

Two girls, one story of grit and glory

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Calcutta: Poverty bears heavily on them, but not enough to crush their spirit.

Metro spoke to two girls who appeared for this year's higher secondary examination and stood out not only for their results, but also for their resilience and determination.

Labani Mondal, 94.2%

Kanaknagar SD Institution (HS) in Hingalganj, North 24-Parganas

The school topper, Labani, lives with her parents and younger brother in a one-room house with a small adjoining balcony.

She studied amid the din of cooking, conversations about financial hardship and other family concerns.

But none of it distracted her from her goal. The result: 88 in Bengali, 83 in English, 98 in education, 93 in geography, and 96 in Sanskrit and health & physical education.

"I don't have a room for myself, but a personal bed on which I study," said Labani from her village in Bankra Dobar in the Sundarbans after the higher secondary results were announced on Thursday.

The 18-year-old's father is a mason.



Labani Mondal

"I had to quit my studies while still in school to shoulder family responsibilities. I find it difficult to pay for my daughter's education, but I am somehow managing," said her father, Kamalesh Mondal.

At times, he could not afford to buy books and exercise copies or even pay the school fees.

"Even a ₹500 registration fee for Class XI, which is a one-time payment, was something he couldn't afford. But we understand. A mason, he was mostly out of a job during the monsoon months. But Labani did not let any of it dampen her spirit. She had her eyes set on the higher secondary exams," said Pulak Roychowdhury, headmaster of the school.

She made some silent sacrifices and refused to speak to anyone about it. "There was a dress I had once liked,



Anwasha Manna

but I knew I couldn't have it," said Labani.

"I want to prepare for competitive exams and get a government job," she said.

Anwasha Manna, 91% Naoda Nayan Chandra Bidyapith (HS) in Howrah

Anwasha's father runs a small grocery shop from their home, selling rice, flour and lentils. When sales are poor and earnings dip, he supplements the family income by tilling other people's land.

The science student often could not afford additional books. "The textbooks were provided, but sometimes we needed reference books that I could not afford," she said.

But that did not hold her back.

She scored 78 in Bengali, 96 in English, 97 in biology, 76 in maths, 91 in physics, and 93 in chemistry.

The privileges that many of her friends enjoy sometimes make her feel sad — not because they have them, but because she does not. Yet the 17-year-old keeps motivating herself.

"When I feel low, I do feel disappointed, but I remind myself that I have to fight my own battle. I also believe that if I remain honest and sincere, I will be rewarded," she said.

She is also grateful for the support she receives from Howrah Vivekananda Siksha Kendra.

"At least that is helping me continue my studies, because many perhaps do not get even this support," she said.

Anwasha aspires to become a doctor and had appeared for the NEET examination on May 3, which was later cancelled.

"For two years, I worked hard to prepare simultaneously for the higher secondary examinations and NEET. The cancellation means I will have to put in the same effort all over again, but I do not know whether that will be possible. If I have to study medicine, it has to be in a government college because my father cannot otherwise afford my education. The re-examination is making me anxious about my score and performance," she said.