CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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INEKE FEITZ STICHTING

HUMANA
PEOPLE TO PEOPLE INDIA

> “Every child has the right to live in an inclusive world.”
>
> **UNICEF**

INTRODUCTION

According to the Census 2011, there were 2.68 crore (26.8 million) persons with disabilities in India, comprising 2.21% of the total population. Children with disabilities often suffer gross violations of their human rights. These include the absence of education, training and work opportunities from their lives. A lack of social relationships and, at times, abusive behaviour from others negates safety and dignity in their lives.

It is no exaggeration to say that children with disabilities are living a neglected life in our society and their parents or caregivers face immense hardships due to lack of essential services. The Project Children with Special Needs has supported children with disabilities to have access to government benefits and equal opportunities, by facilitating better health services, dignity and happiness for them.

The Project team has assisted children with disabilities in obtaining the necessary documentation like Aadhaar cards, family ID and bank accounts. Once the documentation was in place, wherever possible, the Project connected them to the appropriate government schemes designed to support children with disabilities and their families. For some children who were not enrolled in school, the Project ensured they are enrolled so that they can access education and learning opportunities. Those who could not get government support, were provided by the Project with tailor-made assistive equipment support. Also, to raise awareness among the community, the Project team organised workshops to spread knowledge about the challenges and discrimination faced by children with special needs. This contributed towards fostering a more inclusive and supportive environment for these children in the community. Additionally, the Project introduced physiotherapy sessions and door-to-door educational initiatives to address mobility issues and assist children in improving their learning levels.

The Project began in March 2023 and ended in June 2025. In the first phase, the Project identified over 80 children with special needs and selected 40 of those who were in the greatest need of an intervention. The second phase of the Project started in January 2024 and focused on 30 villages and slum areas in Panipat, identified 170 children with special needs and worked with 85 differently-abled children aged 3-18 years.

The Children with Special Needs (CWSN) Project was implemented by Humana People to People India with the support of Ineke Feitz Stichting.

HOPE & TRANSFORMATION

"I am happy that my daughter is able to walk now. She was unable to stand earlier, this is a new lease on life for her," beams Seema while talking about her daughter Roshni. The youngest member of the family, Roshni, lives with her parents and sister in Wadhavaram Colony in Panipat.

Roshni's parents migrated to Panipat from Ballia, Uttar Pradesh, in search of better income and life almost a decade ago. Their search remains to be in vain. Roshni's father Rakesh works as a labourer who works as a welder for daily wages. Disillusioned with the circumstances, he has turned to alcoholism. Seema is a homemaker.

Occupied with keeping things afloat, they couldn't understand why their younger daughter could not walk. The Project Children with Special Needs contacted the family after receiving information about Roshni from a member of the Child Rights Protection Forum. On asking about Roshni, Seema said that Roshni cannot stand or walk, and her condition is such since birth. She also explained that Roshni has not been taken to any hospital for treatment because of lack of funds and awareness.

The field staff of the Project took Roshni to District Early Intervention Centre (DEIC) Civil Hospital for treatment where her health assessment was done by the doctor. She was also linked to the Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram (RBSK) Programme or National Child Health Programme and consequently a RBSK card was made. RBSK provides free treatment and management for identified health problems, including surgery at the tertiary level. It is implemented as an initiative of the Ministry of Health & Family Welfare, Government of India, under the National Health Mission. It's a comprehensive child health programme focused on screening and early intervention for children from birth to 18 years of age.

Roshni's treatment started at the Civil Hospital, and the doctor suggested a wheelchair for her. Furthermore, the doctor prescribed multivitamins and calcium medicines along with physiotherapy for Roshni. The doctor suggested that a medical certificate should also be made for her.

The Project facilitated Roshni's medical certificate and Aadhaar card being made. The medical card will aid Roshni to consult other medical facilities easily, while the Aadhaar card was necessary in getting admission to a school facilitated by the Project. According to Seema, "Roshni now has a wheelchair provided by the Children with Special Needs Project, with the help of which I take her out for walks."

Besides taking supplements regularly and going to a regular school for the first time, six-year-old Roshni has started physiotherapy at Panchal Hospital. Consistent therapy and regular medication have prompted fast recovery in her. Now, Roshni can stand on her feet and has started walking on her own.

