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Invisible Threads, Indispensable Hands

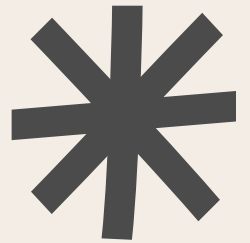
2025



Six Months of Listening

* Brocelle

For half a year we stayed in conversation with eleven caregivers across India, through a pattern of return.



Phone calls on their way back from work. WhatsApp voice notes recorded while stirring dal or rocking a child to sleep. Video calls where the camera showed as much of the kitchen as the face. Messages sent late at night, when the house was quiet and there was finally space to reflect.

We travelled with them through the rhythms of their days. One week we joined at the school gate, as a father explained the juggling act between office meetings and pickup times. Another week it was a mother whispering over the hum of a sewing machine, pausing to send a photo of her child's half-eaten tiffin. In Meghalaya, we caught rain on the line, the sound of it drowning out a tribal mother's voice as she explained how monsoon hours reshape care. In Jaipur, we learnt to read between the silences in a trans caregiver's call, where pauses held as much weight as words.

Because these were not single snapshots. They were threads woven across months, showing us how care is never one event but an ongoing ledger. The first telling was often cautious, shaped by what carers thought we wanted to hear. "Yes, the Anganwadi helps." "Yes, we manage." "Yes, the neighbour supports."



Highlights

Over six months, we stayed close to the daily ledgers of care, not through surveys or one-off visits, but through hours of listening as lives unfolded in real time.

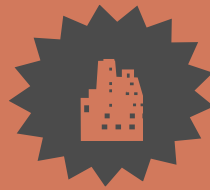
What we traced was not abstract “support systems,” but the texture of how carers actually orient their days: which hours get lost, which rupees get stretched, which small acts of love hold everything together.

These highlights are not the whole story. They are a window into the scale of invisible labour that keeps children safe, fed, and learning, even when systems look away.



Caring Adults

12



Cities

11



Duration

6 months



Total Hours

120+



Children Cared For

23



Dimensions of Care

4

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They were threads woven across months, showing us how care is never one event but an ongoing ledger. The first telling was often cautious, shaped by what caring adults thought we wanted to hear. ***"Yes, the Anganwadi helps."*** ***"Yes, we manage."*** ***"Yes, the neighbour supports."***

But the second telling, the one that surfaced weeks and sometimes, months later, when trust had settled in, was slower and messier. That was when the hidden arithmetic emerged: the unpaid neighbour whose help came with conditions; the crèche whose free hours still cost a day's wage in missed overtime; the office daycare that was more about optics than support.

Staying in their lives over months meant we saw care not as an isolated burden but as a daily system of recalibration.

We began to notice the small fluctuations: a shift ending fifteen minutes late, a power cut disrupting evening routines, a child's fever throwing off the week's fragile balance. Each disruption had to be absorbed somewhere, in a lost wage, an unpaid bill, a neighbour's favour, or the caregiver's own body.



It was through these repeated glimpses that the deeper pattern revealed itself. Every story, no matter how different, kept circling back to **two ledgers**.

One measured hours: stretched, stolen, bargained, or surrendered.

The other tracked rupees: spent, hidden, borrowed, or redirected.

And beneath both ran a **lesser visible current, dignity**, the unspoken cost that decided whether hours or rupees could truly be counted as gain.

We learnt that to understand care is to follow these ledgers over time, not just in a single moment.

A garment worker mother's month looked one way when the crèche stayed open, and entirely different when funding cuts shortened its hours. A father's week looked one way when his manager granted leave, and another when every absence was noted. A tribal woman's routine looked one way in the dry season, and another when the rains swallowed paths to school. **The system of care was never static.** It was constantly rebalanced, with carers improvising at the edge of exhaustion.

This section begins the report as an account of method. We did not arrive once and depart with a "case study." We returned, again and again, until the rhythm of conversion, between time, money, and dignity, became visible.



The Time Ledger: Hours as Scarcity

If money was always scarce, time was even scarcer.

Every caring adult we stayed in touch with spoke of time not as a neutral clock, but as a fragile, leaky container. Days were described less in hours and more in trade-offs: a fever versus a shift, a pickup versus a wage, an overtime bonus versus a bedtime story.

Time in the language of policy looks orderly: 9 a.m. to 5 p.m., Monday to Friday, hours of work neatly stacked beside hours of schooling or childcare. Time in the lives of carers was nothing like this. It moved unevenly, bending around bus delays, night shifts, monsoon rains, power cuts, illness, and the unpredictable demands of employers.

One mother in Bangalore told us her day was “stitched with alarms.”

She sent us the screenshots of the alarms on her phone: wake the child, walk to daycare, leave for the factory, call the neighbour at 4:00 in case of delay. When the crèche closed early, as it often did, every alarm rang out of tune. Another caregiver in Jaipur described how school schedules assumed the presence of two parents: one for the drop-off, one for the pickup, one for the PTA meeting. As a trans single mother, she found herself split in two by a timetable written for a family that was not hers.

In rural and tribal areas, time bent around the land itself. A woman in Ladakh explained that snow, not the school bell, decided her children's attendance. In the Khasi hills, paths turned slippery in the rains. “Care collapses when roads do,” she said simply, describing how neighbours took turns carrying children across streams. In Maharashtra, a young mother waited outside the Anganwadi during farm hours, because leaving her child alone felt unsafe. Her day was halved into waiting and working, neither fully her own.

Again and again, the mismatch was the same.

Systems assumed predictability. Care lived in unpredictability.

Schools, crèches, hospitals, and offices treated time as something they controlled. Caregivers treated time as something they borrowed, and repaid, from one another.



What kept families from breaking was not the formal timetable but the **informal web of hours.**

These webs were finely tuned, constantly adjusted, and barely visible to anyone outside. Neighbours collected children when shifts ran late. Older siblings became second parents, watching toddlers between homework and play. WhatsApp groups of parents acted like dispatch centres, one person late, another stepping in.

A caring adult in Hyderabad told us of her building's unspoken rota: if one mother had to leave suddenly for work, an older child from another room sat with the younger ones.

"We don't write it down," she said.
"But we all know."



These webs were efficient, adaptive, and deeply human. They did not require budgets, but they cost energy. The women (and sometimes men) who held them up were often themselves stretched thin.

Their hours were traded like currency, and like currency, the exchange was not always equal.

Helping today meant expecting help tomorrow, but illness, eviction, or stigma could break the cycle. When that happened, carers fell through.

Policy speaks of "time poverty" as if it is a single measure. What our conversations revealed is that poverty of time is not just about quantity. It is about alignment, flexibility, and dignity. It is about whether the hours of a school day match the hours of a factory floor. Whether a clinic opens before the fever spikes at night. Whether a single parent can be two places at once when the system insists on two signatures.

In every voice note, every call, the same truth circled back: time does not bend easily.

When it snaps, the caregiver absorbs the break.

The Money Ledger: Rupees That Disappear

If time was fragile, money was unforgiving.

Every caring adult we spoke with carried a mental budget, as precise as any spreadsheet, but etched in lived detail: how much rice could be stretched from the ration card; how many bus fares could be avoided if the neighbour stepped in; how many days of rent could be covered if a child's shoes were bought second-hand.

Money never travelled alone. Every rupee was asked to do double duty, not only to buy food or cover fees, but to stand in for time, dignity, or joy. A single father in Chennai explained that the money he spent on daycare was not only a childcare cost. It was the price of keeping his job.

"If I didn't pay, I'd be running home twice a day," he said. "I can't afford to look unreliable."

