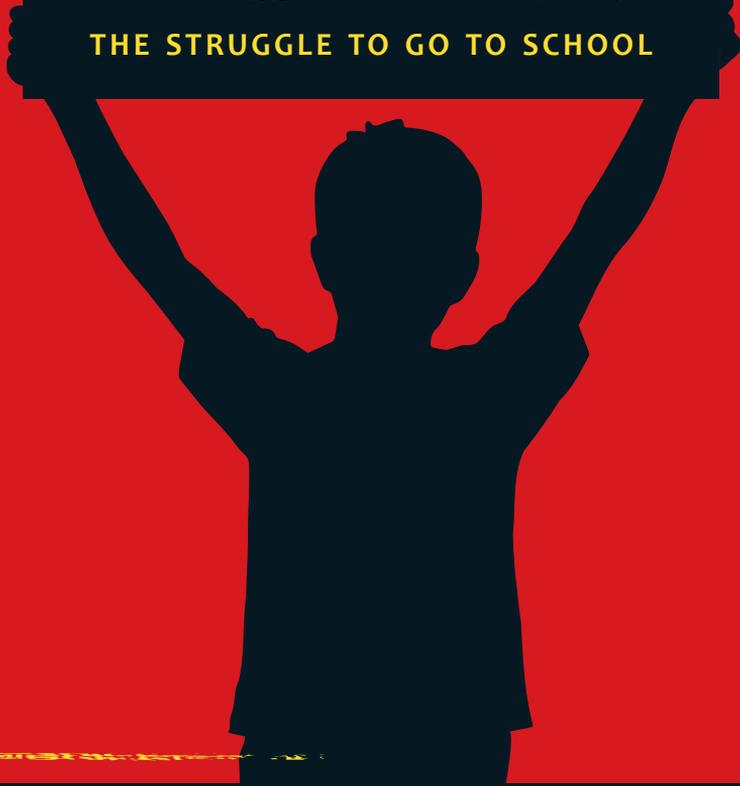


LAURA SCANDIFFIO

**FIGHT
TO
LEARN**

THE STRUGGLE TO GO TO SCHOOL



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*To my children, Claire and Gregory,
who are embarked on
their own journeys of learning*





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Introduction

Have you ever been afraid to go to school? Maybe you hadn't studied for a test, or you weren't getting along with your friends. But what if you were afraid because just getting to school was full of danger? Or being seen in your school uniform made you a target for violence? Or if you knew that once you got there, you would be treated like an unwelcome outsider? And what if you knew that your family would go hungry every day you went to school instead of working?

Now imagine if someone told you that you could never go to school at all. Never learn to read and write or use simple math—what kind of future could you hope to have? Yet around the world, these are the challenges millions of children and teens face. For them, getting an education is a struggle against the odds.

Many obstacles might stand in the way of a child's dream of achieving an education. The stories that follow are true accounts of courageous young people taking on three of the biggest hurdles for children worldwide—poverty, discrimination, and violence. From Pakistani girls banned from school by the Taliban, to India's poorest child workers, to high school students in Chicago overcoming gang violence, these children face barriers that may seem insurmountable. And many have to

battle more than one obstacle in order to learn. Yet there are amazing instances of remarkable young people overcoming these odds—and of teachers who are determined to reach the children who have been left out. Other inspiring young people have not only struggled to claim their own education, but have also become activists fighting for the rights of others.

Why fight so hard to learn? The people in these stories were motivated by the knowledge that education changes lives. They knew that children who get an education don't only grow up to earn a better living, they also understand their rights, improve their communities, and become the leaders of tomorrow. Education gives them control over their own futures, helping them to escape the traps of child labor, discrimination, and lifelong poverty. The people in these stories realized that an educated generation is one that can face society's problems head-on and help to solve them. For young people around the world, getting that education continues to be a struggle, but it is one they are determined to win.

