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'The compensation won't last forever'

Neha Bhayana, Hindustan Times
December 25, 2008

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Email to Author

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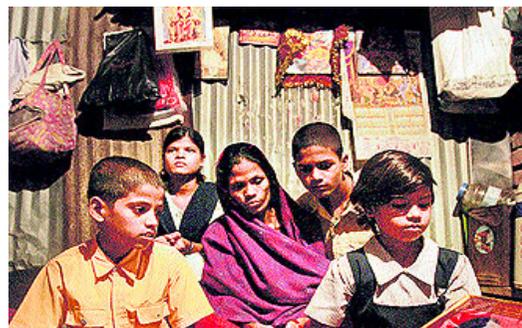
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She wakes up early to dress her siblings for school. Then, she cleans the house, cooks lunch and coaxes her mother to eat. In the evening, she helps her two brothers and little sister with their homework and ensures they eat the dinner she has cooked. Only then does she sit down with her own books.



Growing up overnight: Shivshankar Gupta's family (l to r) — Sandeep, Neelam, Rajkumari, Deepak and Sheetal with their father's photograph. Shivshankar Gupta, who sold bhelpuri at CST station, was one of the first to fall to terrorist bullets. His eldest daughter has taken charge as the family adjusts to a new reality.

At 16, Neelam Gupta has taken charge of rebuilding her family's life.

Her father Shivshankar, who used to sell bhelpuri at CST station, was one of the first to fall to terrorist bullets. The

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37-year-old was packing his basket to leave when the firing started. He fled through a nearby gate but was hit by two bullets outside Cama Hospital at 10.10 pm.

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When his body was brought to their one-room shanty in Mankhurd's Annabhau Sathaye Nagar the next afternoon, Gupta's mother Rajkumari (33) crumbled.

And Neelam grew up.

The young girl comforted her siblings — Deepak (14), Sandeep (12) and Sheetal (9) – and attended to all the condolence calls and media questions.

Neelam tries to maintain a brave front for her family's sake. But sometimes she can't help herself. "I miss my father, too," she says, her eyes welling up.

A consistent topper who never bunked school, Neelam has not attended classes since her father's death. "I'll go back soon and try to fulfil Papa's wish. He wanted me to study computer engineering," she says. Rajkumari is striving to move on, too. She knows her family needs her. "The compensation won't last forever. I have to work," she says. I approached the railways for a job but since my husband was shot outside Cama Hospital and not at the station, they told me I was not eligible."

The family used to manage on the ₹ 100 to ₹ 150 a day Shivshankar brought home. "When he had to close down his stall at a Zunka Bhakar three years ago, I went without food for days. But I always felt secure because I knew he would take care of us," she says. "Now, it is my responsibility."

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