



On the Record: Global Movement for Children

Issue 6: Informal Work

From the AP Editorial Desk

The Salaam Balaak center tries to protect street children from abuse and exploitation

R.K. has lived outside the Hanuman Temple in central Delhi for nine years. He came to the capital from his hometown of Calcutta, the capital of West Bengal, in search of work and to escape from the poverty his family fell into after his father's death.

R.K. works in the shops that line the plaza outside the temple and he sleeps on the streets. He makes just enough to eat one meal a day and buy a drug called "white" or "solution," which is common among street children. "White" consists of a cotton handkerchief that is doused in ink correction fluid (like "Liquid Paper" or "White-out") and then sniffed.

"R.K. likes his life," says Sanjay, a counselor at a drop-in shelter that lies just outside the temple. The shelter is run by the Salaam Balaak Trust, and it provides food, counseling and education to street children like R.K.



Child Line

The Salaam Balaak program is one of five partners in a child helpline initiative called "Child Line." Child line is nation-wide emergency telephone service that is free of cost for street and working children. A child dials 1098 from anywhere in Delhi and a counselor from whatever NGO has been assigned to that district picks up the phone. If the child is in immediate danger, phone counselors arrange an on-the-spot rescue of the child who is then immediately brought to a shelter.

Salaam Balaak is in charge of Central Delhi, where the railroad station lies not far from the Hanuman Temple and the nearby gurudwara where R.K. lives. Other child line partners include Prayas and Butterflies.

Sanjay and his colleagues have been trying to get R.K. off the streets and into drug rehabilitation for nine years, so far without success. "R.K. refuses to take a meal at our day shelter because he's not allowed to bring his drugs anywhere near the younger kids. We can't force him into drug rehabilitation," says Sanjay.

This stubborn behavior can be frustrating for counselors who work with children like RK. The police are much less patient. They routinely beat street children, who are seen as a nuisance and a public eyesore. To escape the ire of authorities,

street children can be found sleeping in trees, in ditches and even trash cans. NGOs like Salaam Balaak conduct sensitivity training workshops for police officers in and around New Delhi.

R.K.'s story is typical of the poor working children in major Indian cities, who on some estimates now number 500,000. In Bombay, the country's financial capital which has a heavy mafia influence, slum and street children are enlisted into begging or selling tissues, books or magazines at traffic stops. Some children are even mutilated to invoke sympathy from passersby, especially tourists. And many are forced to work in the city's notorious Red Light district.

UNICEF has set up vigilante squads with Bombay police at six key entry points into the city. This initiative works in conjunction with the Network Against Child Sexual Exploitation and Trafficking, an NGO network that works in 22 districts and offers training and guidance to police officers. Plain-clothes officers staff the vigilante squads. They have been trained to recognize and rescue children sold into sex trafficking rings.



Hari Ohm, a street child, serves food for other children at the Salaam Balaak contact point outside the Hanuman Temple.

They have been trained to recognize and rescue children sold into sex trafficking rings.

Street children like R.K. are part of a huge pool of children who are working, many of them informally. Officially, India has 11 million child laborers. Unofficially, the number could be as high as 100 million, which is the highest number of child laborers in the world.

Slum children, mostly migrants from rural communities, assist their parents with work as domestic servants, trash collectors or "ragpickers" (like Ajay who was profiled on an earlier page). Other children are enlisted to work in the family business especially when a father dies or falls ill.



Hard at work for tourists.

Still others, especially girls, are sold into the sex trafficking industry by families desperate for money. In the western state of Gujarat, which suffered one of the country's most devastating earthquakes in 2000, a steady stream of girls from the state's devastated towns and villages have been ending up in the red light districts of Calcutta, Bombay and New Delhi. An estimated 100,000 Indian children have fallen victim to commercial sex exploitation.

The Salaam Balaak Trust was started by a prominent filmmaker, Mira Nair, after she made a documentary about street children in Bombay ("Salaam

Bombay"). It operates centers in Bombay and Delhi, where it has two single sex live-in shelters - one for boys and one for girls.

The goal of these centers is to ensure the survival of this floating, vulnerable population of children. The Trust provides education, healthcare, counseling and recreation to the children free of cost. Near the Hanuman Temple children can also head over to the gurudwara, a place of worship for Sikhs, or to the Hindu temple where they can be assured of a place to sleep and a hot meal for only a few rupees. Across the street, the government runs a public bath house where anyone can visit the toilet and get a relatively clean, hot water bath for two rupees.



Welcome sign outside the Apna Ghar night shelter for boys, run by the Salaam Balaak Trust for Children.

Like many other centers assisting street and working children, Salaam Balaak also involves the children they help in musicals and dramas about their lives and struggles. In their shelter for boys, known as "Apna Ghar" ("our house" in Hindi), there is a candlemaking facility for older boys who choose to work instead of attend school. All proceeds from the sale of these candles, goes back to the boys once they turn 18 and leave the center.

Street children making candles at the Apna Ghar night shelter for boys, run by the Salaam Balaak Trust.

"A lot of the children who wind up at our shelters were forced into work as agricultural laborers, workers in the carpet or glass or firecracker industries, maids, and hotel workers to name a few," says Dr. Kanak Mital, Executive Director of the Salaam Balaak initiatives in New Delhi. "We try to reunite them with their families but if that doesn't work we do our best to mainstream them into society."



In 2001, More than 4,000 children have come through the Salaam Balaak shelters and contact points. Though the majority remain on the streets "because they like the freedom," says Mital, the rest have been placed in long-term housing or are enrolled in public school. The government also operates an open school program which allows non-governmental organizations like Salaam Balaak to prepare children for degree-granting examinations that can ultimately secure a spot in college for any child.

Once again, however, in spite of the efforts of Salaam Balaak and others, the number of working and street children continues to grow. "Most children work in the unorganized labor force," says Kailash Satyarthi of the South Asian Coalition on Child Servitude and the Global March against Child Labor. "Families organized by caste and subcaste run entire industries with impunity. Not only do they have connections among government officials, but they also claim to be employing family members from nearby villages. These home-based industries are legal and impossible to expose. These child labor rings are very difficult to crack."