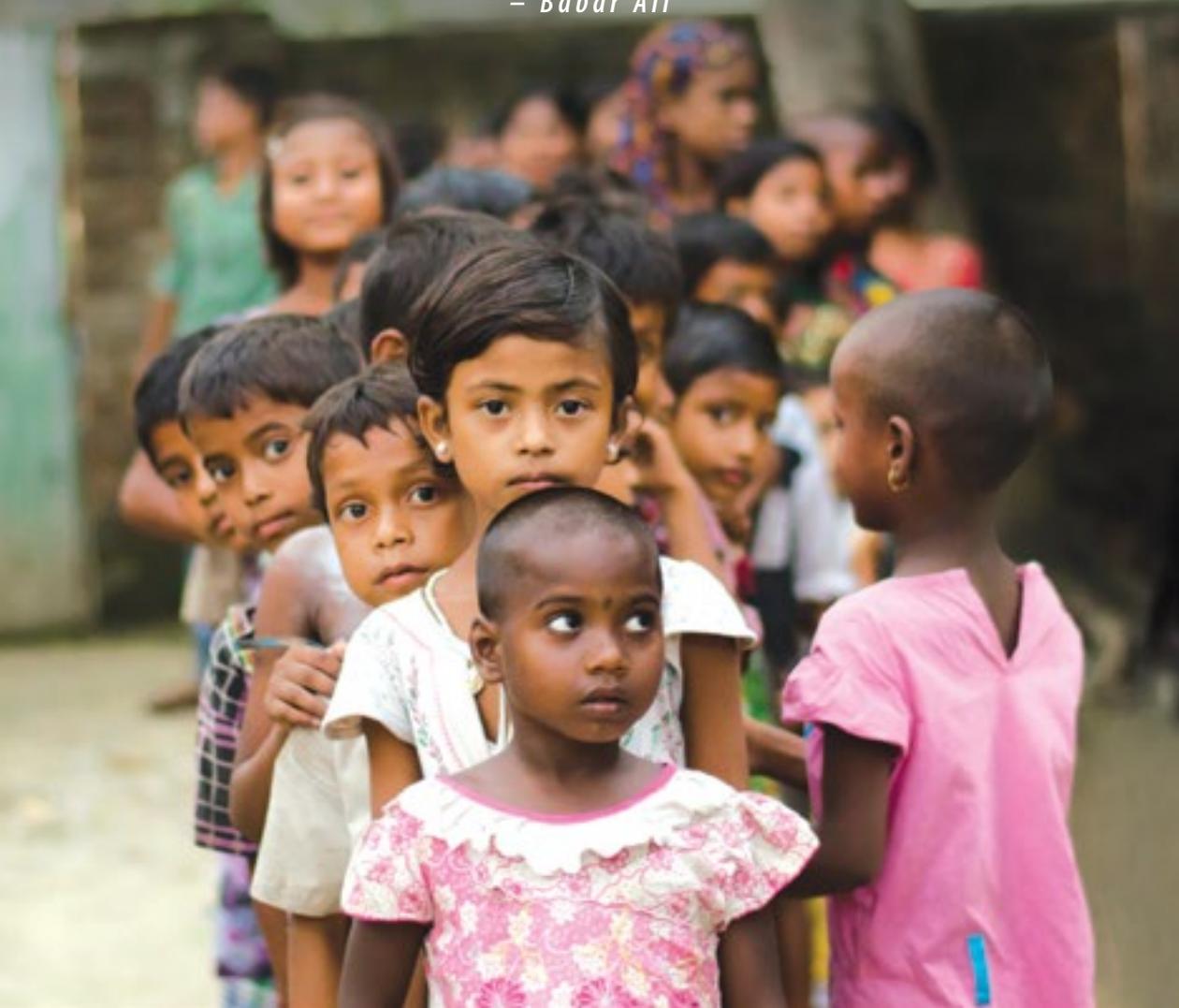


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POVERTY

"Everyone has the right to get
education--and to give it."