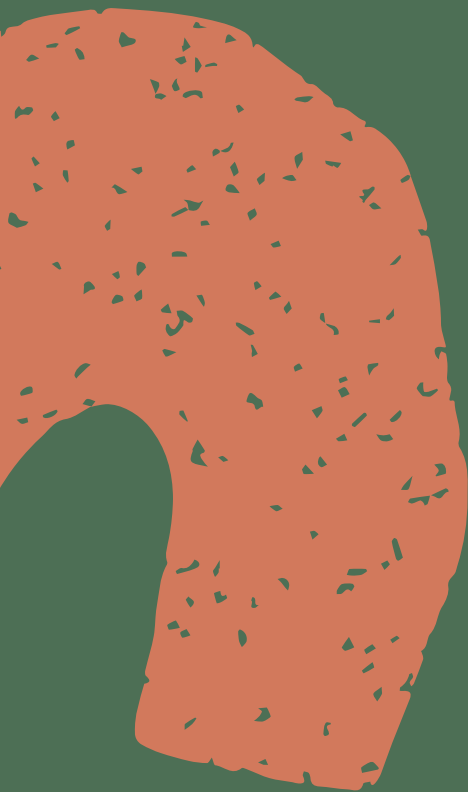
For a garment worker in Bangalore, the cost of childcare was disguised. The NGO crèche her daughter attended was free on paper. But it shut its doors early. Every week, she lost either an hour's wage to collect her child before the machine whistle blew, or spent ₹50 slipping to a neighbour for emergency care. The crèche was free, but her life around it was not.

Shadow costs appeared everywhere. In Hyderabad, a sex worker mother described the "fees" she paid to survive, small payments to neighbours for keeping an eye on her daughter at night, and occasional "safety money" handed to men who policed her street corner. None of this appeared on government ledgers. Yet, when she listed her monthly expenses, these outflows were as real as rent.

In Ladakh, where cash barely circulated, money was still decisive. A mother of three showed us how she rationed her weaving income. Some went to buy oil and tea; a portion was reserved for transport when the village's only jeep could take her children to a health centre. Even here, where barter and kinship carried much of the load, rupees slipped away, on petrol, batteries, occasional medicines.

"We don't spend often," she said, "but when it happens, it all goes at once."





Schooling was another constant drain.

In Delhi, a domestic worker counted off her children's expenses: a free government school, but uniforms and exam fees that swallowed a week's wages. A notebook lost or a pen broken meant another trip to the market. A mother in Maharashtra explained how even the "free" Anganwadi required her to cover snacks, utensils, or contributions to festivals.

"Nothing is really free," she said softly.



The weight of these expenses was not only financial but emotional. Money was tied to shame.

Caring adults spoke of the humiliation of being asked for documents they could not provide, of being told their children could not participate without paying for an "extra", a trip, a uniform, a book. One mother described the feeling of handing over crumpled notes at a clinic, only to be asked again for more.

"I feel small," she said. **"Like my money is never enough to make me equal."**

Savings were thin, if they existed at all. For most, "savings" meant a piglet, a jar of grain, a hidden envelope of coins. Emergencies wiped them out instantly. A fever meant borrowing from neighbours. A broken sandal before exam day meant skipping a meal to buy new ones. One father in Chennai managed to set aside ₹15,000 each month for his son's future, but admitted that every sick day, every delayed payment, felt like a hole torn in his plan.

Over six months, we began to see money not only as cash flow but as a form of translation. Carers used money to buy back time, to guard dignity, to create joy. But they also knew its limits. No rupee could make up for humiliation at a school gate, or for a system that shut an hour too early. In those moments, carers chose hacks, barter, or exhaustion over spending.

The money ledger, then, was never only arithmetic.

It was layered with memory, identity, and strategy.
Every rupee carried both weight and meaning.

And just like time, money was constantly in deficit.

The Conversion Rule: Turning Rupees into Hours, Hours into Dignity

Across six months of conversations, one observation surfaced again and again. When deciding how to spend, when deciding how to sacrifice, caring adults asked themselves:

“If I spend the rupees, do I get the hours back, and do I get them with dignity?”

It was survival arithmetic.



A father in Chennai explained how every daycare bill was weighed not against income alone, but against the hours it bought. The office crèche cost more than neighbours thought reasonable, but it saved him the half-hour commute each way that would otherwise be stolen from his evenings with his son.

“That’s two extra stories at bedtime,” he said. **“That’s worth more than the money.”**

For a migrant mother in Bangalore, the equation looked different. She earned little, and her NGO-run crèche was technically free. But its hours ended before her shift did. Paying a neighbour’s daughter a small sum each week, what she called “chai money”, bought her just enough overlap to finish her quota on the factory floor. The rupees didn’t buy “quality childcare.”

And yet, caring adults were not reckless with this arithmetic. They did not throw money at systems that humiliated them. A trans mother in Jaipur told us how she refused private schools that forced her to sign “father” on forms.

“Why should I pay to erase myself?” she asked.

Instead, she cobbled together an alternative web of after-school play groups and supportive neighbours.

The conversion rule revealed two truths at once.

First: caring adults were relentlessly pragmatic. Every rupee was tested for its return in hours.

Second: caring adults were fiercely protective of dignity.

This dual calculus explains choices that, from the outside, can look irrational. Why would a poor mother spend money on a school photo outfit instead of saving for food?

Over time, we saw how the conversion rule itself carried emotional weight. Caring adults often replayed their arithmetic aloud. The ledger was not only financial. It was moral.

And still, they kept recalculating. Each morning, each week, each season brought new variables: harvests, exams, sickness, deadlines, rent. The conversion rule was never solved once and for all. It was lived in repetition, adjusted daily, endlessly recalculated.

The principle is simple to state, but devastating in practice: if money doesn’t return usable hours with dignity, carers find another way. That “other way” is almost always harder, more exhausting, and less visible, but it protects the one thing they cannot afford to lose: their sense of self as carers who are present, capable, and loving.

Dignity as a Hidden Currency

Time and money were the visible ledgers.

But underneath, **another ledger invisibly shaped every choice: dignity.**

It was harder to name, harder to measure, but for carers it mattered just as much. Sometimes more.

Across months of conversations, this truth became clear: systems often gave access without giving respect. Caring adults were “included” on paper, their children were admitted to schools, their names were entered on clinic registers, their signatures appeared on subsidy forms. Yet the way they were treated inside those spaces left them smaller, humiliated, or erased.

A trans mother in Jaipur described how every form became a site of erasure. Each required “father” and “mother.” Each paused at her name. Each moment carried a small public correction, repeated so often it left her exhausted.

“I am there,” she said, “but they still don’t see me.” Paying fees, buying uniforms, showing up for meetings, none of it bought her the dignity of being recognised as a parent.

In Kolkata, the parents of a neurodiverse child recounted how school inclusion was framed as generosity, not a right.

They were told their son was “lucky” to be admitted, reminded to “cooperate” by lowering expectations, and treated as “difficult” whenever they asked for accommodations. Every therapy session, every shadow-teacher fee, every rupee spent, none of it bought them belonging.

“We are accepted,” they said, **“but never welcomed.”**

Even in government spaces designed for care, small cuts of dignity were routine. Mothers were scolded for being late to crèches, though their shifts ended after closing time.

A domestic worker in Delhi described how her son’s teacher always asked, **“Where is the father?”** even though she had explained many times that she raised her children alone. A sex worker in Hyderabad recalled being made to wait longer at a clinic, even while holding her sick child. **“They look at me like I am undeserving of care,”** she whispered.

These were not single incidents. They were patterns. They accumulated slowly, invisibly, in the bodies and memories of carers. Each interaction shaved away dignity like thin slices. A smile forced at the gate. A correction swallowed at the counter. A tear hidden until the child was asleep.

Over time, this erosion had consequences.

Some caring adults simply stopped showing up. A mother in Maharashtra said she avoided the Anganwadi unless necessary:

"They ask too many questions. They think I am careless."

A father in Chennai described not attending parent meetings because he was tired of being the only man in the room. The cost of humiliation was higher than the benefit of inclusion.

This is what we came to understand:

dignity is not a soft extra. It is a hidden currency.

Without it, hours and rupees do not add up. A free service that humiliates costs more than a paid service that respects. A long journey is bearable if it ends in welcome; unbearable if it ends in suspicion.

And yet, dignity was not always denied.

There were moments, small but powerful, where it was present. A daycare receptionist who treated a single father like family, remembering his son's favourite snack. A teacher who spoke directly to a neurodiverse child, rather than only to the parents. A neighbour who introduced a trans mother without hesitation as "Amma."

These gestures cost nothing, but to carers they felt like wealth.

