

# Learn and earn at Etasha

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**M**EHAK and Jayanti, two girls from Devli village in Delhi, wanted to do a post-graduate degree in Hindi after college. But their parents couldn't afford to fund their aspirations. Jayanti's father works as a clerk in a chemist's shop while Mehak's father is a chauffeur.

Mehak's sister suggested the two girls approach Etasha, a non-profit that provides career counselling to youngsters and trains them to be employable. "We were a bit sceptical at first," says Mehak. "We often heard of similar institutes who swindle you. Happily, we were proved wrong."

After completing a three-month course in Customer Service and Work Culture Training (CSWC), Mehak and Jayanti are working in a Café Coffee Day outlet as Blue Masters – the ones who know what goes into that perfect cuppa. The girls each earn Rs 8,000 per month. "Now I can support my higher education and help my father too," beams Jayanti.

Mehak and Jayanti's story is similar to those of many youngsters whose lives have been transformed by Etasha. Founded in 2006 by Meenakshi Nayar, Etasha trains youth and places them in the retail, hospitality and BPO sectors.

"Right now there is a lack of skilled people in these growing economic sectors. If people are not trained, there is no point in having jobs," explains Ian McBride, Etasha's Director of Communications.

Most of Etasha's trainees are from low-income families and they live in slums. Their parents work as agricultural farmhands or as small vendors and service providers in the informal sector. "There are many government school dropouts among our students," says Ian. "We help them acquire soft skills to operate in a controlled environment." Etasha also trains students from Industrial Training Institutes (ITIs). The non-profit has partnered with ITI Gurgaon, ITI Gurgaon-Women, ITI Rohtak and ITI Siri Fort in Delhi.

Etasha has two training centres strategically located near Madanpur Khadar and Tigri, two large slum colonies in southeast Delhi. Through its community mobilisation teams, Etasha connects with the youth and their families in slums. Team members promote the non-profit's various courses and impress on the youth the need to be economically independent.

Etasha's four courses teach students how to use computers and communicate effectively. Each



Meenakshi Nayar at Etasha's Tigri centre



Mehak and Jayanti at a Café Coffee Day outlet

training module is four to five months long and costs just ₹250 to ₹350 depending on the course the student chooses. "If we come across a student who is absolutely unable to pay for the course, we provide them monetary support," says Ian.

At times, money isn't the only hindrance. Some families just want their sons to continue working in their family shops or tending to their farms. Others don't want their daughters to learn a professional course and work in offices with male colleagues for long hours far from home.

Meenakshi Nayar says parents simply want to marry off their daughters. "We come across families who let their daughter train with us so that she can get a better groom! Although the girls want to work, their parents force them to marry after the course is over. We are trying to change that outlook," she says.

An Etasha classroom reminds one of bygone school days. Vivek Bhardwaj, who teaches English, keeps an eagle eye on his students. "We are not teachers, we are facilitators," he says. "We try to figure out what a student already knows and then gradually build on that knowledge, adding layers of education and information." At

present, Etasha has 20 facilitators in its two centres.

What sets Etasha apart from similar institutes? "Our curriculum," replies Meenakshi. "We don't look at getting a job as the only end result. We prepare youth for a career and for life." For instance, there are classes on sexuality and HIV/AIDS. Also included are anger management sessions.

"Anindita Madam and Anil Sir's anger management classes were the best part of our course," says Mehak. "I used to get angry at the drop of a hat. But with each class, I could feel myself becoming calmer and more restrained. It was the same with all my classmates," she says.

Etasha also takes their students on field visits to retail outlets and metro stations. Students learn to follow the system, communicate with officials and mingle with the crowd. These visits are a huge confidence boost for their students. "They would come back from a visit to an eat-out and say that there is no difference between them and well off youngsters who hang out at those places regularly. They don't feel like social outcasts anymore," says Meenakshi.

The Digital Empowerment Foundation has recognized Etasha's efforts and bestowed them with the 'Best Use of ICT by an NGO Working in Sustainable Development in South East Asia' award. "We use

technology to the fullest extent and the result is visible. Students who didn't know how to use a computer now stay in touch with us through social media networks," says Ian.

The retail, hospitality and BPO sectors hire trainees with the maximum frequency from Etasha. Café Coffee Day, Lifestyle, Kwaliti, Accenture, JCB India, Barclays Shared Services and Tata Capital are some of the companies who recruit from Etasha on a regular basis.

"There are a few companies which promise employees a certain remuneration package but then pay less by deducting hidden costs like charges for uniforms and so on. Our placement team handles such issues immediately and ensures that the employees get what they deserve," says Meenakshi. A fresher often starts with a package of ₹6,500 to ₹10,000, which eventually doubles in three years or less.

Etasha is currently training 240 youngsters in its two centres. Shiv Kumar Dhawan is happy to be a student at Etasha. "Before coming here, I didn't know what the future held for me. But now I know that there are so many things that I can do," he says. ■