



# [ BIOSCOPE ]

Real Stories of Real People

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## *Don't Stay Hungry*

The child padded out in her bare feet and Geeta pulled her back. 'You know you can't go out,' she said on a note of indulgence. 'That's the street. It's dangerous. Come, I'll give you a toy. Sit here and play with it.'

The little girl whimpered at being thwarted and then settled down to play with her doll. It was her favourite object in the entire house, and Shramika kept it with her all the time, even when she went to bed. Geeta had bought it for her three months ago. Shramika loved it as soon as she set eyes on it and didn't allow anyone to touch it, not even her older sister Snehal. Geeta allowed her this whim, though she knew she should berate the child for her selfishness. But then Shramy, as they called her, was not even two and the mother believed that she could do with a little bit of leeway. Surely she was entitled to spoil her daughter a little after almost losing her. Even now, as Geeta kept a close eye on the toddler while she cooked dinner in the dimly lit hovel, she couldn't believe how narrowly they

had escaped disaster. It seemed amazing that just a couple of months ago, they hadn't even been sure if their beautiful daughter would survive.

Life hadn't been kind to Geeta. Ten years ago, when her family had found a husband for her, they had all been overjoyed. The future spread before her like a carpet of flowers. She had completed her tenth standard exams, knew a smattering of English and, having been born and brought up in Mumbai, knew the ways of the city. Her husband earned a reasonable salary as a driver, enough for them to live on, even thrive. Geeta felt there was nothing she couldn't do. With her education and good looks, her opportunities seemed boundless. And then disaster struck. The handsome young man whom she had married turned out to be an alcoholic, incapable of holding down a steady job. Some days when he found work, they were rich and made merry. But the happiness was always short-lived. Gautam spent most of his earnings on

alcohol and often remained at home, nursing a hangover. Geeta had no choice but to work as a domestic help in a few homes to earn money quickly. Once her husband was cured of his alcoholism, she would get trained in some proper vocation, she vowed. Life was hard and monotonous, and Geeta was always anxious about the future. There was a flicker of joy in the house when Snehal was born. However, Geeta had to continue working almost eight hours a day. It never mattered how hard she worked or how many domestic jobs she picked up, they were always hard up and being behind on their payments had now become routine. One fine day the landlord cut off their electricity connection because they had fallen behind on their rent so much that they had practically become squatters.

The baby needed to be nursed and like all newborns, didn't understand the clock. She had to be fed, while Geeta had to be at work. Between managing the home, her older daughter's education, her temporary jobs, some of which she couldn't keep because of frequent absenteeism, and the baby's demands, Geeta was slowly becoming depressed. Things couldn't get any worse.

They could and they did. Geeta noticed that the baby rejected all solid food and preferred to cling to her breast. It wasn't adequate nourishment but she knew that some babies were temperamental. She had seen that in her neighbourhood. Eventually they all started eating regular food. Shramika would be fine. It was a false hope. Some time later, Shramika

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When she became pregnant again, Geeta was filled with hope. This baby, she was sure, would change their luck. Sure enough, for some time Gautam started bringing in some sorely needed income. It was a big relief for Geeta who knew that in her present condition, she couldn't continue to work the way she had in the past. Her back hurt and she needed to rest. But very soon things went back to the way they had been before and Geeta was flung into the depths of despair.

Anxiety about her home situation and their precarious finances turned Geeta old before time. Though barely thirty, she now saw an old woman in the mirror, her straggly hair and dull eyes telling their own story.

Fortunately, Shramika was born healthy, and Geeta was relieved, relieved that she had insisted on seeking professional care during her pregnancy. But what now?

developed a cough and then came down with fever. Geeta was worried but not anxious. Fevers and colds were hardly a serious illness. But when Shramika didn't get better even with medication, Geeta wondered if there was some other problem.