When we asked carers what they most wanted from systems, the answers were often simple: "Don't make me repeat myself." "Don't treat me like I'm less." "Just write parent, not father." Beneath the requests for better hours, lower costs, or more staff, there was always this plea: respect us as carers, without conditions.

Over six months, we came to see dignity as the most decisive ledger of all.

Time could be stretched, money could be borrowed, but dignity once lost was hard to recover. Carers guarded it fiercely. Some chose more exhausting paths rather than risk its erosion. Others walked away from services altogether.

The lesson is stark. Inclusion without dignity is not inclusion. Services without respect are not support. Any system that ignores dignity as currency will fail, no matter how many rupees it spends or how many hours it extends.



Joy and Love as Deliberate Expenditure

If time and money were the ledgers, and dignity the hidden currency, then joy was the unlisted line item, the expense that never fit into budgets, but was never fully cut either.

Caring adults spoke often of sacrifice: meals skipped, wages lost, hours stretched. Yet alongside this came stories of deliberate, small acts of joy. They were not indulgences. They were strategic investments in resilience. In their words, joy was the thread that kept children believing, and kept carers themselves going.

A tribal mother in Meghalaya described how, even when harvest failed, she still sang lullabies to her youngest at night. The words cost nothing, but she called them “a blanket against hunger.”

In Hyderabad, a sex worker mother described buying kulfi on her daughter’s birthday even though it meant skipping dinner for herself. “She looked at me like I had given her the world,” she said. “That smile lasts longer than the hunger.”

In Jaipur, a trans mother baked gujiya with her child every full moon. She admitted it was messy and time-consuming, but insisted on it. “It is our ritual,” she said. “The world cannot take it from us.” Those sweets carried more than taste, they carried belonging, a reminder that family could be made, not just inherited.

In Bangalore, a garment worker described rushing home from the factory to wash her daughter’s only red shirt thrice before school photo day. The photo showed her daughter beaming. “She looked so happy”, the mother said.

These were not trivial moments. They showed us that care was never only about keeping children fed or schooled. It was about protecting their sense of being loved, remembered, and celebrated. We saw how joy operated as both resistance and resource. It resisted the narrative that carers were only surviving. It resourced them to keep going when everything else frayed. A bedtime rhyme, a new pencil, a day off at the park, these were not luxuries. They were survival strategies in disguise.

For caring adults themselves, joy was also a reclaiming of identity. A mother in Mumbai said she sometimes bought herself bangles with leftover coins. “People ask why, when I say I have no money,” she laughed. “But when I wear them, I remember I am not only a worker or a mother. I am me.”



Patterns and Fault Lines

When we began this work, each conversation felt singular. A father in Chennai with his reminders taped to the fridge. A tribal mother in Meghalaya braiding her daughter's hair while rain closed the road. A garment worker in Bangalore whispering from the factory floor. Their stories were textured, specific, alive.

But as weeks turned into months, and calls overlapped across states and situations, something else appeared. Threads began to repeat. What seemed like individual struggles were in fact shared patterns, stitched across distance and identity.

The first pattern was rigidity versus rhythm.

Every formal system ran on fixed schedules: the crèche that shut at four, the Anganwadi that opened at nine, the school that expected parents on weekdays at noon. But carers' lives ran on shifting rhythms, factory overtime, unpredictable day labour, seasonal harvests, night shifts, sudden illness. The clash between rigidity and rhythm left carers constantly contorting their days. They woke earlier, ran faster, cut sleep short, begged neighbours for favours.

The second pattern was support before the system.

Everywhere we listened, informal webs carried the load before formal services arrived. Cousins and neighbours picked up children before buses did. Older siblings acted as shadow teachers before special educators appeared. Mothers pooled resources before state rations reached the village. Even where programmes existed, carers patched the gaps first. The state entered late, if at all.

A third pattern was dignity as the breaking point.

Caring adults tolerated scarcity. They tolerated long walks, short meals, unpaid overtime. But humiliation tipped them over. A mother scolded at a crèche gate for lateness stopped going. A trans caregiver forced to tick the wrong box on a school form walked away. A father dismissed as an exception at parent meetings began avoiding them altogether. Dignity, we saw, was the line that decided whether carers stayed inside systems or slipped outside.

The fourth pattern was joy as resilience, not luxury.

Small acts of love surfaced in every household: the kulfi, the gujiya, the red shirt washed thrice. These were not decorative. They were deliberate tools of survival. Carers knew what policymakers often forget — that children live not only on nutrition and education, but on recognition, celebration, and care that feels joyful. Systems that ignore this create a poverty deeper than money: the poverty of delight.

Finally, there was design without caring adults.

Programmes, forms, and services were consistently imagined without the people they claimed to serve. School schedules assumed nuclear families. Subsidies assumed local ID cards. Daycares assumed nine-to-five jobs. Clinics assumed mothers were always available to wait in line. The result was not only inefficiency but mistrust. Carers felt systems were not built with them, but despite them.

These fault lines ran beneath every narrative, whether urban or rural, poor or middle-class, mother or father, cis or trans. The details differed, but the structure was constant. Time clashed with rigidity. Money leaked through invisible costs. Dignity eroded trust. Joy was undervalued. Caring adults were sidelined as “beneficiaries” when in fact they were the very architects holding everything up.

Over six months, we stopped thinking of these as anecdotes. They were not edge cases. They were the system itself, as experienced from below. The neat diagrams of welfare and education did not look like this. But in practice, this is what kept children fed, safe, and learning: exhausted carers making impossible conversions every day, while invisible scaffolds of care stretched and frayed beneath them.

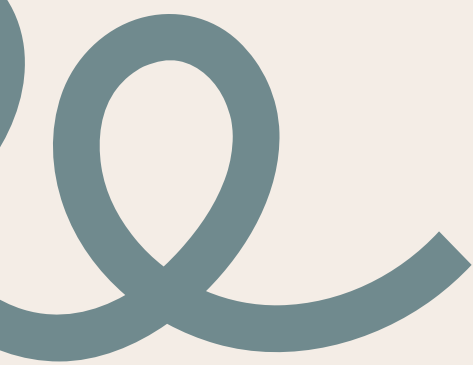
And so, the “fault lines” we describe here are not hidden weaknesses.

They are the ground reality. They are what happens when time and money are misaligned, when dignity is shaved thin, when joy is ignored, when carers are excluded from the design of the very systems they sustain.

These are not gaps to be patched up. They are structural flaws. Left unaddressed, they will keep reproducing scarcity, shame, and exhaustion. Seen clearly, they can become entry points for redesign.



Six months of listening did not give us solutions. What it gave us was clarity: that every system of care is already being designed, every day, by those who carry it.



Not by policy architects or funders, but by fathers rushing between office and daycare, by mothers bartering hours of neighbourly help, by sex workers calculating safety and schooling in the same breath, by tribal women braiding kinship into survival.

Their lives revealed three ledgers, time, money, dignity, and one unlisted expense: joy. Together, these form the hidden economy of care. Yet formal systems rarely account for them.

Time is treated as flexible, as if carers can always adjust. Money is counted only in service costs, not in hidden payments, missed wages, or barter exchanges. Dignity is treated as secondary, a matter of tone rather than design. Joy is left out altogether, considered irrelevant to infrastructure.

The result is predictable: systems that arrive late, run rigid, cost more than they admit, and push caring adults to breaking points. They fill these cracks with their own improvisations. They stretch themselves thinner. They invent webs of support, co-care arrangements, rituals of resilience. They become, by necessity, the true designers of care.

What we ask, begins with a shift in perspective: to see carers not as beneficiaries but as co-architects. To treat their ledgers as blueprints. To acknowledge that every hour they claw back, every rupee they reallocate, every fragment of dignity they defend, every moment of joy they create is already a form of system design.

From this shift, everything else follows. Programmes must be built around time as it is lived, not time as it is scheduled. Policies must recognise money as it is spent, including hidden costs and unpaid exchanges. Services must protect dignity as a baseline, not a bonus. And every space that claims to serve children must also leave room for joy as infrastructure, as a measure of whether care is working.

So this report is not an archive. It is a provocation.

