

## READING CHALLENGE

# The School Under a Bridge

*One man, a piece of chalk, and hundreds of children*

<b>Level</b>	A2 — Elementary
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<b>Age Group</b>	Teens (11-16)
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<b>Topic</b>	True Stories
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<b>Duration</b>	~10 min read
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<b>Skill</b>	Reading
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Every morning at nine o'clock, something unusual happens under a **bridge** in New Delhi, India. A man arrives carrying a bag. He takes out a piece of **chalk** and begins to write on a **blackboard** that hangs on the wall of the bridge. Children appear from everywhere. They come running from the nearby streets. They sit down on the ground, open their books, and the lesson begins. This is not a normal school. There are no walls, no roof, no desks, and no chairs. But for these children, it is the most important place in the world.

## Who Is Rajesh Kumar Sharma?

The man with the chalk is Rajesh Kumar Sharma. He was born in 1977 in a small village in the state of Uttar Pradesh, in northern India. Rajesh was a good student. He loved learning and dreamed of getting a **degree** from a university. But his family was poor. They could not **afford** to send him to college. When he finished high school, Rajesh had to stop studying and find work to help his family.

This was a painful experience for Rajesh. He knew how important **education** was. He had seen how it could change a person's life. And he had seen how unfair it was that some children could go to school and others could not, simply because of money. He moved to Delhi to find work. He got a job in a small shop, selling goods. But he never forgot his dream of education. He just did not know yet how that dream would come true.

## The Children Under the Bridge

In 2006, Rajesh was walking near Yamuna Bank, an area close to the Yamuna River in Delhi. He passed under a metro railway bridge and saw a group of children. They were playing in the dirt. Their clothes were torn and dirty. Some of them were very thin. They were the children of construction workers, rickshaw drivers, and other daily labourers who lived in the slum nearby.

Rajesh stopped and talked to the children. He asked them a simple question: "Do you go to school?" The answer was no. Their families were too poor. They could not pay the school **fees**. They could not buy books or **uniforms**. The **government** schools were free, but they were far away, and the children needed documents that their families did not have. So these children spent their days playing, working, or doing nothing. They could not read. They could not write. They did not know how to count past ten.

Rajesh felt something change inside him. He looked at these children and saw himself — a young person who wanted to learn but could not because of **poverty**. He made a decision right there. He would teach them himself.

## A School Is Born

In 2007, Rajesh came back to the bridge. He brought a small blackboard and some chalk. He hung the blackboard on the concrete wall of the bridge and called the children over. That first day, only two children came. Rajesh taught them the Hindi alphabet. He showed them how to write the letters. He was patient and kind.

The next day, five children came. The day after that, eight. Within a few weeks, more than thirty children were sitting under the bridge every morning, learning to read and write. The

"school" had no name at first. There were no desks — the children sat on the ground or on old bricks. There were no textbooks — Rajesh wrote everything on the blackboard. There was no bell, no playground, and no lunch room. But there was a teacher who cared, and children who were hungry to learn.

Rajesh taught every day before going to his shop job in the afternoon. He did not charge any money. Everything was free. He bought the chalk and the notebooks with his own small salary. When other people saw what he was doing, some of them started to help. Neighbours **donated** old books and pencils. A local shop gave some paper. Slowly, the school under the bridge grew.

## What the Children Learn

Today, the school runs six days a week. Classes start at nine in the morning and finish at noon. About 200 children **attend** the school. Their ages range from four to fourteen. Rajesh does not teach alone anymore. Several volunteers now help him, including a few of his former students who grew up and came back to teach the younger children.

The children learn Hindi, English, mathematics, and basic science. Rajesh believes that English is especially important because it gives children more **opportunity** in India, where many good jobs require English. The younger children start with the alphabet and simple words. The older ones read stories, solve maths problems, and learn about the world around them.

The blackboard is still the main teaching tool. Rajesh writes a lesson on the board, explains it, and then asks the children to copy it into their notebooks. He asks questions. He gives small tests. He checks homework. It is simple, but it works. Many of his students have learned to read and write within just a few months. Some have gone on to attend proper government schools after learning the basics at the bridge school.

## Life Under the Bridge

Teaching under a bridge is not easy. When it rains, water sometimes pours through the gaps in the bridge. During the monsoon season, from July to September, the area near the river can flood. In summer, the temperature in Delhi reaches 45 degrees Celsius, and there is no fan or air conditioning under the bridge. In winter, it drops to near freezing, and the children sit shivering on the cold ground.

There are other problems too. The noise of trains passing overhead makes it hard to hear. Dust blows in from the road. Sometimes dogs or cows wander into the "classroom." The children come and go — some days there are 200, other days only 50, because many of them also have to work to help their families earn money. Some of the older children sell vegetables, clean cars, or collect rubbish to earn a few rupees a day.