– Babar Ali





Babar Ali decided to teach the children of his village who were too poor to go to school.

CHILD WORKERS

The Boy with a School in His Backyard

WEST BENGAL, INDIA – 2009

School was out for the day, but while the other boys lingered to play sports or hang around talking, Babar Ali rushed straight home. The tall, lanky teenager walked the first stretch at a brisk pace, the afternoon heat making him sweat under the white collar of his school uniform. Then he caught a ride on an auto-rickshaw the rest of the long way.

All day he had sat in the front row of his class, taking notes, his face frowning in concentration. And it wasn't just because he was studious. It was because he knew he would soon be passing on everything he had learned to others. He didn't want to forget a word.

Babar hadn't been home long before a brass bell rang loudly in his family's yard. It was 4:00 p.m. Suddenly children—dozens at first, then hundreds, of all ages—came streaming through the metal gate in the brick wall, many carrying books. The family's chickens scattered, then quickly settled back into their scratching and strutting. The kids' colorful clothes brightened the yard as they lined up in rows. Before them, Babar Ali, now in shorts, sandals, and a neat polo shirt, stepped up on a raised platform under a tree so all could see him. Together, they began singing India's national anthem, "Jana Gana Mana."

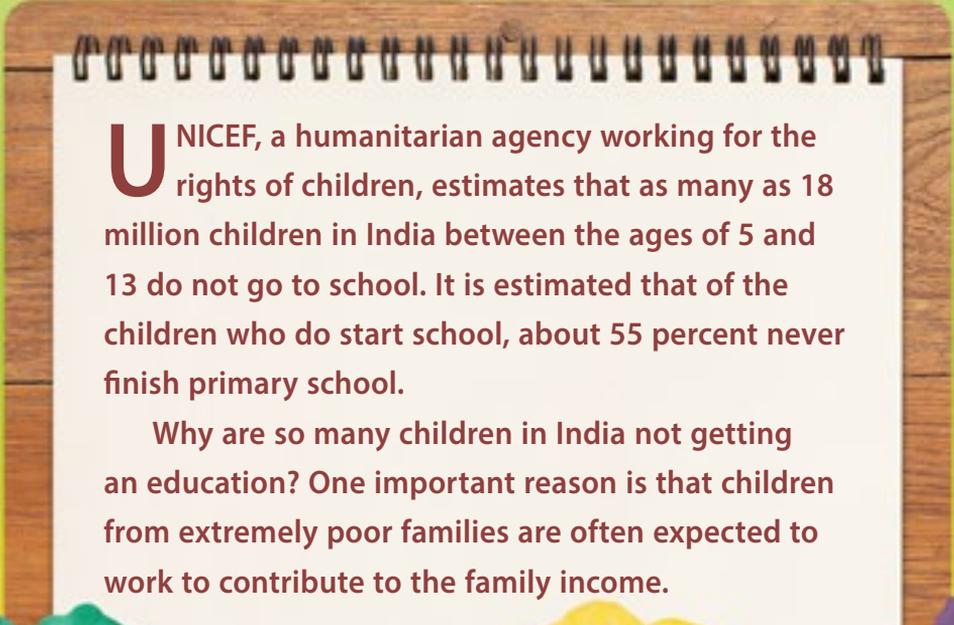
Soon the children were sitting cross-legged on the ground, their books propped open on their knees. Others were squeezed together on rough benches under a long, narrow shelter built alongside the yard wall. They would stay till the light faded, or till it poured, which happened often during monsoon season.

This was the only schooling these children had ever had. Babar Ali would teach them everything his teachers taught him, without asking for anything in return. For children with no other hope of going to school, it must have seemed too good to be true.

It Started as a Game

Babar Ali was very happy to be a student. Even though neither of his parents could read or write, his mother and father believed education was valuable and would change their son's life. And so Babar Ali was the first of his family to be sent to school.