Care is not a side issue. It is the infrastructure beneath every other system, health, education, economy, democracy. And it is already breaking. Not because carers are failing, but because the systems around them refuse to bend with them.

The question is no longer whether we can “support” caring adults. They are already supporting us. The question is whether we are willing to redesign our systems with their ledgers in mind, time, money, dignity, joy, so that the burden of improvisation does not rest solely on their shoulders.

We ask, simply, that you read these stories as instructions. Not prescriptions. Instructions. They tell us what needs to change. They show us what is possible. And if taken seriously, they offer the beginnings of a care system that does not demand exhaustion as its price.

The Potrait Gallery



The pages that follow introduce eleven caregivers.

Each one is represented through a persona, a composite sketch drawn from six months of conversations, field notes, and repeated check-ins.

These are not case studies frozen in time. They are living portraits that capture rhythm as much as detail: how mornings begin, how hours are traded, how dignity is defended, how joy is carved out of scarcity. Together, they show the quiet choreography of care as it unfolds in homes, fields, factories, and city lanes.

All names in this section are pseudonyms. They are chosen not to conceal but to protect, a reminder that what matters is not who these individuals are, but what their lives reveal about the systems that surround them.

We resisted categories like “urban poor” or “working mother” because they flatten texture. Instead, these personas are arranged to show how care is actually lived: at once intimate and public, fragile and resilient, invisible and indispensable.

Read them not as stories of exception, but as mirrors of patterns repeated across communities. Each persona is a window into the unseen economies of time, money, dignity, and joy, the currencies by which families survive when systems fall short.

CAREGIVER 01: LEELA

“The crèche is both refuge and risk.”

-  **Location:** New Delhi
-  **Identity:** Single mother, informal worker
-  **Dependents:** Two children (aged 3 and 7)
-  **Work:** Domestic worker, part-time tiffin cook

A Day in the Life — Leela



Leela's mornings begin before dawn. By 5:30 a.m. she has boiled milk, soaked lentils, and swept her single-room home. At 7am she wakes her children, braids her daughter's hair, and packs leftover rice with salt for lunch. A neighbour's teenage daughter escorts them to the NGO crèche.



From 9:00 a.m. to 2:30 p.m., Leela moves between two households, cleaning floors, scrubbing bathrooms, and cooking rotis. By three, she rushes back to the crèche. If she is late, the workers scold her. Evenings are another shift: laundry, cooking, repairing torn hems for extra income. Her children often fall asleep beside unfinished homework. After they are asleep, she scrolls WhatsApp school groups, anxious not to miss forms or announcements.



Soundtrack of Care:

She hums old Meena Kumari songs while cooking.



"The crèche shuts at 4.
My work doesn't."



SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

EXTERNAL CIRCLE

City services that appear only
for ration cards or ID updates.

INNER CIRCLE

The NGO-run crèche,
unreliable, underfunded, but
indispensable.

CORE CIRCLE

Herself, and
occasionally a
neighbour's
teenage daughter.



Energy Drains

Choosing between her job and her child's fever. She says the guilt lingers long after the illness ends.



Energy Gains

Her daughter's crèche rhymes echoing through the narrow lanes, a sound that makes her feel "we belong here too."



Fictions

Employers assume she has "help at home." The crèche assumes her shifts end by 4. The school assumes a father exists.



Frictions

- "At least the poor have crèches."
- "Informal workers don't plan anyway."



Futures

Leela dreams of a care system with flexible crèche hours, rest mats and real food for children, monthly health check-ups for mothers as well as kids.

If **Leela** could design a care system:

She would build neighbourhood crèches that open early and close late, run by women from the community and funded well enough to pay them fair wages. There would be no scolding at pickup time, only support. She would add a helpline, not for emergencies, but for encouragement, "a voice that reminds us we are not alone."

LEDGER OF CARE

LEELA

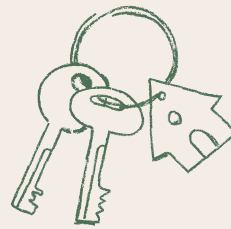
THE JUGGLER



₹4,000

Basic staples (lentils, rice, salt) for herself and two children; very frugal meals.

FOOD & GROCERIES



₹1,500

A small jhuggi (slum) dwelling; possibly an informal rent or community fee for a single room.

HOUSING (RENT)



₹500

Limited electricity and water access (often shared taps); cooking fuel (kerosene or LPG) and a basic mobile phone recharge.

UTILITIES & COMMUNICATION



₹300

Minor school expenses (government school fees are nil, but includes uniform, notebooks for her 7-year-old).

EDUCATION



₹200

Mostly walks to work; occasional bus or shared auto fares when needed.

TRANSPORTATION





₹0

Relies on a free NGO-run crèche for her 3-year-old (no fee, though its timing is a constant challenge).

CHILDCARE



₹300

Out-of-pocket medicine or clinic visits when absolutely necessary (uses subsidized clinics when possible).

HEALTHCARE



₹200

Very minimal; occasional clothing or footwear replacements (often second-hand or donated).

CLOTHING & PERSONAL



₹0

Virtually no ability to save; any tiny leftover goes to repaying small debts or is kept for emergencies.

SAVINGS



₹500

Unplanned costs or social obligations (e.g. helping family back in village, small treats for children, or lost wages if she has to skip work for a sick child).

MISCELLANEOUS



CAREGIVER 02: TSERING

“The mountains teach routine. The school doesn’t.”

 **Location:** Ladakh

 **Identity:** Mother

 **Dependents:** Three children (aged 2, 5 and 9)

 **Work:** Seasonal farming, home-based weaving

A Day in the Life — Tsering



Tsering’s days begin with fire and ice. At 6:00 a.m., she melts slabs of frozen water for tea, prepares tsampa, and sends her eldest on the long walk to school. Her two younger children stay close, the youngest tied to her back with wool while she tends to the fields.



Electricity is erratic. Some mornings the playschool is closed because the heater won’t start.

On those days, her children trail behind her, wrapped in layers. At lunch, she serves barley and dried vegetables, singing folk songs. Homework happens in the afternoons, slate boards balanced on their laps. By evening, the stove smokes with yak stew. Six months of calls revealed a rhythm shaped more by weather than by schedule. Snow meant weeks of isolation, schooling paused. Summer meant bursts of barter.



Soundtrack of Care:

The crackle of firewood, the creak of prayer wheels, children’s laughter carried thin in the cold air.



"Care here doesn't clock in. It gathers firewood and wipes noses."



SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

EXTERNAL CIRCLE

A visiting NGO teacher once a month; one shared phone in the village.

INNER CIRCLE

A community barter system where women rotate field and childcare duties.

CORE CIRCLE

Herself, with older siblings acting as second carers.



Energy Drains

Watching her children's learning stop each winter, knowing there is no backup.



Energy Gains

Her middle child's dramatic poem recitals, arms flailing as cousins giggle.



Fictions

- "The community takes care of its own."
- "There's no demand for services in remote areas."



Frictions

Education and healthcare collapse with the weather. Play-based learning feels foreign. Public systems don't serve the mountains.



Futures

She dreams of mobile crèches that arrive with food and stories, of childcare vouchers for the seasons when work peaks, of cooperative systems that respect farming mothers as workers.

If Tsering could design a care system:

She would send solar-powered learning buses up the slopes, staffed with teachers who stayed through storms. She would build women's cooperatives that combined weaving, farming, and care, so that tending a field or spinning yarn never meant leaving a child untended.

LEDGER OF CARE

TSERING

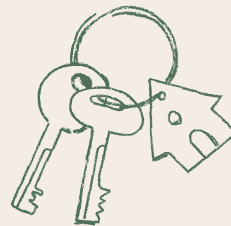
THE SINGER



₹1,500

Low cash spending as most food (barley, vegetables) is home-grown; mainly for essentials like salt, tea, cooking oil.

FOOD & GROCERIES



₹0

No rent (lives in a family home in the mountains).

HOUSING (RENT)



₹100

Little to no electricity (uses firewood for heat); perhaps a shared basic phone in the village for occasional calls (very low cost).

