

SPECIAL REPORT

Writing their own tickets

By Lalita Iyer Photos by Bhanu Prakash Chandra

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Helping hand: Shankar Aligethi with a SATHI volunteer at the Yesvantpur station in Bengaluru

With a carefree smile on his face, Shankar Aligethi walks barefoot on the cold platform of the Yesvantpur railway station in Bengaluru. Four boys, with slicked-back hair and buttoned-down shirts, gather around him and Shambulingam, a volunteer of the non-government organisation SATHI.

They are nervous and suspicious. The bunch of boys had come from Bihar, but the agent who brought them was missing. The short walk to the SATHI home behind the station, donated by the Railways, seems to put them at ease. And once the door opens, they see other boys their age, friendly adults and hot tiffin and tea. Communication becomes easier on a full stomach.

Shankar insists that he had come with his father and was roaming alone on the platform because he had to go to school from there. His father, having dropped him, had gone to work. As if narrating a well-rehearsed monologue, he says he is in class 6 and even mentions the name of his school.

“They are not afraid when we try to befriend them,” says Maunesh, a volunteer at SATHI. Two counsellors and a lot of friendliness finally gain Shankar's confidence, and he starts to talk. He has six siblings; his oldest brother is married and has three children. His family, from Wadi in Karnataka, is fairly rich and owns six bullocks. This was his second getaway. The first time he ran away, he was following his teacher and boarded the train he was in. But when he could not find him, Shankar got off at the next station and called his father. This time, he got on the train because he wanted to see places.

“In Wadi, Shankar is a missing child only if a formal complaint is lodged,” says Pramod Kulkarni, founder of SATHI. And even if they get a complaint, the police find it very difficult to track the child

because he is always on the move. Kulkarni, however, says most runaway children can be found on platforms and even if the child goes to ten places in ten days, he will eventually return to the station.

Apparently, this happens a lot. According to *Rescuing Railway Children: Reuniting Families from India's Railway Platforms*, written by Lalitha Iyer (not this writer), 70,000 to 1.2 lakh children arrive at the country's 50 main railway stations every year. Maneka Gandhi, the women and child development minister, called it an epidemic and asked the Railways to set up public call offices to help children dial 1098, the government's helpline number. She said ticket examiners must be more alert in noticing runaway children.

According to the National Crime Records Bureau, almost 60,000 children were reported missing in 2011. A report by Bachpan Bachao Andolan, founded by Nobel laureate Kailash Satyarthi, says 11 children go missing every hour and at least four of them are never found. It says the number of missing children could be as high as 90,000 a year.

The question, however, is — why do these children run away? There are many reasons, including poverty, physical abuse by teachers and parents and love affairs.

The children found on the platforms are usually aged between six and 16 and many of them board a train with no destination in mind. Most girls who run away do so because of an affair and a promise of marriage. They come with a man, stay with him for a few days and are then abandoned. "While poverty is one of the major reasons, the trigger is really a discomfort in the family and school," says Iyer.

While many children run away from home as an act of rebellion, some come with agents looking for work. And, in some cases, the parents know this. Of ten children who come to work, seven go back with the agents or the parents come to fetch them. The rest do not inform their parents and some of them are helped by the NGOs. If the address of the parents is found, they are asked to come and pick up the child. And if finding the address is difficult, the NGO takes care of the child and sends him to a government home when he turns 18. "We do not encourage long-term staying," says Kulkarni. "A different kind of environment has to be created for long-term inmates."

The child needs help within the first week of leaving home or he might fall victim to sexual harassment or pick up habits such as smoking. Such children usually get addicted to whitener, which they inhale, or marijuana, gutka and cigarettes. "We set up deaddiction camps for these children and 85 per cent of the children can change," says Maunesh.

Quite often, the parents know their child is at a shelter and want to keep him there. They find it an easier way to discipline the child and send him to school.

The judiciary, too, has taken note of the situation. Last January, the Delhi High Court directed the government to set up child protection committees at major transit points such as railway stations. The committee will consist of a station manager, a superintendent, representatives from the Railway Police, a ticket inspector and a section engineer. The committee at every major station will ensure that the children get food, temporary shelter, clothing, toilet facilities and first-aid, and it may be managed with the help of NGOs.

Though the government and judiciary seem concerned, strangely, many parents don't file complaints at the police station. Their reasons are many. Some feel the police offer no help, while some say the child keeps running away, so why bother? Most, however, want to wait a bit longer before going to the police.

SATHI volunteers, who cover 12 stations, find six boys a day on an average. The volunteers usually identify the boys by their clothes or the lost look on their faces. They then walk with the boys and try to build a rapport. The volunteers then take them to the railway police station for registering their names and then to the shelter.

