

SLUM LIFE: MAHENDRA'S JOURNEY AS A YOUNG MIGRANT



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A young boy named Mahendra lived in the bustling streets of Delhi, amid the chaos of honking horns and the constant humdrum of life. He was 13-years-old and had moved to Delhi from a small village in Bihar with his mother and sisters. Their move wasn't one of choice but of necessity. Four years ago, Mahendra's father had passed away, leaving the family with no option but to seek better opportunities in the city.

Life in Delhi was a stark contrast to that in their village. The city's sheer size was overwhelming, and the family had to adjust quickly. They moved into a cramped room in a crowded neighborhood, where Mahendra's elder sister had already been living. She had promised their mother that life would be better in Delhi, with more opportunities for work and education.

Mahendra was a talkative boy, full of curiosity and dreams, but the reality of their situation soon became clear to him. Despite the promises of extra help with his studies, Mahendra found himself struggling at his new school where the teachers were harsh. One incident stood out in his mind though. One day, a teacher, known among the students as '*baste waale Sir*' (the Sir with a bag), lost his temper and bit Mahendra on the arm. The pain and humiliation was too much for him. "*baste waale Sir marte the toh school jaane ka man nahi kiya*, (the Sir with a bag used to beat me at school so I lost interest)," he confessed, explaining why he had stopped going to school.

His mother, a resilient woman, took up selling water to support the family. Every day, she toiled under the scorching sun, her hands rough from carrying heavy water containers. Despite her hard work, life was tough for migrant families like theirs, especially in women-led households. They were often targets of local thugs who would come around, even in broad daylight, to threaten Mahendra's mother and take what little money she had. "*Room par aa jaate hain, chaaku dikhakar paisa le jaate hai*, (they enter our room, threaten us with a knife and snatch money from us)," Mahendra explained, his eyes reflecting the fear and anger he felt.





But Mahendra was not one of those who would back down. One day, he decided enough was enough. When the bullies came around again, he stood up to them. It was a brave but dangerous move. He sought help from a local '*pahalwan*' (wrestler), who was tough but was a kind-hearted worker at the water tank. Pahalwan, whose real name was Sanju, had reputation for standing up against injustice. When Mahendra approached him for help, Pahalwan did not hesitate.

Together, they confronted the thugs. It was a fierce encounter, and Mahendra watched in awe as Pahalwan fought back with skill and determination. "*Pahalwaan Bhaiya ke sath gaya aur khoob mara* (Pahalwan bhaiya and I beat the thugs and drove them away)," he recalled triumphantly, feeling mixed emotions of pride and fear. The confrontation sent a clear message to the bullies: they could not mess with Mahendra's family anymore.

Mahendra's act of courage earned him respect in the neighborhood, but it also paints a troubling picture of the challenges young migrants face. His involvement in such dangerous situations hints at a future that could be marred by crime and violence. Yet, at the same time it also shows his resilience and determination to protect his family.

In the heart of Delhi, amid the struggle and hardship, Mahendra's story stands out as a testament to the strength and courage of young children, who are forced to grow up before their time. This is another tale of survival, of standing up against adversity, and of keeping alive the flame of hope for a better future.