Six-year-old Roshni at her home in Wadhavaram Colony, Panipat, Haryana.

Motivated with improved health, Roshni studying at home.

Children with disabilities often require specialised care and support, in addition to routine healthcare, to address their unique needs and ensure optimal health outcomes. Early intervention and access to inclusive health services are crucial for maximising their development and social integration.

With her newly gained mobility, Roshni's world has broadened. Roshni was included in the exposure visits organised by the Project, in which she visited different places and saw new things. "It was for the first time we stepped out to a park for leisure. With such excursions one is reminded that, like everything else in life, the bleak times fade away too. Roshni enjoyed the visit a lot, especially being out with other children," says Seema emotionally.

Since Roshni started her educational journey later than most children her age, the Project fills in the learning gaps through educational activities, which the Project teacher conducts with Roshni at her home regularly.

ENHANCING WELL-BEING

Born in a family with four girls and one boy, Gurmeet was different from the start. He had a physical disability and could never stand up. Economically disadvantaged and stretched for resources, Gurmeet's parents could not understand Gurmeet's condition, and nor could they afford medical guidance. Gurmeet's father Dilbagh Singh is a security guard and his mother Poonam Devi runs a small general store to make ends meet. Gurmeet is currently ten years old and lives in Bharatnagar, Panipat in Haryana.

The Project Children with Special Needs got to know about Gurmeet during a door-to-door survey. Gurmeet's mother Poonam explains, "When the Project team visited our home, initially I was hesitant talking to them about my son. I was skeptical, as many people had contacted us before too, but no one had helped us. After multiple visits by the Project team I got a bit reassured. I informed the team that Gurmeet has been handicapped since birth. We got treatment from many places earlier in his childhood, but we learnt there is no cure. He speaks very little and remains lying on the bed most of the time."

In low-income households, health needs of individuals with disabilities are often overlooked due to a combination of factors like poverty, lack of access to healthcare and social stigma. This can lead to poorer health outcomes for individuals with disabilities in these communities.

The Project team initiated the making of a disability certificate for Gurmeet by giving information about it and how to get it made. Consequently, Gurmeet's parents applied for the certificate from the nearest Jan Seva Kendra or Public Service Centre. He was also taken to the Civil Hospital for check-up by the doctor who processed the disability certificate. Also, on the same day Gurmeet also visited the District Early Intervention Centre where the doctor provided treatment, and Gurmeet started taking medication. His Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram (RBSK) or National Child Health Programme card was also made and he was referred to Khanpur District Hospital for splints. A wheelchair was also recommended by the doctor.

Since there was no equipment to take Gurmeet anywhere, he had to be carried by the parents on their shoulders. An equipment distribution camp was organised by the Project Children with Special Needs in December 2023, and Gurmeet was provided with a wheelchair by the Project. With the help of this wheelchair, Gurmeet is now able to sit, and it is now easier to take him anywhere. An exposure visit organised by the Project was the first instance when Gurmeet stepped out for sightseeing. The Project was also supporting his physiotherapy sessions.

Ten-year-old Gurmeet in his family room in Bharatnagar, Panipat.

Gurmeet with his mother Poonam.

Accessible public spaces for children with disabilities promote independence, foster social interaction, and build confidence, while also sending a powerful message of inclusivity to the wider community.

According to Gurmeet's mother, "Gurmeet enjoys going to the park a lot in his new wheelchair. A new world has opened to him. He has become more interactive, even with the few words he speaks. I can see the joy in his eyes. It gives me immense happiness to see my son's quality of life improved."

ONWARDS & UPWARDS

"I want to be a doctor," says Shayan, beaming with assurance. The eleven-year-old's confidence has developed fairly recently. Shayan is unable to walk since childhood, and his parents being without resources and awareness mostly kept him bedridden at home without any education. It is after the Project Children with Special Need's invention that Shayan has started learning and engaging with others.

