

INDIA

Mumbai's night schools find a

Mobile science lab, short syllabus and job training are offered

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Mumbai

It is late evening and a Marathi class is underway at the Adarsh Nagar Night School in Worli. I watch Jiten Parab, 16, engrossed in reading from his textbook. Just an hour ago, he was intently checking out the innards of an old Maruti car.

Jiten, son of a farmer from a village in Malvan district, says he's been fascinated by machines ever since he began living in Mumbai, seven years ago. So he works at a motor workshop from 9 am to 6 pm, Monday to Saturday and half of Sunday trying to figure out what makes machines tick. He then attends school after work, six nights a week and does his homework before he sleeps.

That's a lot of hard work but with simplicity and honesty he says: "I want to do a course at an Industrial Training Institute (ITI) so that I can get a good job."

It is this passionate aspiration of students for a better life that inspired Nikita Ketkar to resign her government job and set up Masoom (Innocence) in January 2008. Her outfit now runs an intervention programme for night schools.

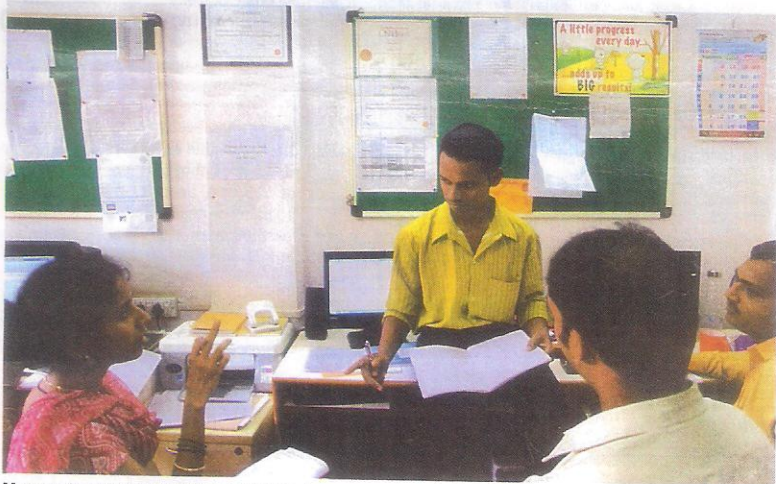
"It is sheer self-motivation, a desire to do something with their lives that brings these youngsters here. But they receive a very poor quality of education. Notebooks, textbooks, access to scientific laboratories and in some cases, even chalk, are not provided. I felt they deserved better," says Nikita.

Mumbai has around 150 night schools for students from Class 8 to Class 10. They cater to more than 15,000 students. The oldest night school was set up almost 100 years ago. Funded by charitable trusts, some of these night schools receive aid from the government in the form of teachers' salaries. The Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) rents out classrooms in their schools to the night schools. But it doesn't allow them use of facilities like science laboratories or computers. The trusts pay the rent and running expenditure, but it is only "five or ten per cent of the trusts that take an active interest," says Nikita.

In 2006, Nikita and her team of volunteers



Nikita Ketkar



Masoom team helping out at a night school

researched the problems night schools faced and what could be done. Their findings revealed that around 60 per cent of night school students worked during the day, doing small jobs in canteens, offices and shops. Some helped with the family business or at home. The children, tired from work, found it difficult to concentrate. They were also hungry.

Most teachers work part-time in night schools, teaching in schools during the day. They cannot give their best. Perhaps the biggest handicap is the duration of the classes. Night schools are open for just three hours. Day schools work five to six hours. Yet night schools are expected to complete

the entire year's syllabus. School results were naturally poor. The average pass percentage of Class 10 students was only around 20 to 30 per cent.

In 2008, after Masoom was founded, it adopted two schools for an intervention programme. Masoom decided to improve infrastructure, enhance the quality of education and lobby with the government, trustees and other stakeholders.

During one of her first visits to a night school, Nikita found students had negligible exposure to understanding science by doing practicals. Students were permitted entry to the science lab once, usually just before the board exam.

Masoom created mobile science lab kits which

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