UTILITIES & COMMUNICATION



₹200

Government schooling is free; this covers school supplies or uniform for her older children

EDUCATION



₹100

Rare travel; mostly walks. Occasional shared jeep to the nearest town when needed .

TRANSPORTATION





₹0

No formal childcare services; care is community-based or by older siblings.

CHILDCARE



₹100

Relies on the monthly visiting health worker or traditional remedies; spends a small amount when someone falls ill.

HEALTHCARE



₹100

Relies on homemade or handed-down clothing; only small purchases (e.g. warm socks, soap) occasionally.

CLOTHING & PERSONAL



₹0

No formal savings; any surplus produce might be stored for winter rather than saved as cash.

SAVINGS



₹100

Community and ritual expenses (contributions at local monastery, festival needs) or emergency travel during medical needs.

MISCELLANEOUS



CAREGIVER 03: MEENA

“I was still learning how to be a girl when I became a mother.”

 **Location:** Rural Maharashtra

 **Identity:** Young Mother

 **Dependents:** One toddler (age 2), extended joint family

 **Work:** Farm helper, unpaid domestic care

A Day in the Life — Meena



Meena wakes before sunrise to fetch water. By six she is feeding buffalo, her toddler strapped against her hip, before preparing rice and bhakri for the joint household. At nine she takes her child to the Anganwadi. If the centre is closed, as often happens, she keeps her child under a neem tree while she joins her cousins in the fields. At midday she returns, clothes damp with sweat and dust, her son curled in her lap as she cooks again for the household. By evening, there are clothes to wash, cattle to feed, in-laws to serve. Her toddler clings to her waist as she rocks him to sleep. When the radio works, she listens to Marathi songs. Over six months of calls, what surfaced most was not just her labour, but her constant self-doubt, always told she was too young, yet trusted daily with the life of another.

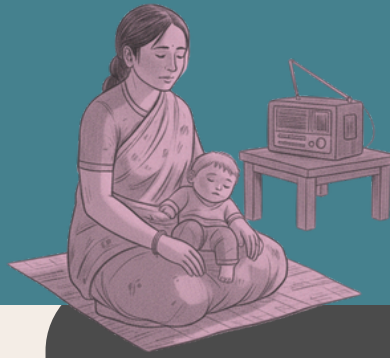


Soundtrack of Care:

Marathi songs on the radio.



"They say I'm too young to decide things. But I'm not too young to raise someone."



SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

EXTERNAL CIRCLE

A visiting nurse who comes once every two months; no phone of her own.

INNER CIRCLE

A cousin of similar age, sharing whispered advice between rows of groundnut plants.

CORE CIRCLE

A kind Anganwadi worker who checks in.



Energy Drains

Pretending she knows what's best while being told she knows nothing.



Energy Gains

Her son grinning in the mud with the same mischievous smile her younger brother once had.



Fictions

She is not allowed to rest. "She's young, she'll manage." When the Anganwadi is shut, her day collapses.



Frictions

- "She has help at home."
- "At least she has access to the Anganwadi."



Futures

She dreams of finishing school.

She wants a care system that treats young mothers as learners too, not just as vessels of duty.

If Meena could design a care system:

She imagines vans that travel to the fields, carrying stories, toys, and safe spaces for toddlers. She imagines peer circles where young mothers can speak freely without shame, learning together. And she imagines Anganwadis that stay open after hours, when farm work refuses to follow the "ideal" care window.

LEDGER OF CARE

Estimated Income: Very low personal cash, part of a joint farming household. Household's cash flow is seasonal (after harvest sales); monthly cash for Meena's needs maybe ~₹3,000 (she herself has no independent wage).

MEENA

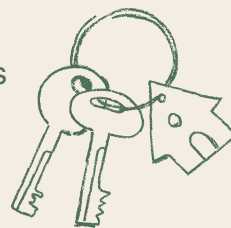
THE UNGROWN GIRL



FOOD & GROCERIES

₹3,000

The extended family pools resources; staples like rice and bhakri come from their farm, but they buy oil, spices, and some groceries for a large household.



HOUSING (RENT)

₹0

No rent (they live in their ancestral village home).



UTILITIES & COMMUNICATION

₹300

Electricity and cooking fuel (subsidized cylinder or firewood) are modest. One basic mobile or radio in the family for which she chips in a bit.



EDUCATION

₹200

Her toddler (2) is not in school yet. The free Anganwadi center provides early childhood care (when open) at no cost.



TRANSPORTATION

₹100

Mostly walking. Maybe an occasional bus ride to the nearest market or health center.





₹0

Anganwadi is free, and family members (in-laws, cousins) share childcare duties when needed.

CHILDCARE



₹100

Limited spending; they depend on the visiting nurse or government clinic. May buy small remedies locally if urgent.

HEALTHCARE



₹100

Infrequent purchases; she wears hand-me-down sarees. Perhaps some expense for the child's clothing or blankets.

CLOTHING & PERSONAL



₹0

She has no personal savings. Any farm income is managed by elders; if there are savings, it's handled at the household level.

SAVINGS



₹100

Occasional needs like a flashlight battery during power cuts, a small toy for the child, or religious event contributions.

MISCELLANEOUS



CAREGIVER 04: ARJUN

“I’m not multitasking. I’m surviving.”

-  **Location:** Chennai
-  **Identity:** Single Father
-  **Dependents:** One son (age 4)
-  **Work:** Mid-level tech job at a large firm

A Day in the Life — Arjun



Arjun wakes before the alarm. By 5:30 a.m., the kettle is on, tiffin boxes lined up, and his son’s cereal poured. At 7am, he dresses his son, negotiating cartoons for a few minutes of quiet. By 8:30 he drops him at the office daycare. Between nine and five-thirty, Arjun juggles endless Slack messages, project deadlines, and the ache of wondering about his son.



By six, they are home. He tries to cook, but more often orders dosa, guilty but grateful for a meal that fills them both. Bedtime is stories: The Gruffalo on good nights, silence on tired ones. He tells us, “When my son calls me Amma in his sleep, I don’t correct him anymore.”

Across months of calls, the pattern emerged: competence at work masking vulnerability at home, a choreography between professional performance and parenting improvisation.



Soundtrack of Care:

“Baby Shark doo doo...”



"They say I'm too young to decide things. But I'm not too young to raise someone."



SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

EXTERNAL CIRCLE

An online therapist. Parents live far; friends have drifted since the separation.

INNER CIRCLE

A Reddit parenting group, an HR manager who quietly grants flexi-hours.

CORE CIRCLE

Himself, and a daycare receptionist who cares beyond her duty.



Energy Drains

Performing competence at work while wondering if he remembered the spare nappy.



Energy Gains

His son's sleepy whisper of "Amma," a title he has grown into without hesitation.



Fictions

- "Men don't want to be primary caregivers."
- "Daycare means you don't really need support."



Frictions

Most school and daycare spaces assume a "mummy" will show up.



Futures

He wants parenting leave designed for parenting, not gender. He wants mixed-gender support groups where fathers are not applauded as anomalies, but welcomed as normal.

If Arjun could design a care system:

He would create after-hours parenting circles, both online and off, where care is shared without stigma. He would reframe HR policies to recognise single fathers as a growing reality. Most of all, he would want care spaces designed without the silent assumption of a mother in the background.

LEDGER OF CARE

Estimated Income: ~₹70,000 per month (mid-level IT salary).

ARJUN

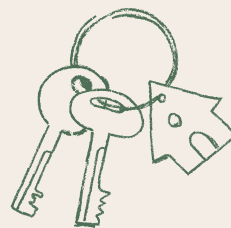
THE MULTITASKER



FOOD & GROCERIES

₹10,000

Groceries and eating out combined. He cooks when possible and orders takeout (like dosa) on busy days; also includes child's food and tiffin snacks.



HOUSING (RENT)

₹18,000

Rent for a 1-2 BHK apartment in Chennai. Provides a safe home for his 4-year-old, albeit a sizeable expense.



UTILITIES & COMMUNICATION

₹3,500

Electricity (for appliances, maybe an AC to cope with heat), water, cooking gas, broadband internet for home, and mobile phone bills.



EDUCATION

₹0

His son is only 4 and not in formal school yet.



