

Delhi as the street kids see it

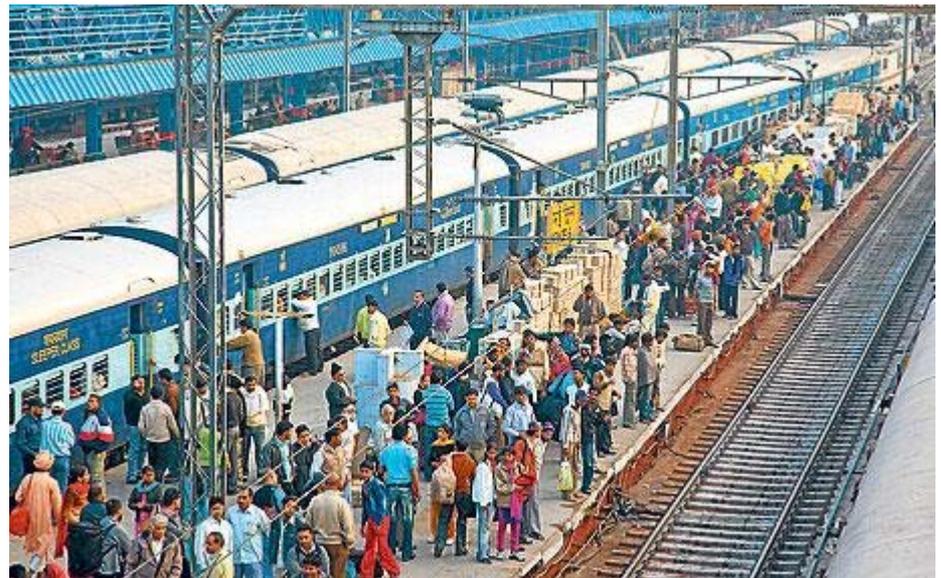
In New Delhi, Nigel Richardson joins an ex-runaway for a unique look at the life of the city's homeless children.

By Nigel Richardson

Published: 12:20PM GMT 19 Mar 2010

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In 1999, a homeless 11-year-old boy with a glue-sniffing habit jumped off a train that was pulling into New Delhi railway station and vanished into the surrounding shadow-world of the desperate and destitute. Ten years later that kid stands before me on one of the station platforms in the heart of India's capital. His name is Brijesh Pandey and he radiates charm and self-confidence.



Hundreds of homeless children eke a living around New Delhi's station Photo: ALAMY

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"I changed myself," he declares in perfect English. "I don't know how, but I did it." His modesty belies the spirit that enabled him to overcome the beatings, imprisonment, solvent addiction and ill-health that are so often the lot of children living on the streets of India's cities. But he didn't come through alone. Brijesh is testament to the life-saving work done by the Salaam Baalak Trust, a charity for which he now works as a tour guide.

Salaam Baalak (literally, Greetings Street Child) offers daily tours of the area of New Delhi station, where hundreds of homeless children eke a living just as Brijesh once did. Most are runaways from the countryside fleeing abuse and exploitation. The guides have a unique insight into their predicament because they are themselves former street children.

New Delhi station abuts the tourist neighbourhood of Paharganj, with its cheap hotels and teeming Main Bazaar. Many tourists instinctively shy away from the poverty they find on these chaotic streets. The Salaam Baalak tours are a corrective to that instinct, a revelation of the human face behind the deprivation.

The trust was set up in 1989 with 25 children in its care and a staff of three. Now it has more than 100 full-time staff and looks after some 5,000 children a year through its shelters, contact points and mobile classrooms.

"Can you guess why the kids run away from home?" asks Brijesh as we walk along a disused platform of the station. "They are the kids of parents who abuse them – emotionally, physically, sometimes sexually. I was a street child myself, suffering the same hardships as the children you will see today."

Running parallel with the station platform is a siding where some old maroon-coloured rolling stock has reached its final resting place. Two five year-olds are washing in the water from a broken standpipe next to the tracks, their meagre bodies dwarfed by the carriage wheels. On the platform, lounged on a patch of sacking, a group of barefoot children of about seven are playing with a puppy held on a string.

"*Namaste, Namaste!*" yell the kids as we walk by.

"They have been living, all the family, on the street," Brijesh says. "Their parents are drug addicts. They don't have any idea how to live in a house. They don't work; they send the kids out to sell garlands and balloons." He jokes with the kids and their faces light up. "It is hard for them to trust," he says quietly. "They have been neglected by the society."

Brijesh's life story has an epic Dickensian sweep for one so young. He was born in Bihar, India's poorest and most lawless state, and at the age of six was farmed out to his aunt and uncle, who promised to educate him. "But my aunt didn't send me to school," he says. "I had to do all the housework. Sometimes my uncle beat me. That's why I ran away." He was eight years old.

Brijesh jumped on a train heading west and hid in the lavatory.

"Within one month I was behaving like a street boy. I learnt how to sniff glue, smoke cigarettes – these things that can help us escape from the present. I used bad words to the police and they beat me," he recalls.

When he arrived in Delhi, via the industrial city of Kanpur, he slept in the narrow roof space above the station platforms and he and his fellow waifs took showers in the "washing lines", the siding where carriages and locomotives are hosed clean.

Then at the age of 13 he started attending a contact point set up by the Salaam Baalak Trust and by degrees he was persuaded of the benefits of schooling. It seems a near miracle that the young man who stands before me, in pressed striped shirt, clean jeans and grey Crocs, was the semi-feral urchin whose tribulations he has been describing.

For the most part, Brijesh tells his story impassively. Just once he becomes emotional, when he recalls how his aunt used to treat him. "She used to use the words 'You are totally useless'," he says, and is momentarily choked up. Then he recovers and speaks with pride. "I started crying. I spent five years on the street and I did nothing for a good cause. Then I decided to show my aunt that she was wrong."

ESSENTIALS

Salaam Baalak Trust's guided city walks take place Monday to Saturday from 10am and last about two hours. To book your place, telephone 0091 99 1009 9348 or email salaamwalk@yahoo.com (<mailto:salaamwalk@yahoo.com>) The fee is 200 rupees (£2.90). For more information on the trust, including details of how to offer help and make donations, see salaambaalaktrust.com.

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