

Palwal girls hop on to a better future

GIRLS-ONLY BUS SERVICE

For over 300 school-going girls in the region, a seat on Blossom Bus service means they will be able to study at least till class 10. The free pick-and-drop service addresses safety and stigma concerns, both

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GURUGRAM/MEWAT: Sahila Khan, 16, wakes up at 5 in the morning. Half of her family members are sleeping. In their modest dwelling in Jalalpur Khalsa village, she sweeps the floor, plasters the walls with cow dung, and washes the utensils before helping her mother prepare breakfast. Amid this flurry of activity, she quickly dons a pink sari, kamosee, pecks her rifle, and heads out. On her way, she meets her friend Rasheeda Khan and the two walk towards the spot in the village where they wait for the arrival of a bus. Around 7:20 am a yellow bus draws up and the two hop on.

The bus is one among five that drop these girls to school and bring them back home. They are part of a programme called Blossom Bus, run in the Mewat region of Haryana. Started with 30 girls in 2010, the free bus service now caters to more than 300 girls, whose use of the vehicles to reach their high schools located at a distance ranging between 2km and 10km from their villages.

SAFETY CONCERNS

Every morning around 8, Sahila, Rasheeda and other girls from different villages board the bus to reach the Government Girls Senior Secondary School in Aharwan village in Palwal. The bus is an indispensable part of the girls' lives, said Sahila. "We wouldn't be going to school if it was not for this bus service. Our parents would have never sent us so far as they fear for our safety. The bus service ensures safe transit and fewer worries for our parents. Earlier, girls used to face problems while commuting to school since the boys' school lets out at the same time. The boys would harass us, while on the way," said Sahila. Rasheeda agreed it wasn't safer for girls to walk back home.

"Last winters, the bus didn't come and I decided to walk back home. A boy from the neighbouring school followed me on his motorcycle and pulled at my dupatta. Since that day, either I skip school when the bus is not there or tag along with other girls," she said.

Both Sahila and Rasheeda studied in a government primary school in Bhanguri of Hathin in Palwal till class 5. Both said had the bus service not been there, it would have been certain for their education.

"The village school was only till class 5. My mother had no plans of sending me to the higher secondary school, which is far off from the village. She was persuaded to change her mind after we informed her about the bus service to the girls' school," said Rasheeda.

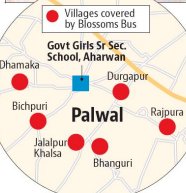
EDUCATING GIRLS IS

EMPOWERING GIRLS

Like other girls in the school, 15-year-old Santiya Khan also wakes up at the crack of dawn. After finishing her daily chores, she helps her younger brothers get ready for school. Her brothers study in the boys' senior secondary school, located near her school. The school has a handful of girls too, but she still goes to different school. "Boys are travelling where. Who will stop them? My parents did not send me to my brothers' school since they will not allow me to study with boys," she said.

"Even I would never want to study with boys," she adds as an afterthought. "Boys are useless. They won't get up to take a glass of water on their own. No restrictions are imposed on them. However, a girl is questioned even if she steps down from the terrace," said Santiya.

Her voice drowned in the sound of the school bell, which rang to announce the end of the lunch break, with teachers calling out to the students, asking them to get back to classes. Amid a din of voices and hurried footsteps, the girls retreated back to the classroom in a matter of minutes. A slogan was written on the wall of class 9-A, 'Padhi likhi ladki, roshni ghar ki' (An educated girl lights up the whole house).



Started with 30 girls in 2010, the free bus service now caters to more than 300 girls who use the vehicles to reach their high schools that are located at a distance ranging between 2km and 10km from their villages in Mewat region of Haryana.

VOGENDRA KUMAR/HT PHOTOS



The bus service has changed the lives of many girls, some of whom are married. Soniya Bikal, 16, from Bichpuri village in Hathin, got married in 2008 at the age of 8, along with her sister to save wedding expenses. Unlike her sister, Bikal has refused to go to her in-laws house until her education is complete.

"I don't even remember when and how I got married. Every year, my dad celebrates her anniversary and tells me that I got married along with her. I will complete my education before the gohna (traditional wedding farewell) happens, provided the bus service continues," she said.

Bikal said she was hopeful that she would complete her education. Like Bikal, 16-year-old Sheetal Bokah is also married. Both come from Bichpuri. Imagining school life without the bus is difficult, they said. "I got married on February 20, 2014. I was visiting my aunt's house when I was told that I would be getting married the next day. I was happy that I would get to wear a lehenga (traditional skirt) and agreed," said Bokah.

The lehenga has stayed with Bokah but her priorities in life have changed. She now hopes to complete her education and apply for a job in the police force.