TRANSPORTATION

₹3,000

Commute and travel costs. He might maintain a two-wheeler or use cabs/trains. This covers fuel, parking, or app-based rides for work and daycare drop-offs.





₹3,000

Daycare expenses. His company's on-site daycare might be subsidized, but he still contributes a fee for his son's care during work hours.



₹1,000

Routine medical care. Covers co-pays for his and his son's doctor visits or medicines

HEALTHCARE



₹1,000

Clothing, shoes, and personal care. Includes occasional new clothes for the growing child and work attire maintenance for Arjun.

CLOTHING & PERSONAL



₹15,000

He allocates a portion of his salary to savings and investments (child's education fund, emergency fund). As a sole parent he prioritizes building a safety net.

SAVINGS



₹5,500

Other expenses including any loan EMIs (perhaps a vehicle loan), home necessities, entertainment or toys, and an emergency buffer for unexpected needs.

MISCELLANEOUS



CAREGIVER 05: FARZANA

“I leave my child in care so I can stitch and make a living.

-  **Location:** Patna
-  **Identity:** Migrant worker
-  **Dependents:** One daughter (aged 5)
-  **Work:** Garment factory, stitching unit (piece rate)

A Day in the Life — Farzana



Farzana wakes at 4:30 a.m. in a cramped tenement, lighting a mosquito coil and stirring *dal*.

Her daughter wears yesterday's washed dress. By seven, they walk together to the NGO-run daycare. At 8am, Farzana is at her sewing machine on the factory floor. She measures her output not in hours but in pieces: ten collars = ten rupees. At 6pm, she collects her daughter.



They walk home, talking about the day. By nine, her child is asleep across her lap as she massages her swollen legs with mustard oil. Over six months, her refrain was the same: the daycare is both lifeline and liability. If it shuts early, she loses wages. If her child falls sick, she loses pay. Migrant identity strips her of city entitlements, and every form asks for proof she doesn't have.



Soundtrack of Care:

A child chanting “Twinkle Twinkle” in a mix of Tamil and Kannada



“We came for work,” she says. “Care is what we construct out of leftover time.”



SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

EXTERNAL CIRCLE

The NGO that runs the daycare, underfunded, precarious, sometimes shuttered.

INNER CIRCLE

Occasionally, a visiting cousin. Most kin are back in the village.

CORE CIRCLE

The daycare worker, and other migrant mothers who share food and advice.



Energy Drains

The constant fear of the daycare closing early.



Energy Gains

Her daughter's laughter when she sings rhymes in a mash of languages, inventing her own words.



Fictions

- “At least she has free daycare.”
- “Migrants don't engage with formal systems.”



Frictions

Her ID says she belongs to another state, so city schemes exclude her.



Futures

She wants a care system that travels with her, flexible hours, migrant ID portability, recognition that she is both a worker and a mother. A city that does not ask her to start from zero every time she moves.

If Farzana could design a care system:

She imagines drop-in care centres aligned with factory shifts, no scolding if a parent is late. She wants parenting breaks built into workdays, 15 minutes, no questions asked. And she dreams of an ID card that moves with her, unlocking services without proving her belonging again and again.

LEDGER OF CARE

Estimated Income: ~₹10,000 per month

FARZANA

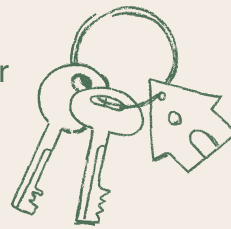
THE STITCHER



FOOD & GROCERIES

₹2,500

Very basic meals (watery dal, rice) for herself and her 4-year-old. She stretches every rupee, sometimes sharing groceries with other migrant mothers.



HOUSING (RENT)

₹2,500

Rent for a cramped shared room in a tenement. It's a substantial part of her income for a small, crowded space.



UTILITIES & COMMUNICATION

₹800

Electricity (a single bulb/fan), shared water tanker fees, and a simple mobile phone plan to stay in touch with her family back home.



EDUCATION

₹0

Not applicable yet. Her daughter is 5 and not in formal school; learning is informal or through the daycare's activities.



TRANSPORTATION

₹100

Minimal cost; she lives close enough to walk to the factory and the NGO daycare. Only occasional bus fare for errands or if she must visit a doctor.





₹0

The NGO-run daycare is free (or charges a token amount that's negligible). This is a critical support that enables her to work.



₹200

Limited spending on health. She might buy over-the-counter medicines if her daughter falls sick, but avoids costly clinic visits (often relying on periodic free health camps).

HEALTHCARE



₹100

Bare minimum. She might get second-hand clothes or use the factory's discarded pieces.

CLOTHING & PERSONAL



₹500

A small amount saved or sent back to her village when she can. It's precarious, but she tries to put aside a bit for emergencies or to support relatives.

SAVINGS



₹300

Other variable expenses. For example, an occasional treat (like a small sweet for her child), or costs like documentation and any unforeseen fee or day of lost wages.

MISCELLANEOUS



CAREGIVER 06: SUNITA

My day never runs straight. Office, kids, in-laws. Non-stop.



Location: Mumbai



Identity: Married working mother



Dependents: Two children (ages 11, 16), ageing in-laws



Work: Admin role at a private firm

A Day in the Life — Sunita



Sunita wakes up daily before her 6:00 alarm. First task - pack breakfast and lunch boxes for five. While she cooks, she sends voice notes to family members, doctors, folks at work - anyone she's missed keeping up with. By seven-thirty, she is trying to help her teen revise for exams while also checking her work emails. Her workday runs from 9-5, but caregiving happens in parallel. Calls to tuition teacher, paying bills, and checks in on her in-laws. At 6pm, she's back home, prepping dinner & closing homework. Once the house sleeps, she opens up her laptop and catches up on pending work.



Soundtrack of Care:

Calendar app that pings her constantly on work and life responsibilities.



"They all think I have it together, but I don't have even ten minutes that are mine."



SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

EXTERNAL CIRCLE

A paid after-school centre and an elderly neighbour who checks in if the kids come home early.

INNER CIRCLE

A tutor who comes twice a week; a WhatsApp group of other working mothers.

CORE CIRCLE

Mostly herself, sometimes her husband steps in.



Energy Drains

The feeling that every minute belongs to someone else.



Energy Gains

Finding her daughter's messy robot drawing taped to the wall.



Fictions

- "She has help at home."
- "She chose this life, so she should be able to manage."



Frictions

Earns enough, but can't afford full-time help or a nanny. Leaves run out before June hits with all the duties.



Futures

She dreams of micro-leaves, two hours off each month without penalty, just enough to attend a school meeting or take her in-laws to the clinic.

If Farzana could design a care system:

She would build a rota where neighbours watch each other's children and earn credit, like a care savings bank. She would push for workplace policies that name eldercare as part of labour, not a private problem.

LEDGER OF CARE

Estimated Income: ~₹80,000 per month

SUNITA

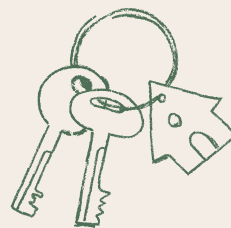
THE BRAIDER



₹10,000

Groceries and household food for a family of six. She plans meals frugally but the volume is high.

FOOD & GROCERIES



₹25,000

Rent.

HOUSING (RENT)



₹5,500

Electricity, cooking gas, internet, mobile phone bills.

UTILITIES & COMMUNICATION



₹25,000

School and tuition expenses for two children.

EDUCATION



₹3,000

Local train/bus passes, fuel for a two-wheeler. School transport and any occasional taxi when juggling errands with kids/elders.

TRANSPORTATION





₹2,000

After-school care center for the younger child.



₹2,000

Medical expenses for the family. This includes monthly medicines for aging in-laws and occasional doctor visits for the children.



₹1,000

Clothing and personal care spread across the family, including school uniform.



₹5,000

They try to save something each month in an FD to use for insurance.



₹1,500

Incidentals.



CAREGIVER 07: REKHA & DEV

“We are constantly told to accept our child, but the world won’t.”