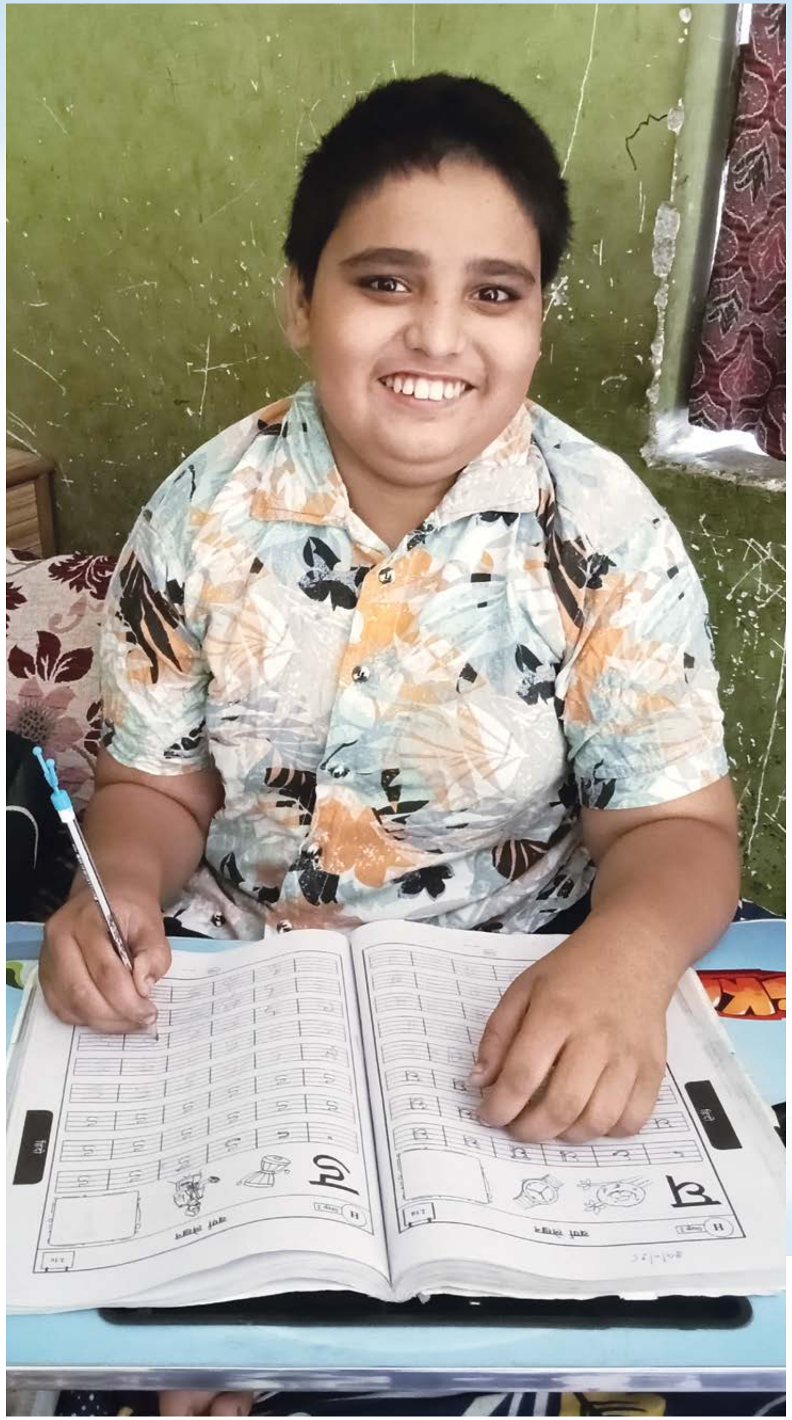
Shayan's father Shokin sells sugarcane, and his mother Saina rears cows to sell milk. Shayan lives with his parents and an elder brother in the aspirational Wadhavaram Colony in Panipat. When the Project team visited their house and learnt about Shayan, the parents informed that Shayan is disabled since birth, and he has been treated at many places. They had even tried to get him admitted to school where his brother studies, but the school had refused to continue his enrolment.

The Project team made Shayan's parents aware about getting a disability certificate for him. A disability certificate is important as it formally recognises a person's disability status and enables them to access various government benefits, schemes and support systems designed for individuals with disabilities.

