

guru in Masoom

are taken to night schools on scheduled days so that students can participate in practicals. Similarly, access to a library, computers, free notebooks and textbooks have been provided by Masoom.

Ashok Jadhav, principal of the R M Bhat night school, feels that much more can be done for students but there is a lack of funds. "Some children need financial help. We teachers sometimes pay for their board examination fees. We wish we could expose them to computers. But we don't have a teacher," he says.

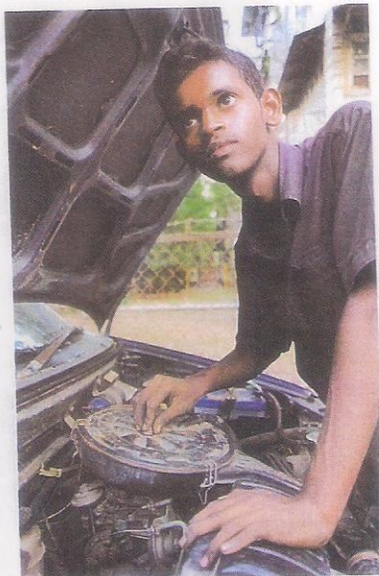
Masoom provides a meal to students in night schools it works with. Jadhav's school isn't part of Masoom's intervention programme, so his students don't get nutrition. He strongly feels it's important to provide children with an evening meal.

"The Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan should be extended to secondary education," says Nikita. "If day schools are being provided midday meals, then night schools should also be given evening meals. The night school's student is at a disadvantage compared to the student who can afford to attend day school. The night school student is at times the sole breadwinner of his family and has to work."

It is also a huge challenge for teachers and students to cover the entire syllabus in a short time. To tackle this problem Masoom put together a 'research and development team' with academic experts. The team brainstormed with the night school teachers and managed to bring out a condensed version of the syllabus which they are now following for Class 10.

Masoom is also working with the Night Schools Headmasters Association, an umbrella organization which sets the preliminary papers, and they have agreed to focus their question papers on the minimum essential syllabus that we have worked on," Nikita explains.

But there's more that Masoom is trying to do for night students. It offers them extra-curricular



Jiten Parab activities, life skills training, psycho-social counseling and vocational guidance.

"We have seven or eight students who are enrolled in vocational courses. That is motivation for the present batch to attend school regularly. We have counselors who help students with learning disabilities or those who are slow learners during our one to one sessions with them," Nikita says.

Prashant Kokate, 24, a former volunteer, now heads the Career Cell. "We find out where the student's interest lies through questionnaires. But it doesn't stop there. We do one to one counseling and see where their interest really lies. Some of

them could just be writing what their parents want them to do. Some might be good at drawing. We make them aware of the possibilities."

Masoom sponsors meritorious students above 18 years for courses in soft-skills development, English conversation and grooming, says Prashant.

Amol Pashelkar, 21, is one such student. Weak in math and science, Amol didn't really believe he would be able to pass Class 10. But the persistent efforts of a volunteer teacher helped him overcome his fears and four years after his first attempt he scored 74 per cent, a record of sorts for a night school student. "I feel proud to have won the scholarship and more self-confident now," he says. Amol has enrolled himself for further studies at a night college which he attends after his day job at the Bombay Stock Exchange.

Masoom's intervention strategy is being implemented in 10 night schools. The NGO is constantly monitoring its impact. Ganesh Naik, 29, a former volunteer is now the Education Coordinator. He collects data from schools on attendance levels, response to English conversation classes, extra classes and teachers' training.

"There is awareness amongst night schools about Masoom's initiatives," he says proudly. "Attendance has improved and the pass percentage for Class 10 has gone up by 10 to 15 per cent." Attendance is still a major issue. Perhaps this is because students feel their part time teachers are disinterested. "The teachers need to be motivated too," says Naik.

The night schools are an orphaned lot. They were set up even before the BMC schools and no specific department takes responsibility for them. "The education department is sympathetic, but they say they don't have the budgetary allocation. And night schools don't even exist in the reports of the Planning Commission!" says Nikita.

Finally, I ask her, why did she name her NGO, Masoom? But this is best answered by Vaishali Aiwale, 19, a student and a homemaker. Married for less than a year, she sits comfortably behind a desk, immaculately dressed in a golden sari, in a classroom full of trendily-clothed teenagers. "I have a great desire to learn. I'm not concerned about getting any job. I just want to keep on learning," she says simply and with innocence.

SAMITA'S WORLD

by SAMITA RATHOR

