



School Time

This would be the last time the teacher would beat him for asking a question in class, Sachin vowed. All the children sniggered when anyone was beaten, and Sachin felt the humiliation like a physical thing on his back. He didn't think he was wrong in asking his doubt, but nobody was going to agree with him. The teacher had marched up to him, slapped him hard on the cheek and told him to sit down and not open his mouth again. That evening, when he described what had happened in school, his father slapped him again, and cursed him for bringing shame to the family by misbehaving in class. Sachin cried loudly and declared that he would never go to school again. The teacher had been wrong to single him out, and if he returned to school, the same thing would be repeated.

Father said, 'I can see you have no interest in your studies. It's simply a waste of time. I had hoped you'd do well in school and become a big man, but obviously I was wrong.' He sighed. 'The tea stall owner near Turbhe Station is my friend. He'll be happy to give you some work. The sooner you start working and contributing to the family, the better.'

Mother was of a different opinion. 'He's only nine,' she cried. 'How can you put him to work? Let him go back

to school. Sometimes teachers can be harsh but it's for the children's own good. We are suffering because we are uneducated. Do you want the same thing to happen to your children?'

'I did put him in school,' Father pointed out. 'But the boy isn't interested in studying. This way, at least he won't roam the streets and develop bad habits. The tea stall owner will take him under his wing, perhaps teach him some cooking along the way. It can only help him.'

This wasn't what Sachin had bargained for. When he had chosen not to go to school, he had thought he would watch TV, play cricket in the alley with the older boys, practice his Salman Khan moves. Going to work had formed no part of his plan. Besides, his father was wrong. He liked studying, especially maths. He had got every sum right in the last exam. It was social studies that he detested, all those boring descriptions of things that happened hundreds of years ago. The teacher was very strict but never explained anything properly. She just read out from the book and gave homework at the end of the class. She was the one who had beaten Sachin.

The next day Sachin's father declared, 'It's done. I've spoken to my friend. He has agreed to take our son.'

Far better that he should do something than waste his time in school. The owner is a fair man. He'll pay Sachin a decent salary, and train the boy. Tomorrow

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morning I'll take the boy with me. It's a good thing. I, too, began work when I was eight. It's better to find work than play cricket all the time.' They all knew he was referring to Sachin's habit of playing cricket for hours together after school.

To say that cricket was Sachin's passion was an understatement. On weekdays, Sachin picked up his bat as soon as he returned from school and went out to play, returning home only when he became too hungry to play any longer. While he was good at both bowling and batting, he enjoyed the latter more, flinging the ball far and wide for fours and sixes. Whenever there was a match on TV, he watched it until his parents switched the TV off. One day, he vowed, he'd see a match in the stadium. His father laughed when he said so. 'You better earn enough for the ticket, my lad.'

When the teacher had beaten Sachin, he had thought it was the end of the world for him. But that was nothing compared to the hell in the tea stall. The heat of the constantly burning stove was intolerable. The owner yelled at Sachin and the other helpers all the time. The customers also yelled at them for delaying their orders,

even though Sachin scurried around as fast as he could. He got hardly any rest and was exhausted by the end of the day. He wanted to quit this job, but the money plugged a big hole in the family finances. In a few weeks, Sachin had got used to the work in the tea stall, though he felt wistful about his days in school. Now, of course, it was too late for him to return. He had already missed eight weeks of class. The teacher was ruthless when they missed even one day of school. There was no way he could resume his education now. Once in a while, Sachin would pick up a book from the shelf at home and try to read it. It was becoming increasingly difficult. There was nobody who could help him, nobody to encourage him. Sachin knew that he would never return to school now, that he would remain as uneducated as his parents. If only he had not chosen to bunk school when his teacher beat him! Things would be so much different now. He had heard that all the children from his class were going for an IPL match. He was going to miss it, of course. He was no longer a student of the school.