The Project Children with Special Needs' team organised a workshop with the parents of the children with disabilities associated with the Project and government school resource teachers working with children with disabilities. Through disability awareness, the misconceptions and stereotypes surrounding those with disabilities can be brought to the forefront. When these are gone, attitudes and behaviours become more positive and impactful. Also, in this workshop the resource teacher was informed about Shayan, and support from the teacher to enrol him in school was demanded. Consequently, the resource teacher assured to support the child.

Since Shayan never went to school, Shayan's academic learning had not been developed. A teacher from the Project visited him regularly with the Kadam* books to teach him basic concepts and how to write. Practical examples were used to make the learning engaging for him. An exposure visit to Kurukshetra Park nudged Shayan into being comfortable talking to other people beyond his family members.

With lack of movement, Shayan's upper body has become heavy and his parents find it difficult to carry him around, thus leaving him mostly confined to his room. The Project provided him with a wheelchair, a sitting chair and a walker, which is aiding his mobility with relative ease. Shayan also got admission to the Government School Wadhavaram in 3rd grade.



Shayan studying enthusiastically to achieve his goal of becoming a doctor.

Shayan's mother Saina providing the pivotal parental support that is essential for children with disabilities.

Historically, children with disabilities have been excluded from the general education system and placed in 'special schools'. The Right to Education Act, along with the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (RPwD) Act, (2016), mandates inclusive education, aiming for equal participation and tailored support for students with disabilities.

While the legal framework is in place, there is a need of raising awareness and ensuring effective implementation of the provisions for inclusive education.

Now, Shayan is going to school regularly and is practicing to walk with support of a walker. "It gives me immense pleasure to see joy and confidence in my son's eyes. The quality of his life has improved, and I hope he studies as much as possible," shares Shayan's mother while she helps Shayan to sit in his sitting chair to read.

**Humana People to People India's Kadam Programme bridges the learning gaps in primary school children. It is a way of teaching-learning strategy adapted by primary school teachers for enabling children in achieving their age-appropriate learning level.*

STRENGTHENED BY EMPATHY

Sami is a fifteen-year-old boy who lives with his parents in Hari Nagar, Panipat. “It felt like a gift when Sami was born. My two children born before Sami died soon after they were born,” reflects Nagina, Sami’s mother.

Sami’s, father works as a labourer in a dhurrie-making, factory and his mother is a homemaker. Theirs is a low-income household and Sami’s parents are not educated beyond 7–8th grade. When Sami was five months old, they realised he did not respond to sounds. Eventually, they also observed that he could not speak. They went to Panipat Civil hospital where a paediatric doctor confirmed that Sami has hearing and speech impairment. Furthermore, the doctor told them that the child is too young for a surgical implant.

Without any tangible solutions for Sami’s disability, his parents gave up on the idea of their son being “normal”. But soon they were surprised to witness Sami’s extraordinary will to engage in and learn everything. “Sami challenged our limited understanding of what is considered normal. He started engaging with us through hand gestures early on. We thought if he is unable to hear and speak, he won’t be able to learn. But to our surprise, Sami himself tagged along with his cousin to school. Observing him engaging with other children his age with ease, we got him admitted to a private school,” explains Nagina with pride.

In 2023, the Project Children with Special Needs reached Sami’s home while doing a survey. The Project, after his parents’ agreement, consulted a specialist doctor to get the child assessed. The doctor prescribed a hearing aid, and Sami was given one under the Project. Sami is adapting to his hearing aid, and now that he can hear, he still is learning how to discern noises that reach his ears. The Project is supporting him to get speech therapy at Model Town Raymond Hospital, where he is learning sounds and how to speak.

Due to the stereotypes and discrimination surrounding people with disabilities in our community, the biggest roadblock is other people. **Society at large needs to recognise the value that those with disabilities bring to the table. And since there is an overall lack of understanding and acceptance, raising awareness is necessary.**

Taking cognisance of this, the Project organised many such awareness sessions and workshops with parents and caregivers of children with disabilities, and with different stakeholders like Anganwadi workers*, school teachers and government officials.

The Project supported Sami with a teacher visiting him regularly for improving his learning level through the Kadam Toolkit. When asked about Sami’s progress, his mother narrates, “Sami is a well-adjusted boy with a lot of friends in his school. He is empathetic and understands interpersonal-relations more than other teenagers. I am raising him to be independent, and I hope he is able to achieve what he wants to.”