The Raj Govinda school was run by the government, so it was free. The teachers there were well trained, and the classrooms had all the simple basics: desks, chairs, blackboard. Babar Ali had to pay only for his blue and white uniform and his books—about 1,800 rupees (about \$28) a year. But in his West Bengal district of Murshidabad, many children were too poor to afford even that. Besides, they often had to work during school hours to earn money to help their families survive. The boys labored in fields herding livestock or cutting grass; the girls usually got jobs cleaning houses. Babar Ali knew he was one of the lucky ones. His father was a jute seller in Gangapur village. Babar Ali, his three siblings, and his parents lived in a



UNICEF, a humanitarian agency working for the rights of children, estimates that as many as 18 million children in India between the ages of 5 and 13 do not go to school. It is estimated that of the children who do start school, about 55 percent never finish primary school.

Why are so many children in India not getting an education? One important reason is that children from extremely poor families are often expected to work to contribute to the family income.





At first Babar Ali played at being teacher, but soon realized that this was many children's only chance to get an education.

small thatched-roof house. By the standards of his village, they were far from poor.

When he was nine, Babar Ali came home from classes one day to find that some of his friends had stopped by his house. None of them could afford to go to school themselves. They were curious and asked him questions. What was a school like inside? What did he learn? Could he tell them? So Babar started a game in his backyard. He played teacher to his friends, repeating by heart everything he had heard during the day. He had a very good memory. And he discovered being the teacher was fun.

“My friends had never seen the inside of a school, so they enjoyed playing students,” he explained. “They ended up learning arithmetic and enjoying it.”

At first it was just for fun, but slowly Babar Ali began to see that the game could be turned into something much more valuable: “In the beginning I was just play-acting, teaching my friends. But then I realized these children will never learn to read and write if they don’t have proper lessons.”

Babar had always taken his responsibilities seriously. Now he felt strongly that it was up to him: the future of these young people was in his hands. And so, in October 2002, Babar Ali decided to make the game official. The grade 5 student opened his own daily school, outside in his family’s yard. His students were eight friends who would come to learn after spending a long day working. What had started as a game was becoming a lot more real.

“Become big yourself, then help others . . .”

Babar Ali’s parents were impressed by their son’s generosity. But not everyone was convinced the backyard school was a good idea. Some villagers grumbled, “What is the point of teaching children who should be working anyway? If you educate the girls, who will want to marry them?”

Babar’s mother had mixed feelings at first. “Babar, focus on your own studies,” she told him. “Become big and educated yourself, then help others to learn and grow.”

But his answer was to remind her of the teachings of a Hindu spiritual leader who spoke of the importance of service to others. “Ma, haven’t you read the works of Swami Vivekananda? So where is all this selfishness coming from?”

“I had to agree,” she later said, “and inside I was happy my boy said such a thing.”

Babar’s father took a little more convincing. His dream was



Lessons took place outside in Babar's yard, where children as young as five sat on the ground for class.

that his son would get a job in India's civil service, where he would one day become an important man. But what was this now—his boy was running a school?

His parents wanted him to wait. "In all India, run as many schools as you want," his father said. "But first fulfill my hopes for you."

But all around him, Babar could see children growing up without education, here and now. They could not wait. So neither could he.

"The way to a better life . . ."

Word of Babar Ali's unusual school spread, and the number of curious children arriving at his gate each afternoon began to grow. Teaching so many children by himself, without books or classroom supplies, was going to be difficult. But Babar realized



Other volunteers joined Babar to help teach the growing number of children who flocked to his free school.

that there was another problem. Almost all these children were arriving hungry. How could they concentrate on lessons when their stomachs were empty? So Babar began providing them with a meal of rice from his father's fields.

Babar Ali's goals began to expand: teaching kids to read and write was an important beginning, but he wanted them to learn the whole curriculum of a regular school, including math, science, and Bengali, the main language of West Bengal. He knew he couldn't do this alone. One by one, he convinced students his age or a little older from Raj Govinda school to help out with the teaching.

