

# No one here has ever been to school

Sumita Sarkar

@timesgroup.com

**Nashik:** Twelve-year-old Surekha Babar has never been anywhere near a school, and neither have the other children in her slum. And if exception proves the rule, there is Sai Shinde, who has attended Class VII for a few days, and can now write his name in Marathi and English.

The entire Nathpanthi Gosavi community, residing at Tavli Phata in Panchavati division, has never been to school, a fact that came to light during a survey conducted on out-of-school children by Nashik Municipal Corporation (NMC) teachers. They also learnt that the members of the community would not mind getting their children educated, provided teachers come to them.

The NMC is more than willing to indulge them if it means education for all the children. The slum houses around 25 families. The girls are married off early and before that, they are little more than babysitters. The civic administration's education department, with help from a few social activists, is trying to convince them of the importance of education. The education department is even ready to send teachers to the slum.



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The itinerant community hails from the Marathwada region, and stays at any one place for a year or two before moving on. A few move after just six months.

The slum-dwellers are resistant to the idea of receiving an education. "We have never seen what a school looks like," says Surekha, replying in the negative when asked if she would like to go to school.

Reshma Chavan, all of 10 years old, is keen on studying but already suspicious of going to school at her age.

Both Surekha and Reshma say they are happy the way things are and will likely end up following in their mothers'

footsteps.

Sai Shinde, acting on a teacher's advice, went directly to Class VII at a school in Chandwad. "I went only for few days and learnt to write my name, but I would like to continue studying," says Sai, brimming with pride.

Extreme poverty has also contributed heavily to this mindset.

The elderly Anusaya Chavan says that the men would beg for alms to make a living, and when the boys grow up, they accompany their fathers. "The girls stay back with us (to cook, clean and wash). Who will send us to school? We don't have enough money. If

the government is educating our children for free we are ready to send them. But no school is close by. So we want the teacher to come here," she said.

Meanwhile, Durga Chavan is ready to send her three children to class only — and this is a common refrain of this community — if teachers are sent to their slum.

All day, every day, the children while away the time playing.

Every family has three children or more and that, says mother-of-three Chandi Shinde, is another reason for not pursuing education. "If we have (just) one or two kids, then our husbands are forced

to remarry by their parents. What will we do by studying?" she says.

Meanwhile, the NMC is trying to bring them into the mainstream. Admissions will be provided through the Right to Education (RTE) Act, a move that would also serve to make up for the worryingly high number of school dropouts in the last three years — an eye-popping 10,000.

NMC education department's administrative officer Nitin Upasani says, "We have asked for land in these areas for constructing a school for the slum-dwellers nearby. But this will take time some time. (For the time being), we will send our teachers there and they can teach the children under a shed. The slum-dwellers have also asked for teachers to be sent to their slum."

He said that the education department had demanded 16 rooms for schools in different places of the city. The NMC, which has a hostel for needy students, is planning to another where such children of such nomadic communities can be accommodated.

For now, education is not a priority for the community, which is happy moving from one place to another, begging. Unless the NMC can alter this school of thought, illiteracy will continue