But Rajesh never stops. Every morning, he is there. He says that even if only one child comes, he will teach that child. "These children have nothing," he says. "Education is the only thing that can change their lives. I know this because it almost changed mine."

## The World Notices

For many years, nobody outside the neighbourhood knew about the bridge school. But in 2012, a journalist visited and wrote an article about Rajesh. The story spread quickly on social media. Newspapers, television channels, and websites from around the world told the story of the man who teaches under a bridge. Rajesh received **praise** from thousands of people.

The attention brought help. People from across India and from other countries donated money, books, school supplies, and even a few small tables and chairs. A charity helped to paint the walls of the bridge with colourful pictures and the alphabet. The area began to look more like a real school. Some organisations offered to pay for Rajesh's teaching materials and to provide free meals for the children.

Rajesh's story **inspired** other people too. In other parts of India, volunteers started similar schools — under bridges, in parks, on rooftops, and in empty parking lots. The idea was simple: if children cannot come to a school, the school must come to the children.

## Challenges and Dreams

Despite the fame, Rajesh still faces many challenges. The school still has no building. The government has not officially recognised it, which means the children do not get certificates or diplomas. Rajesh still works at his shop in the afternoons to earn money for his own family. He does not get paid for teaching. Some days, he feels tired and worried about the future.

But he also has a big dream. He wants to build a proper school building — with classrooms, a roof, desks, chairs, a library, and maybe even computers. He wants every child in the area to be able to read, write, and have a chance at a better life. "A child who can read," he says, "can do anything."

Some of his earliest students are now adults. A few of them are working in shops and offices. One is studying at a college. They come back to the bridge sometimes to say thank you and to help teach the next group of children. For Rajesh, these moments are the best reward.

## Why This Story Matters

India has more than 250 million children. Millions of them do not go to school. The reasons are always the same — poverty, distance, lack of documents, or families who need the children to work. The Indian government provides free education for all children between six and fourteen years old, but the system does not reach everyone. Children who live in slums, on the streets, or in remote villages often fall through the gaps.

Rajesh Kumar Sharma cannot solve this enormous problem alone. But he shows that one person can make a difference. He did not wait for the government. He did not wait for money. He did not wait for a building. He just picked up a piece of chalk and started teaching. And that is something that anyone, anywhere in the world, can do.

Today, under the noisy metro bridge near the Yamuna River, children are learning to read. They are writing the alphabet in their notebooks. They are counting numbers on the blackboard. They are smiling because someone believes in them. And the man with the chalk is still there — teaching, hoping, and changing lives, one child at a time.

## Vocabulary

#	Word	Definition
1	<b>bridge</b>	a structure built over a river, road, or railway so people can cross
2	<b>chalk</b>	a soft white stick used for writing on a blackboard
3	<b>afford</b>	to have enough money to pay for something
4	<b>poverty</b>	the state of being very poor, without enough money for basic needs
5	<b>education</b>	the process of learning and teaching, usually at a school
6	<b>blackboard</b>	a large dark board on a wall that teachers write on with chalk
7	<b>donate</b>	to give something, like money or things, to help others
8	<b>degree</b>	a qualification you get after finishing studies at a university
9	<b>government</b>	the group of people who control and make decisions for a country
10	<b>fee</b>	money you pay for a service, like school or a doctor
11	<b>uniform</b>	special clothes that everyone in a group wears, like a school uniform
12	<b>praise</b>	to say good things about someone or something they did
13	<b>attend</b>	to go to an event or place regularly, like school or a meeting
14	<b>inspire</b>	to make someone want to do something good or creative
15	<b>opportunity</b>	a chance to do something good or useful

## Comprehension Quiz

### 1. Where did Rajesh Kumar Sharma start his school?

- A) In an old factory building
- B) Under a metro railway bridge in New Delhi
- C) In his own house
- D) In a park near the river

### 2. Why could the children near the bridge not go to a normal school?

- A) Because they did not want to study
- B) Because there were no schools in Delhi
- C) Because their families were too poor to pay school fees
- D) Because they were too old for school

### 3. What happened to Rajesh when he was young?

- A) He won a prize for best student in India
- B) He had to stop studying because his family could not afford it
- C) He moved to another country to study
- D) He became a teacher at a government school

### 4. What do the children at the bridge school learn?

- A) Only English
- B) Only mathematics
- C) Hindi, English, mathematics, and science
- D) Only how to read and write in Hindi

### 5. What is Rajesh's dream for the future?

- A) To become a famous actor
- B) To move to a different country
- C) To build a proper school building with classrooms for the children
- D) To close the school and get a different job

## Answer Key

Q	Answer	Question
1	<b>B</b>	Where did Rajesh Kumar Sharma start his school?
2	<b>C</b>	Why could the children near the bridge not go to a normal school?
3	<b>B</b>	What happened to Rajesh when he was young?
4	<b>C</b>	What do the children at the bridge school learn?
5	<b>C</b>	What is Rajesh's dream for the future?