-  **Location:** Kolkata
-  **Identity:** Parents of a child on the autism spectrum
-  **Dependents:** One son (age 8)
-  **Work:** Rekha is a homemaker-turned-advocate; Dev is a schoolteacher

A Day in the Life — Rekha & Dev



Mornings in Rekha and Dev’s home sit in predictability. Rekha lays out clothes and visual cue cards while Dev helps their son get dressed, step by step. Routine is everything. By 8:30, they leave for school, where a *shadow teacher* hired by them sits with him through the day. When their son returns in the afternoon, he is often overstimulated from school - restless, humming, sometimes shut down. They do calming exercises with music or sensory-friendly meals. Dev gets home soon after and helps with homework. Evenings are family time: old Kishore Kumar songs, laughter when their son sings entire lyrics from memory. But paperwork never ends — disability certificates, school forms, therapy receipts.

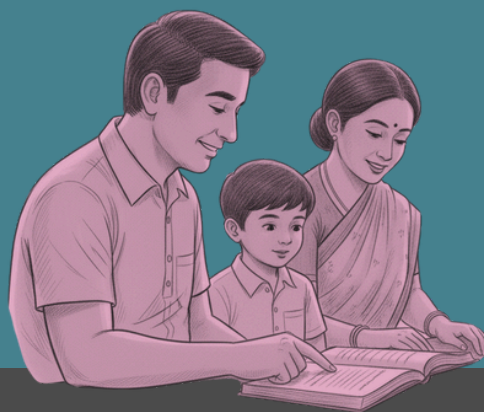


Soundtrack of Care:

Neele neele ambar pe by Kishore Kumar.



"Everyone talks about my child.
No one talks to my child."



SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

EXTERNAL CIRCLE

A school with reluctant inclusion, and
the city's Disability Office

INNER CIRCLE

A WhatsApp group of parents of
neurodiverse children.

CORE CIRCLE

One another, and
a paediatrician
who listens.



Energy Drains

The endless negotiation with schools,
doctors, and officials



Energy Gains

Their son's unfiltered laughter at his own
jokes, or the rare moment when a stranger
speaks to him without pity.



Fictions

- "They're lucky they can afford private therapists."
- "At least the child is verbal, right?"



Frictions

Birthday parties without invitations,
teachers who lower their voices around
their son, neighbours who look away.



Futures

They hope for classrooms where their son
belongs, not just attends. They dream of
public transport, playgrounds, and schools
designed with all bodies and minds in
mind.

If Farzana could design a care system:

hey imagine Individualised Education Plans that
work across schools, not just as paperwork. And
they want a single city desk where families like
theirs can find real support, not just forms.

LEDGER OF CARE

Estimated Income: ~₹65,000 per month

REKHA & DEV

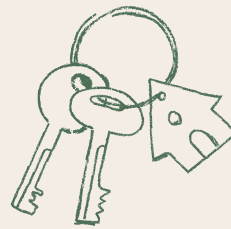
THE TRANSLATORS



₹6,000

Monthly food expenses for a family of three. They cook at home.

FOOD & GROCERIES



₹25,000

Rent for a basic 2-bedroom apartment in Kolkata, near the school and therapist.

HOUSING (RENT)



₹3,000

Electricity, gas, internet, mobile phone bills.

UTILITIES & COMMUNICATION



₹30,000

Schooling and support for their 8-year-old son. Includes the cost for a *shadow teacher*.

EDUCATION



₹1,500

Mostly use auto-rickshaws for transport. Closed vehicles make the child feel claustrophobic.

TRANSPORTATION





₹0

No other additional childcare.



₹4,000

Weekly therapy sessions and emergency medical expenses budget.



₹500

Very modest. Not priority.



₹2,000

Saved for emergencies.



₹2,000

Administrative paperwork, a very rare family outing, also buffer for unexpected costs.



CAREGIVER 08: IBANDRI

“We care together. It’s not special here”

 **Location:** Arunachal Pradesh (Eastern Himalayas)

 **Identity:** Tribal mother

 **Dependents:** Four kids (aged 1, 7, 9 and 12)

 **Work:** Farming, selling fermented bamboo.

A Day in the Life — Ibandri



Mornings begin with smoke rising from the firewood stove. Rice boils while her eldest fetches water from the stream that winds down the hillside. She braids her daughter’s hair, humming an old lullaby in her own dialect, the baby tied against her hip with a cloth wrap. By eight, the older children walk along narrow mountain paths to the government school. She spends late mornings tending vegetables and collecting firewood, and when the harvest is good, carrying baskets of bamboo shoots or ginger to the market. Afternoons are shared with neighbours, women plucking betel leaves together. At dusk, she cooks over the hearth, the youngest clinging to her waist as she tells folktales her grandmother once told her.



Soundtrack of Care:

Folk songs sung by all the mothers.



“We don’t have babysitters, we have cousins, goats, and a lot of bad weather.”



SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

EXTERNAL CIRCLE

A seasonal mobile health van.

INNER CIRCLE

Clan elders, church gatherings, and the ASHA worker who visits when the roads allow.

CORE CIRCLE

Her mother, eldest daughter, and two neighbouring women.



Energy Drains

Illness during harvest season.



Energy Gains

Kids enjoying time in nature. Climbing trees, playing with the goats.



Fictions

- “Tribal communities manage fine.
- “Nature makes up for the lack of services.”



Frictions

Health and schooling are seasonal, dependent on weather and terrain. Services don’t apply to mountain life.



Futures

She dreams of local schools teaching in her mother tongue alongside Hindi and English.

If Farzana could design a care system:

She would strengthen the care circles and systems that already exist in the villages and forests. To find ways to have the Anganwadi centers come closer to their homes in the forests.

LEDGER OF CARE

Estimated Income: ~₹5,000 per month (largely non-monetary).

IBANDRI

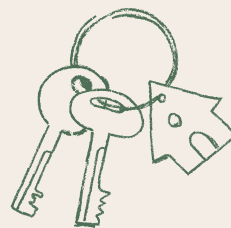
THE ROOTED ONE



₹800

Minimal. Grow their own rice, vegetables. Access to forest produce. Keeps poultry.

FOOD & GROCERIES



₹0

Lives in family home, in a traditional hut.

HOUSING (RENT)



₹100

Basic feature phone. Some extra cash for firewood.

UTILITIES & COMMUNICATION



₹300

Local government school fees and stationery.

EDUCATION



₹150

Travel mostly on foot. Extra cash to take produce to the market.

TRANSPORTATION





₹0

No formal childcare.



₹200

She might buy basic medicines (like for fevers or coughs) from the market.



₹200

Mostly wear traditional, hand-woven clothes. Cash for school uniforms.



₹100

Saved for emergencies.



₹100

Community and cultural expenses, such as weddings.



CAREGIVER 09: NOOR

“Everyone says I’m lucky. But no one asks if I’m okay.”

-  **Location:** Udaipur
-  **Identity:** Trans mother, single parent
-  **Dependents:** One child (aged 7)
-  **Work:** NGO staff

A Day in the Life — Noor



Noor’s mornings begin with making chai, spending time with her son. At 7am, they set off for school, trading questions along the way. Her workday at the NGO is busy with meetings and coordination. She sometimes has field visits, so those days can be longer for her before she comes back home.



Usually, by 7pm, she is back home. They do puzzles, play games on the terrace, share stories, laugh lots.

At night, after her child sleeps, she spends time with herself and writes some poetry.



Soundtrack of Care:

Singing songs by herself as she cooks or prepares for the day.



"Some days, I am tired of correcting the world. I just want to be a mother."



SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

EXTERNAL CIRCLE

A seasonal mobile health van.

INNER CIRCLE

Clan elders, church gatherings, and the ASHA worker who visits when the roads allow.

CORE CIRCLE

A full-time nanny and her mother.



Energy Drains

The judgement that constantly surrounds her.



Energy Gains

Her child's confidence.



Fictions

- "Trans people can't be stable parents."
- "She must be seeking attention."



Frictions

Every form demands a father's name.



Futures

She imagines schools where children don't carry adults' shame. Forms that simply say "parent." Evening childcare that welcomes everyone without questions. A world where her child is never made to explain her.