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The principal of the school agreed to take Sachin back, but not before giving his mother a stern lecture on letting children miss lessons. Sachin sat through every lesson and when he returned home, threw his bag



against the wall. 'I'm never going to go back,' he wailed. 'I had no idea what was going on. Even the maths teacher shouted at me. Nobody in school explained anything.'

His father grunted that he should return to the tea stall. Education wasn't meant for the likes of them, he added. Perhaps he was right, thought Sachin as he went back to work. It was clear that the teachers in school had no interest in teaching him, really teaching him. Most of the time in the past he had found it difficult to cope with lessons. Some of the children in class went for tuitions, but his family couldn't afford that.

A month later, Sachin returned home from work as usual and found his mother standing at their doorstep. She was beaming and hugged him close when she saw him. 'Darling, I've found a way you can go back to school.'



school, they could go there for extra lessons to make up for what they'd lost, and Reliance Foundation would help them in returning to school and coming up to the level of the rest of the class.' She said this carefully, measuring her words for accuracy. 'You'd go to school in the morning and then in the afternoon everyday you would go for extra coaching. And we don't have to pay anything! Tomorrow,' she said with determination, 'I'm going to take you to the teacher who told me this. She'll explain it all to you fully.'

The social studies teacher's sneering face swam in front of Sachin's eyes and he felt reluctance well up in him. He couldn't go through the humiliation all over again. He just couldn't return to school.

Sachin's mother dragged him to the coaching and day care centre, convinced that they carried a solution to his dilemma. And she was right. The teachers were trained to handle delinquents and dropouts, treat

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Sachin, exhausted after a long day, collapsed in a corner and said in a dull voice, 'I don't want to go back to school. I don't know anything.' Silent tears ran down his cheeks as he spoke.

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them with sympathy and understanding and gain their trust so that they would follow their advice and re-enroll in school. Sachin met other children from the neighbourhood there, and discovered that there were many like him who had stopped going to school and were joining back. He met a girl whose working mother had chosen to withdraw her from school to look after her younger siblings. Now Anita had returned to

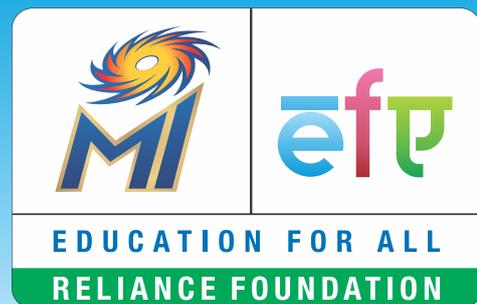
school after the centre's administrator counselled the mother to match her work timings to the school timetable. Anita told Sachin that she wanted to become a doctor one day.

How long had she been away from school? Sachin was sure it couldn't have been for more than a few days, not like him who had now spent almost five months working in the tea stall. Two years, was the astonishing answer. But now all that was behind her, Anita declared. She had re-learnt everything, and now stood first in class. The centre had helped her to achieve that.

This was when Sachin became convinced that he could also resume his education. The thought excited and terrified him. He was scared of the teachers in the centre and how they'd behave. But when he went there, he found that they were extremely patient with him and seemed to understand that he was behind with his schoolwork. Their teaching methods were so good, and so different from the indifference of some of his teachers in school. In just a week, he could read his textbooks and felt ready to go back to school. Of course, he wasn't as proficient as before but the tuition teachers had only words of encouragement for him. And he knew that they would always help him with his difficulties. Already he felt that they had become his friends.

One year later, Sachin couldn't help doing a little hop, skip and jump on his way home from school. Today was the most special day ever. He had got full marks in his maths exam, his teacher had nominated him for class monitor, and best of all, his school was going to send his entire class to an IPL match at Wankhede Stadium courtesy Reliance Foundation's Education for All initiative. Sachin was sure the grin would stay on his face for the rest of his life. School was such fun!

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The Education for All initiative has impacted the lives of over 70,000 underprivileged children in Mumbai