Whenever someone asked why he was doing all this, Babar Ali would explain that it simply needed

*"Without this school,
many kids wouldn't
get an education;
they'd never
even be literate."*

– Babar Ali



to be done: “Our area is economically deprived. Without this school, many kids wouldn’t get an education; they’d never even be literate.” Again, he believed it was his responsibility, not just for them, but for the society he lived in. “It’s my duty to educate them, to help our country build a better future.”

Babar Ali understood that education was the key to breaking out of a life of poverty. Like him, the new teachers knew they would be making an important difference. “Education dispels darkness. It’s the way to a better life around here. That’s why I come to teach,” said Imtiaz Sheikh, a grade 10 student.

In addition to the young teachers, another volunteer joined—Tulu Rani Hazra, a widow who earned her living as a fishmonger. Although illiterate herself, she became a valuable addition to the school. In the morning, as she sold fish from village to village, she also recruited new students, and she fearlessly confronted parents who had stopped sending their children to class. She found at least 80 new students for the school that way. Each afternoon she also proudly rang the brass bell to open classes.

Babar often turned to the Raj Govinda teachers for advice on his burgeoning school. With their recommendation and support, and that of sympathetic local monks, trust in the school spread. People who had once been suspicious began to donate money for books, pencils, and notepaper.



A local woman volunteered to ring the bell to call children to class.

Local government officials heard people praise Babar's scheme, and they began to provide the midday meal and furnish books for the younger students. For everything else, Babar Ali and his students depended on donations from well-wishers.

Where No One Is Too Poor to Learn

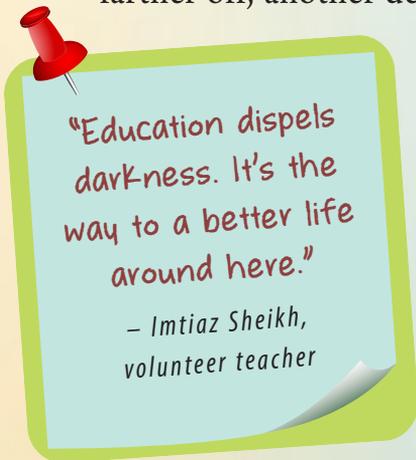
What did a typical school day look like in Babar Ali's yard? At four o'clock, Tulu Rani rang her bell and the children streamed in, many carrying their own mats to lay over the muddy ground before they sat down. Another group of students sat under the shelter that lined one wall. Attendance was taken by the teachers, and each child had a number to make this easier.

The youngest classes were the biggest, with grades 1 and 2 including over 200 students. Grade 8 might have as few as 20. The older students studied 10 subjects and were mostly taught by Babar himself and the volunteer college student.

The buzz of voices was constant as several classes went on at the same time. One young teacher, leaning forward in his plastic chair, was explaining the arithmetic of savings. On a low bench farther off, another described how energy acts on matter. In

the shade of the makeshift shelter, a teacher quizzed her pupils on how an emperor used to get crowned. Whenever Babar Ali was not teaching, he acted as headmaster, strolling from group to group, asking how it was going and reminding his students to study hard.

Everyone worked on lessons till seven o'clock, when it began to get



"Education dispels darkness. It's the way to a better life around here."

- Imtiaz Sheikh,
volunteer teacher



At one end of the yard a shelter protected some of the students from rain.

dark. But because they were outdoors, a downpour could end classes abruptly. Some of the soaked students would run underneath the makeshift shelter, but the rest would dash home, slipping and sliding through the mud.

Changing Lives, One at a Time

It was very important to Babar Ali that his school be entirely free. He always found donors to pay for the children's books. No one was too poor to attend.