If **Farzana** could design a care system:

She would begin with paperwork: forms that reflect families as they are. She would design schools that teach inclusion for everyone. And she would create evening childcare spaces that open late, playful and safe for children of all backgrounds.

LEDGER OF CARE

Estimated Income: ~₹25,000 per month.

NOOR

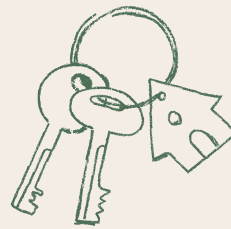
THE STEADFAST



FOOD & GROCERIES

₹5,000

Home-cooked meals for herself and her 7-year-old.



HOUSING (RENT)

₹8,000

Rent for a small flat with non-discriminatory neighbours.



UTILITIES & COMMUNICATION

₹2,500

Electricity, water, phone bills.



EDUCATION

₹1,500

School fees and supplies.



TRANSPORTATION

₹1,000

Local buses and auto rickshaws.





₹0

No extra care. If she's late from work, the child is with her neighbour who takes care.



₹500

Routine medical expenses.

HEALTHCARE



₹500

Frugal spending on clothes.

CLOTHING & PERSONAL



₹2,000

Despite a tight budget, tries to save as much for emergencies.

SAVINGS



₹1,000

Additional needs and community contributions.

MISCELLANEOUS



CAREGIVER 10: MARY

“Everyone says I’m lucky. But no one asks if I’m okay.”

-  **Location:** Kannur
-  **Identity:** Single mother
-  **Dependents:** One toddler (age 3), ageing parents upstairs
-  **Work:** Remote consultant, mid-career

A Day in the Life — Mary



Mary’s mornings start with emails. By 6:30, she is planning her work day along with all the meals for the family. At 7:30, the nanny arrives and her mother comes down with tea.

Between nine and one, she is in back-to-back meetings, always half-listening for the sound of her child upstairs. Lunch is squeezed in with her toddler and parents: laptop still open, ear half-tuned to Slack notifications. Afternoons are harder: the nanny leaves at four, and Mary shifts between work calls and snack time.



Evenings bring story time and bath time, then another stretch of deliverables.

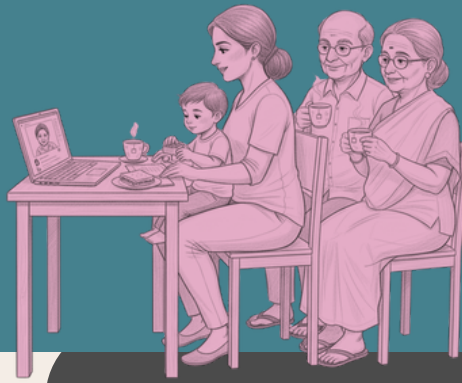
At 11 p.m., the house finally quiets, and she gets a little time to herself.



Soundtrack of Care:
Church hymns on a Sunday.



“Work-from-home means
I’m always present, but
neither at home or work”



SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

EXTERNAL CIRCLE

A seasonal mobile health van.

INNER CIRCLE

Clan elders, church gatherings,
and the ASHA worker who visits
when the roads allow.

CORE CIRCLE

A full-time nanny
and her mother.



Energy Drains

The myth that having help means she must be fine.



Energy Gains

Putting her son to sleep each night.



Fictions

- “She has it all.”
- “Work-from-home means more time with kids.”



Frictions

Mental load, constant mismanagement of work and home. Multi-tasking every day.



Futures

She imagines judgement-free check-in lines for caregivers , especially for single mothers.

If **Mary** could design a care system:

She would create co-care groups in her apartment block, where parents take turns for play, meals, and emergencies. She would want workplaces to ask about her needs, not just her child’s.

LEDGER OF CARE

Estimated Income: ~₹85,000 per month.

MARY

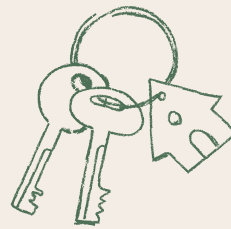
THE BALANCER



₹8,000

Groceries for her and her toddler, plus contributing to the household (her aging parents live upstairs and often share meals).

FOOD & GROCERIES



₹0

Lives in family home.

HOUSING (RENT)



₹4,000

She pays the bulk of the utility bills as part of living with her parents.

UTILITIES & COMMUNICATION



₹0

Child not in school yet.

EDUCATION



₹1,000

Low as work-from-home. Covers fuel (small second-hand car) for doctor runs or family outings.

TRANSPORTATION





₹10,000

Salary for a full-time nanny.



₹2,000

Routine medical expenses.



₹2,000

Includes clothes and toys for the toddler.



₹20,000

Actively focused on savings and investments.



₹5,000

Part-time helper for cleaning and cooking prep.



CAREGIVER 11: SAIRA RANI

“Everyone says I’m lucky. But no one asks if I’m okay.”



Location: Hyderabad



Identity: Single mother



Dependents: One child (age 9)



Work: Informal work, sex work.

A Day in the Life — Saira Rani



Saira’s mornings begin before dawn, lining buckets for the tanker and cooking lemon rice from scraps of the night before. By 6:30, she wakes her child, plaits their hair, and irons the school uniform with a flickering iron. At eight, she drops them at school, lingering until they vanish into the crowd.



Her work hours are uncertain. From nine to three, she navigates corners of bus stands and markets, always scanning for safety. Some days she picks her child up herself, other days a neighbour steps in. Evenings are for homework by candlelight, some stories from her childhood, and a shared bowl of dal.



Soundtrack of Care:

Busy streets filled with traffic.



“Every day, I decide between safety and school fees. This is my work. And my child is my love.”



SYSTEMS OF SUPPORT

EXTERNAL CIRCLE

NGO health camps, a legal aid helpline, and a small after-school library corner.

INNER CIRCLE

Other sex workers who rotate childcare, share food, and guard one another.

CORE CIRCLE

Her child, a neighbour who watches over them, and older kids in the building who step in when needed.



Energy Drains

Her parenting is invisible because of her work.



Energy Gains

Watching her child dance to the radio.



Fictions

- “She’s unfit to be a parent.”
- “These children are bound to suffer.”



Frictions

Daycare doesn’t match her hours. Schools demand documents she cannot always provide. Housing is fragile.



Futures

She wants sliding-scale after-school centres that stay open late. A room with a real door, not a curtain. A city desk where housing, school, and health can be accessed without judgement.

If Farzana could design a care system:

She would create anonymous care centres, no questions asked, open at night. She imagines school forms that don’t demand documents she cannot provide. She wants housing that doesn’t shift with stigma.

LEDGER OF CARE

Estimated Income: ~₹15,000 per month (variable).

SAIRA

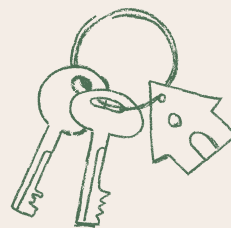
THE RESOLUTE



FOOD & GROCERIES

₹3,000

Basic food for herself and her 9-year-old. She cooks simple meals. Sometimes skips her own portions to make the food last.



HOUSING (RENT)

₹2,000

Rent for a single-room accommodation in a low-income area.



UTILITIES & COMMUNICATION

₹500

Limited utilities.



EDUCATION

₹500

Government school fees and uniforms.



TRANSPORTATION

₹300

Occasional auto to go to the doctor or other trips.





₹0

No formal childcare. When Saira works irregular hours, she relies on a trusted neighbor or older children in the community to look after her child in the evenings.



₹300

HEALTHCARE

Health-related costs. She might access free NGO health camps for check-ups, but she still spends on occasional medicines



₹500

Includes both her child's clothing needs and her own.

CLOTHING & PERSONAL



₹200

No formal savings. Hides a small surplus in rice box for emergencies.

SAVINGS



₹700

Other expenditures and uncertainties, including security.

MISCELLANEOUS



mudito



This piece is a part of Voices of Care, a Bachpan Manao Collabaction seeded by EkStep Foundation in 2024.

It is an ongoing inquiry into the caregiving systems that shape childhood in India. By understanding what enables care to thrive, we uncover what allows children to flourish.

This work is anchored at mudito.

2025