THE BUS SERVICE
The Blossom bus service runs under the aegis of White Lotus Trust—a non-profit organisation, headquartered in the US. Suraj Kumar, project manager at the White Lotus Trust, said the bus service was particularly started for girls from the Mewat community due to higher dropout rates and low literacy levels. "The service was started for Mewat girls only, but we could not refuse others and now it caters to girls from all communities. In 2009, a report of the National Commission for Protection of Child Rights stated that there was only one Muslim girl in class 9 in many villages. This prompted me to investigate the reason behind such low literacy rates among Muslim girls. The most common

reason that parents shared across villages was concern over the safety of the girls since there were no safe commuting options for them. Many girls told us that they wanted to study but their parents don't allow them to continue their education after primary classes due to safety concerns," Kumar said.

Kumar said Mewat was chosen to launch the service not just because of the higher concentration of Muslims in the population. The Ministry of Statistics and Programme Implementation data from 2015-16 shows that among all districts, the lowest enrolment rate was in Mewat district, which has a heavy concentration of Moos. Only 643 girls enrolled in class 11 and 828 in class 12.

"Of the 100 students enrolled in school in class 1, only 10% reach class 12. Mobility is a major hindrance as there is no public transport available in the villages of the Mewat region. Safety is the biggest concern among parents and students alike. This is where Blossom bus service fills the vacuum. Many of the Blossom Bus girls are first in their village to reach class 12," said Kumar.

Kumar argued that the Right to Education Act, which guarantees free and compulsory education to students of 6-14 years of age, should be extended to cover

students of all ages. "Many parents, who were earlier blamed for not allowing their girls to pursue higher secondary education, are now proud of their daughters. It is the responsibility of the government to bring every child under the RTE."

The volunteers associated with the bus service also try to get dropouts back to school. Ishika Boken joined the Aharwan School in class 10 in 2013. Three years later, she was compelled to drop out of school owing to her ill health. "I used to constantly fall sick. I left school and stayed at home for two years. There was no one else to look after my mother either. I would not have resumed school, in all likelihood," said Boken, a resident of Bichpuri village.

This year in July, Boken resumed classes. She credits the Blossom bus service for it. "My parents were hesitant about sending me back to school after a gap of two years. However, the Blossom volunteers convinced my parents. They are no longer worried about the distance that I have to travel to go to school," said Boken.

HIGHER SCHOOLS NEEDED

While many told HT that they were keen on completing their education, they were not sure if that would be possible since the

school they go to is only till class 10.

"We have requested the education department to extend the school till class 12. There is no other senior secondary girls' school in the vicinity. Most importantly, parents want to educate their daughters and this should be enough to convince the government," said Sandeep Pal Sheoran, who teaches Hindi in the school.

School authorities said they have given several proposals to the education department to convert the school at Aharwan into a higher secondary institution. However, the request for an upgrade has been turned down repeatedly.

Ashok Baghel, Block Education Officer, Palwal, said that the school's proposals were rejected on grounds of lack of feasibility.

"Availability of 1.5 acres is must for setting up a higher secondary school. The high school cannot be converted into a higher secondary school since it doesn't have the required land. It is located on a much smaller area. If the panchayat gives us the required land, we will happily convert it to 10-2. The school fulfills all other rules," said Baghel.

BUS CRITICAL TO EDUCATION

Drawing and dispensing officer (DDO) Ram Ratan, who holds temporary charge

as the school headmaster, said that the school would shut down for all practical purposes if the bus services were to discontinue.

"The school functions because of the bus service. If you take away the bus service, the student strength would come down to 50-60. Our daughters will stop coming to school," said Ratan. Over the years the Blossom bus service has expanded its area of operation. These buses are also now being used to ferry women to colleges. Some of the girls, after completing education in Aharwan girls' school managed to complete graduation. A few of them are now pursuing postgraduate degrees.

Sartia Kumari, 23, is a first-generation college-goer. She is in the final year of her postgraduation in political science. She takes the Blossom Bus twice a day to reach her college in Palwal, which is 8km from her village, Bhanguri.

Sartia used to walk to school, but her commute to college has been made easy due to the bus. "The bus service has been like a saviour for girls like me. Our parents got the confidence to send us to college because of the Blossom bus. Parents are assured about our safety," said Sartia.

Belonging to the Schedule Caste, Sartia is the only one in her community in the village, who has reached postgraduation. Encouraged by her example, other parents are also motivated to educate their girls. "Parents come to me to enquire about the service. They ask about the college and if the bus service will help in the commute," Sartia said.

Sartia's father, Jeevan, admitted it is not safe for girls and there is still some social stigma attached to educating girls. "I am not sure if I would have educated my daughter had the bus service not been there. Upper-caste people spread rumours when girls from our community step out of their house. The best part about the bus service is that it picks up the girls from their doorstep and drops them back," said Jeevan.

RESPONSIBLE STAFF

The safety of the girls is the primary concern of all those associated with the bus service.

"When we had launched the service, we used to encounter men who would try to molest the girls. Once, two men from Aharwan followed the bus on their motorcycles and passed obscene comments at the girls. The bus driver beat them up when the girls told him that the men were stalking them for the past few days. They were never seen again," said Pratap Sehrawat, one of the bus drivers.