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At first it seemed that the doctor at the Reliance Foundation clinic in Madhav Bagh in South Mumbai would also fail in treating Shramika. The cold and fever persisted in spite of the medication. The baby was extremely weak and hardly ate anything. But during Geeta's second visit, the doctor took a closer look at the baby and fitted what looked like an armband around her upper arm. After seeing the measurement,



the doctor gave a startling diagnosis. The armband test confirmed that Shramika was suffering from malnutrition. Geeta thought she had misheard the doctor. Malnutrition? Wasn't that something that happened to very poor children in remote villages? They lived in the heart of Mumbai where people suffered from other illnesses. How could her baby be malnourished? She took every care at home, and even

though they weren't exactly flush with funds, they weren't short of food.

The doctor almost smiled when he saw Geeta's expression. She looked incredulous. 'It's hard to believe, isn't it? We think malnutrition isn't an urban disease.'

'Disease?' Geeta asked in wonder. 'Malnutrition is a disease? Isn't it just a case of being a little hungry?'

Geeta only believed what almost everyone else did, that malnutrition wasn't really an illness. The doctor explained the reality. 'It's a disease like any other disease, only if the child suffers from it for too long, the effects last all through life. The child grows into a weak, possibly stunted adult with poor immunity, and the likelihood of even death is high. In Shramika's case, we've caught it early so with the right treatment, she should be fine. In most cases, especially in Mumbai, the illness is seldom diagnosed. There's very little awareness in parents about this particular disease. The child suffers all through life merely because nobody thought of her weak condition as an illness to be treated. You'd be surprised how many children in Mumbai suffer from malnutrition. It's an irony that even an illness that is so easily curable is so widespread.'

It was gradually beginning to dawn on Geeta that her baby had just escaped a possibly serious condition, thanks to the observant doctor at Reliance Foundation. How easily she could have lost her child had she not visited the clinic, or had the doctor not observed her daughter carefully. He gave her a tin of nutritional supplements, a tonic and instructions on how to administer these and asked her to report back to him after a week. He also told her in a kindly tone that her stress was transmitting itself to the baby, and if she wanted to see her child get well,

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she needed to stop worrying so much. In addition, the doctor gave her a tonic to build her strength up. This level of care overwhelmed Geeta. She had a small doubt in her mind, one she was a little ashamed to voice. She looked at all the supplements and tonics in her bag and said, 'Er...how much...?'

Before she could complete her sentence, the doctor said, 'Don't worry. You don't have to pay. Just make sure you follow all the instructions and continue the treatment.'

A month later, Geeta wept for joy when Shramika ate a whole bowl of porridge for the first time. The child had put on some weight and there was a healthy flush on her cheeks. Her fever and cold had disappeared a long time ago. Surely the baby was on the path to recovery. One day Geeta returned from work to find the social worker from the Reliance Foundation clinic waiting for her. 'You missed your appointment with the doctor last week. I came to see if everything's all right.'

Geeta was astonished and touched. For the first time someone had actually bothered to check-up on her and Shramika. 'I'm sorry,' she felt chastened. 'Shramika is much better now. I'll come tomorrow.'

The next day she apologized to the doctor. 'There was a lot of work at home. My older daughter had her parent-teacher meeting and there were some pending chores as well. In any case, Shramika is much better now.'

'You must complete the entire treatment,' the doctor replied. 'You have to come regularly for three months before we can call the child completely cured. I'm glad she's looking well.' And he handed over another tin of supplements.

'Glad' was an understatement. Reliance Foundation had saved her child's life. There was little chance of Geeta ever forgetting that.

Today was a day of celebration. The doctor had finally declared that Shramika was healthy and needn't visit the clinic any more. Geeta had made sweets in preparation for her older daughter, Snehal's, return from school. Now she stood in front of the mirror and oiled and combed her hair. Then she looked at herself and after a moment, added a dash of lipstick and smiled at her reflection. She wasn't vain but she believed that she almost looked like the new bride she had been ten years ago, her face glowing with happiness!

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*Reliance Foundation's Maternal and Child Health initiative is working towards enhancing the health and nutritional status among children of more than 3,000 underserved families in Mumbai. The programme focuses on community engagement, health literacy and early identification of malnourished children towards ensuring continuum of quality healthcare.*