One girl at Babar Ali's school had worked every day since she was five, cleaning homes in her village. Along with her grandmother, she lived in a small thatched-roof hut with only a bed inside. Her father was disabled and couldn't work, so her

family depended on her earnings, just 200 rupees (about \$3) a month. After washing floors in one home and doing laundry in two others, she hurried each day to Babar Ali's yard and sat alongside the other girls on a bench. Sometimes she barely had time to finish work before class. But she looked forward to the time spent at lessons with her friends and dreamed of becoming a nurse. Before she found Babar Ali's school, it had never seemed possible.

"Here, we get books, rice, everything for free," she marveled. "Babar Ali's a very good headmaster. He doesn't ask for any money."

Although most of the students ranged from 5 to 14 years old, there were exceptions. One mother and daughter traveled far to learn together at Babar's school. "I couldn't help my daughter with her homework so I decided to study," the 25-year-old mother explained..

"We are more like friends . . ."

When Babar Ali turned 16, in 2009, his life was very different from that of other young people his age. Most boys he knew were students, or they were working to help their families. But by this time, Babar Ali had already been teaching after school for seven years. The number of children who came to his yard had grown to an astonishing 800. Many came only when they could, but on any given day, there might be close to 400 students squeezed into the yard. The youngest were four or five years old and the oldest were in grade 8. And they were still learning outside.

But now the school had a name. On a brick wall facing the gate, Babar had hung a sign that read, "Home of Joyful



Within a few years, hundreds of children were attending Babar's school.

Learning” (“Anand Siksha Niketan”). And he had more teachers! Ten volunteer teachers were pitching in, all students at high school or college. People asked him whether such young teachers could get the children to listen—after all, they were barely older than their students. Babar didn't see any problem. “The narrow age gap works to our advantage,” he explained. “We are more like friends. The rod is spared in my school.”

Maybe young teachers could still be effective, but what about a 16-year-old headmaster? Babar didn't worry about it; headmaster was not his most important role. “I feel I am a teacher first and a headmaster second. I teach my students with a lot of

affection. Although they are different ages, they look at me as a friend and a mentor. This creates an atmosphere of joy and love and makes it easy for me and other fellow teachers to impart education.”

And of course, Babar was still a student as well, continuing to attend school during the day. He was excited about learning himself, and his enthusiasm got his students interested, too. “My favourite subject is History. I also like English and Political Science. In my school, I am the History and English teacher,” he said. And as if that were not enough, he had bigger plans in mind. In addition to Bengali, math, and geography, he also wanted to introduce computers as a subject. Nothing seemed impossible now.

The World's Youngest Headmaster

There was no denying that literacy rates were climbing in the region thanks to Babar’s backyard school. Local authorities began to recognize its value, and nine years after Babar held his first classes among the chickens in the yard, the school was

registered with the West Bengal state government. This was very good news for Babar Ali’s students, because it meant that when they had finished grade 8, they could transfer to local high schools and continue their education.

Babar found at last he could reconcile his passion for teaching with his father’s wishes. “At present I want to carry on teaching,” he

“Everyone has
the right to get
education – and
to give it.”

– Babar Ali





Babar at his headmaster's desk

said, “but in the future I hope to join the Civil Service, to help people in my society.”

Babar Ali graduated from university with an honors degree in English, and he went on to pursue a master’s degree in English literature. He has traveled around the world to speak about his school, and was invited to give a TED talk as “the world’s youngest headmaster.”

“We want the light of education to flow out from this school to the rest of the society,” he has said. “Education for all. With that purpose, we have founded the school. Everyone has the right to get education—and to give it.”

The backyard “Home of Joyful Learning” has continued to thrive and make a positive difference in Babar’s community. Six of Babar’s former students who graduated from the school are now teachers there—including his sister. The poverty that keeps millions of children in India from going to school is a complex issue the country is struggling to address. Advances have been made in getting more young children started at school; the challenge continues to be keeping them there, especially when poverty places them under pressure to work for survival. But individuals like Babar Ali have shown that it is possible to change the pattern, one life at a time, beginning with those closest to home.

