

## Helping runaway kids find their way back home

**Sathi, a non-profit organisation in India, rescues children from the vagaries of life on railway platforms and reunites them with their families**

Indian railway stations are nothing short of mammoth jungles, with as many as 13 million passengers travelling in more than 14,000 trains every day. Just to put this in perspective, nearly 500,000 passengers travel from just New Delhi railway station every day. Now imagine a child between the age of 5 years and 14 years lost in this jungle and it becomes all the more scarier. As many as 265 children go missing in India every day, and a significant number of them are runaway children who end up on railway stations. There is no separate data available for runaway children.

The Society for Assistance to Children in Difficult Situation or Sathi is a non-profit organisation working to help runaway children by reuniting them with their families. Headquartered in Bengaluru, Sathi also works with children living on railway platforms. It rescues them from the vagaries of the platform life and provides shelter and care until the time the child has safely returned home. Started in 1992, Sathi now operates in 15 railway stations and has rescued more than 100,000 children to date.

But for the assistance of Sathi and other similar organisations, these children have little chance of ever getting in touch with their families. They are most likely to be pushed towards a life of near slavery and bonded labour in small eateries or sweatshops. Most of the runaway children belong to the state of Bihar, one of the most poverty-stricken states in the country.

“We decided to run away from our homes because we didn’t want to study. Sometimes our parents beat us up also when we didn’t do well in school,” say Ravi Kant and Ayush Kaityar, both 13 years old, who decided to escape from school and studies in Gurgaon in October 2016. Fortunately they were found by a Sathi team and finally reunited with their families about a month later. Usually the trigger for a such a big step is a small and insignificant incident. They are barely able to control their tears at an event organised by Sathi to reunite them and other children with their parents. Twenty-eight children were reunited with their families on November 14, 2016.

Shiva Kashyap, 9, from Udaipur is overjoyed and excited to see his father who has travelled from Udaipur to collect his son from the Sathi shelter in New Delhi.

Contrary to the popular belief, most of the children come from emotionally stable family homes. “Fortunately, most of these children (nearly 65 per cent according to Sathi) come from a good family environment. It is usually an inconsequential incident which provokes them to run away from home. “It could be anything — from being scolded by the teachers or parents to fear of being found out by the school authorities for doing something wrong, which makes them run away,” says Rajeev Dar, who is handling the Delhi office for Sathi.

However, the longer a child stays on his/her own at railway stations, less are the chances to reunite him/her with their families. “Then [if they stay on their own for some time] they gain confidence in their ability to survive on [railway] terminals. In such a case the bond with parents and friends is no longer a pull factor for them. Besides there is a strong chance that they might get involved in drugs addiction, petty theft or other anti-law activities. That is why it is important to find them in initial days itself and reunite them with their families,” explains Dar.

Another key finding for them is the high number of Madrasa (Islamic religious schools) students, who run away from homes. Dar explains that this is probably because Madrasa education is very strict and demands a high level of discipline and commitment. Many a times, the students are unable to cope with it and escape by running away from their home.

The organisation also works with children addicted to drugs who unfortunately are not located in the initial days of running away from home and end up living on the railway station. “We hold nearly 10-15 camps in a year to help these children. Each camp is of one-month duration and has around 25-30 children in every camp. It is a de-addiction camp. We try to motivate and influence them towards a better life through yoga, story-telling, and other means. Nearly 75 per cent of them decide to go back to their homes but sometimes they run away again,” says Rohit Shetty of Sathi.

Sathi was founded by Pramod Kulkarni in Raichur in 1992. Initially, the organisation was called Prerna. Today it is operational at 15 railway stations across the country. The centre in New Delhi started operations in 2002, and on an average, it finds five-to-six children every day. With a staff of around 160 employees, the organisation works relentlessly to reunite runaway children with their families.

The key reason behind the success of Sathi's model is its foot soldiers who spend hours standing on railway platforms scouting for runaway children. Akash Mathur has been working on the New Delhi railway platform for the last seven months and has helped find as many as 200 to 250 children. Tall and lanky, Mathur, 23, stands in a rather unobtrusive manner as his eyes scan the crowd which relentlessly walks through the platform. His work day usually starts at 8.30 in the morning and continues until 5pm.

"There are telltale signs of a runaway kid. We look for kids who look lost and bewildered, have a faraway look in their eyes and are usually hungry and have an unkempt appearance. Many a times, they don't have any luggage and are generally unaccompanied. Even when an adult is accompanying them, there is a mismatch between the child and the adult," says Mathur.

The battle doesn't come to an end once they find a child. "Nine out of ten times the child will lie to us initially. It is not surprising that they are very suspicious of us and don't trust us. It takes many sessions to find out what exactly is the problem and the whereabouts of the child's family. Sometimes they are not sure about the exact address, or they just don't want to go home in any situation and will continue to give us wrong leads," says Priyanka, who was earlier working in the Sathi Shelter but is now stationed on the platform to look for runaway children.

Once a runaway child is found at the railway station by a volunteer, he/she is sent to the shelter, where they stay until a guardian comes and takes them back home. Sometimes, a small event is held to mark the children's return to their families. During this time the child is counselled extensively to find out the reason for his running away from home. Educational and vocation classes are also held to keep the child busy. At the same time, efforts are being made to locate the child's family and to establish contact with them. This is done through police stations and other government organisations.

Before a child is sent home, there is also a counselling session of the parents or the guardians. "This is critical because it is important to address the real cause of a child's running from his home. We advise parents and guardians to be a little more sensitive to a child's needs and to listen to him/her. We feel that parents are generally unaware that their behaviour might be partly responsible for a child to run away. Once we talk to them, they are mostly quite receptive to it," explains Dar.

Many times, children get attached to the volunteers at the shelter and are reluctant to go back. "Sometimes they would continue to call us long after they are back home. There was one child, Anoop, of about 13 to 14 years and he called me for months after going back home. Almost without fail he would give a call every day," recalls Priyanka.

While most of the time the families are overjoyed to have their children back, there are also instances when Saathi itself decides not to send the child back. "Very rarely but there have been instances when the situation at home is so bad, financially and otherwise that either they request us or we decide that it is better the child doesn't go back," says Dar.

"There was this incident about a few years back where the entire village didn't want the boy back. He was just 11 years old at the time but he used to steal small things and that's why the entire village was against his return. We had to convince the elders of the village that the boy will not steal and only then did they take him back," says Praseon Shukla of Sathi.

The biggest reward for Sathi's workers is the satisfaction of reuniting children with their families. "It is not like any job, it is a mission. I know I cannot be lax in the work I do because a little negligence on my part can change the future of a child. There is no room for error," says Mathur, who continued to look for lost children even while having a conversation with me.

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