

From Punjab's suicide country, a story of fightback scripted by kids

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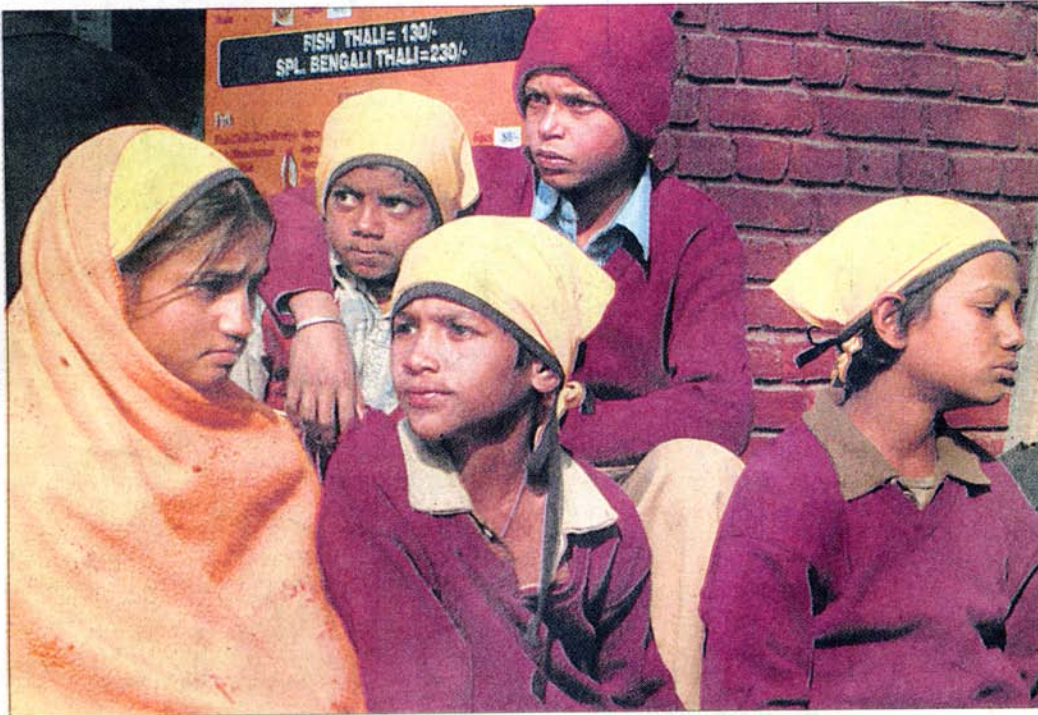
*Pind murare jad main turdi
Turda tera parchanva ni mae*

(When I walk in the village,
your shadow walks with me
mother)

People at Dilli Haat had stopped in their way to listen as 12-year-old Jasbeer Kaur sang the song. Jasbeer had last week come to Delhi from Kalbanjara village in Punjab with her two younger brothers. Their father committed suicide in 2002 because he was unable to pay back the local moneylender's loan. Their mother left home soon afterwards never to come back. Now they are barely surviving with their grandmother. This is just one example out of thousands in the Sangrur district of Punjab, where parents, one or both, have committed suicide owing to failed crop and humiliation of ever-increasing debts. The children were left behind to fend for themselves with no means of earning and a huge debt.

Navdanya, an NGO that runs a bio-diversity conservation programme, had brought 12 such kids from six different villages of Sangrur to Delhi to highlight their plight. They visited the Dilli Haat on Wednesday and will took out a march from Mandi House to Krishi Bhawan on Thursday.

Though Jasbeer, being the eldest among the three, under-



Jasbeer Kaur with younger brothers Jagtar Singh and Gurpreet Singh. Renuka Puri

stands the magnitude of the tragedy that has struck them, a smile never leaves her face. Her younger brothers, Gurpreet and Jagtar, do not remember much about their parents. "We like playing cricket. We play at school whenever we get time," said an excited Gurpreet while Jagtar was busy teasing other children. It was their first trip out of Punjab and they were happy thinking about that only.

With almost no means of survival and an acutely depressed

80-year-old grandmother in the name of family, these children have learnt to live in the present. When asked about her future plans, Jasbeer said, "I would like to have a job when I grow up. But that's far. Right now, I just want to study as much as I can."

These 12 children can easily be an inspiration for others. Despite all odds, none of them left school. Take for instance, Naresh Khan, who went to take an examination two days after his mother died. "I do not want to become a farmer.

It is risky. I would rather study and have a steady job," he said. And then there was Dharminder. His father killed himself in December 2007. "We have a debt of around Rs 2.5 lakh. My father could not even pay back the interest. Strangers used to come to our house and abuse us. They even threatened us many times. Then my father killed himself," said Dharminder. Here he is now, just a few weeks later, hoping to turn the tables around.

Thousands of such children in