Sami at his home in Hari Nagar, Panipat.

Sami learning with Project CWSN’s team member.

Sami doing his school homework with his mother Nagina.

**Anganwadi Centres , started by the Indian Government in 1975, is a rural child care centre in India that provides a range of services for young children and pregnant/lactating women. Anganwadi workers and helpers are responsible for delivering these services at the local level.*

HEALTH, DIGNITY & HAPPINESS

Priyanshi is a thirteen-year-old girl who lives with her family in Batra Colony, Panipat in Haryana. She was born with a hearing and speech impediment. Her father's name is Subhash and mother's name is Lakshmi, who earns her daily wages working in a factory. According to Priyanshi's mother Lakshmi, "We eat what I earn daily. Since more than a year, my husband is not earning as he is not fit mentally. He is caught in the loop of addiction. So, my husband, I and my three children survive only on what I earn."

The Project Children with Special Needs learnt about Priyanshi during a door-to-door survey. Priyanshi's elder sister Jyoti informed the Project team that they had sought treatment from many places during Priyanshi's childhood, but could not find a solution. Jyoti also informed that Priyanshi was in grade 3 in a government school.

The Project team took Priyanshi along with her parents to the civil hospital where they applied for a disability certificate and got the assessment done from the District Early Intervention Centre (DEIC). After an assessment a disability certificate was made for Priyanshi. A disability certificate serves as an official proof of a person's disability, enabling them to access various benefits, concessions, and legal rights. A Rashtriya Bal Swasthya Karyakram (RBSK) or National Child Health Programme card was also made for her.

Subsequently, the Project team took Priyanshi and her parents to Raymond Speech and Hearing Centre where her hearing test was done. The doctor informed that Priyanshi is completely deaf, but after getting a hearing aid Priyanshi will be able to hear. In an equipment distribution camp, Priyanshi was provided with a hearing aid by the Project. A doctor also trained her and her parents on how to use the hearing aid.

With the support of her elder sister Jyoti, Priyanshi had been learning basic things going to a regular government school. According to Lakshmi, "Priyanshi is a bright girl. She learns fast. Even in day-to-day life she acts independently; she goes to shops and writes down things she needs to buy." But her learning level is low due to lack of special teachers and facilities in her school. Furthermore, Priyanshi has been unable to adapt to the hearing aid. She gets agitated with loud noises and prefers using sign language to communicate. Considering all these factors, it was decided to try a school better suited for her learning. The Project team took Priyanshi and her mother to Mata Parkash Kaur Welfare Centre for Persons with Speech & Hearing Impairment, Karnal. This school provides education to children who are deaf and speech-impaired till 12th grade. It provides facilities for children to live and study at a minimum cost.

Currently, Priyanshi is studying in 4th grade and staying in the school's hostel. "Priyanshi has to live in a hostel there as the school is in another city. She is adjusting well, and I connect with her regularly on video calls. Priyanshi is intelligent, and I hope she is able to realise her full potential and get a good education. Education is the only way out of this cycle of poverty towards a life with dignity," concludes Lakshmi.

Priyanshi at a school for persons with speech and hearing Impairment.

Priyanshi with her mother Lakshmi.

Promoting dignity is fundamental to creating an inclusive environment where children with disabilities can fully participate in all aspects of life.

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The Ineke Feitz Foundation (IFS) is an endowment fund established by Mrs M Feitz-Dreesmann in 1989. Through this fund, she wanted to contribute to the care of vulnerable children, especially children with disabilities, on behalf of her daughter Ineke Feitz, who died suddenly at the age of 11. Mrs Feitz-Dreesmann died in 1998. The objective of IFS is: “To improve the lives of vulnerable children wherever they may live, especially children with a mental (or multiple) disability by providing them with access to care and education, if and when that is not a matter of course.”

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Humana People to People India is a development organisation registered as a not-for-profit company under Section 25 of the Companies Act, 1956, since May 1998. It is a non-political, non-religious organisation working for the holistic development of the underprivileged and marginalised people in rural and urban India. We work through social development and poverty alleviation interventions by coordinated, strategic approaches focusing on school education and teacher education, life skills, improved livelihoods, health, women empowerment and environment protection.


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