

Durga: kick-off to a new life

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The idea of playing football in front of a crowd doesn't bother 13-year-old Durga. One of three girls in a team of 25 who play at the Makkala Jagriti centre in Adugodi, Bangalore, the otherwise reserved Durga is transformed on the field.



The goal: Durga wants to be a policewoman when she grows up. Hemant Mishra / Mint

Durga's thrice-a-week practice sessions make a bolder statement than any woman in her family would have dared to. Her mother, Kantamma, works as an *ayah* (maid) at the local corporation school and earns Rs2,000. Durga's father, Kantamma says, is unemployed and an alcoholic. She is the only earning member in a family that includes Durga's two younger sisters, Ashwini and Saraswati.

"A few years ago, I didn't see sense in my daughters going to study. I did send them to school because it was free, but never insisted they go regularly," says Kantamma. So Durga and her sisters played truant from school and hung around the streets of Adugodi, running errands for a few rupees for people in the neighbouring colony.

Members of Makkala Jagriti, which tries to create different learning opportunities for children, adults and communities from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, met Durga in the slum three years ago. She was in class V then and was enrolled in a government-aided school about 2km from home. A year later, they saw no sign of the girl in the locality and enquired with her mother. It turned out that Durga had quit school because she was scared to cross the road. “We found that she was staying at a relative’s place, doing odd jobs,” says Joy Srinivasan, who founded Makkala Jagriti in 2003.

Srinivasan persuaded Durga to rejoin school, this time one closer to home. In addition to day school, the three sisters were also encouraged to visit the Makkala Jagriti learning centre in Adugodi after school hours. “We run to the centre after school. Many of my classmates come there. We read, play, talk and totally enjoy ourselves,” says Durga.

It was at this centre that Durga was introduced to football. Having had little opportunity to play any sport previously, she enrolled out of curiosity. “They didn’t say only boys can join, so I signed up,” she says.

Initially, Kantamma refused to let her play. “My neighbours said the boys might misbehave with her and that it isn’t good for a girl to run around and play.” But the little girl held her ground. For Durga, who has witnessed the violent outbursts of an alcoholic father and lived in a male-dominated community, playing football was a huge act of self-assertion. “I used to get very bothered by the things my neighbours used to say to my mother; now I realize they don’t matter,” Durga says.

Over the past year, Madhu Shukla, programme manager, Makkala Jagriti, has seen Durga become more focused on the tasks she has given herself—and it shows in her performance at school as well. “Her demeanour has gradually become more adult-like,” says Shukla.

Durga’s day begins with school. She then heads to the learning centre, where she stays until it closes. Back home, she sometimes reads books borrowed from the centre’s library or helps her mother with chores. She wants to become a policewoman when she grows up. “Makkala Jagriti uses a two-pronged method for families like these. On the one hand, we make school and learning an interesting concept for the children, and simultaneously, include parents in workshops that encourage them to speak about their problems and tell them that education can be the solution to several of their problems,” says Srinivasan. It took over a year before there was noticeable change in Kantamma’s outlook. The NGO also conducts training sessions for government schoolteachers on how to make the classroom interactive and informative.

MAKKALA JAGRITI, BANGALORE

Makkala Jagriti has been working in the slums of Bangalore for six years. It began by motivating children to go to school and sponsoring their tuition fees. It has built three learning centres that provide books, computers, games and toys, youth leadership and civic awareness programmes and educational tours to children. It supports the overall education of 500 children.

Rs5,000 FOR THIS CHARITY CAN

Help fund facilities at the three learning centres:

- ▶ Rs2,500 per month can fund books, activity sheets, craft material, crayons and educational toys for one learning centre
- ▶ Rs2,000 can pay a month’s salary of one karate teacher, who conducts eight classes for around 20 students at one centre
- ▶ Rs500 can pay for a monthly fun-day outing (travel and stay) per child

“I have handed over the responsibility of guiding my children to Joy madam,” says Kantamma. When quizzed if she will get Durga married when she turns 18, she retorts: “That’s her choice, isn’t it? If she wants to get married she can find her groom or she can be single and rise to a good position.”

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