Each major station has its own story to tell. In Delhi, for instance, children alight at any of the many stations in the region and merge with the populace. Close to 25 children are rounded up every day in the capital. In Chennai, policemen are posted at major junctions, and this makes the child wary of going there. The Howrah Junction has nearly no platform children because of the heavy police presence. Most trains to Howrah stop at the outer signal and the children alight there before vanishing into the city.

As Howrah is not an option, many children disembark at the Sealdah junction in Kolkata. CINI ASHA, an NGO, has a manned booth at the station, which the children can use for shelter at night.

According to Iyer's book, most of the children who run away are from Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Jharkhand, Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. "It could be that the family ties are stronger in certain places and the economic environment might be good, keeping the child anchored," says Kulkarni.

West Bengal's porous border makes the situation worse as many children come in from Bangladesh and Myanmar. And because of the political situation, it is hard to repatriate them. Many children come with their families but get separated when the parents are held up by the police for lack of documents. They are then sent to a government home. Almost 15 per cent of children found in these homes are Bangladeshis.

"A survey needs to be conducted to find out how many children land in each state and then allocate the funds," says Kulkarni. The women and child welfare department has a budget of Rs15,000 crore a year, of which Rs350 crore is sanctioned for child programmes. But Kulkarni says 80,000 children can be helped with just Rs30 crore a year. Each child costs SATHI Rs3,000 a week and this can go up to Rs10,000 if the child has to be taken to deaddiction camps. "They can either give the money to the state, which can disburse it to NGOs or, if they want to do it centrally, they can set up a childline service exclusively for the railway platforms," says Kulkarni.

Iyer, too, feels more can be done to find these children. "Though there is supposed to be volunteer presence 24/7, there is no one on the platform at all times. They have a peak time and then there is no one there consistently," she says.

Lack of data also presents a problem. Though there are more than a dozen websites which collect data on missing children, they are not comprehensive. There is no analysis of the children staying at government homes for more than six months or a year and such information could be crucial for effective management. More than half the children in government homes are not in touch with their families and Kulkarni feels that the government homes should be more active in finding the families.

"You can see the children only if you are looking for them. It has to be in your psyche," says Kamlesh Pandey, programme officer at SATHI in Delhi. And that's all they can do, keep looking.

Back at the railway home, Shankar has his hands in his pockets and walks with a swagger beyond his age. But that's what running away at a young age does. It forces you to grow up.



[A new life: Kuldip, who stays at the Sealdah Junction, says his family is originally from Ajmer](#)

Kuldip Singh is now part of this motley crew of child entertainers who perform on the station for money. He is cheerful in an oversized coat, talks nonstop and, every now and then, claps his hand loudly, shocking the people around him. He lives at the Sealdah station and uses the CINI ASHA booth to sleep at night.

Kuldip says his father, Netu Singh, is a sardar and that his mother died two years ago. The family is originally from Ajmer. When he first arrived in town, he was taken to a shelter but he felt claustrophobic and soon decided that he belonged on the platform.

What does he plan to do in the future? "*Kuch bhi ho sake,*" he says, philosophically.



Home again: Saurav with his father, Gopal Biswas, in Kolkata.

Saurav, 12, stays in Mission Bazar in Kolkata, plays football and hasn't heard of his namesake—Sourav Ganguly. His father, Gopal Biswas, is a cement labourer and his stepmother also works to run the house. To help him study, they sent the boy to his grandmother's place at Malancha near the Sundarbans. Though he ran away from there a couple of times, he would always come back. This time when he disappeared, no one paid attention. But Saurav had flown the coop. The family started worrying when he did not return after four days, but they did not go to the police. Saurav's stepmother felt bad because he was staying with her parents. He had been herding cows there, but he says that he did not like it as a city boy does not do that. He boarded a train and got off at a station in the North 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. The police found him and took him to a government home. He was kept there for more than a year because he did not know his house address. However, he remembered a few landmarks and spoke to a volunteer. She put two and two together and finally brought him to his house. The neighbours felt the mother was to be blamed because she berated the father continuously and this might have affected the child.



Seeking attention: Dhanush left Kengeri, near Bengaluru, and landed at the Yesvantpur station.

Dhanush doesn't make eye contact and seems lost and angry. His parents are separated and his mother, Asha, took care of him along with her parents. THE WEEK met Dhanush, 14, on the day he was to go back with his mother.

When he was young, Asha worked at a housekeeping company and left Dhanush with her parents in Kengeri, near Bengaluru. They pampered the boy and spoiled him with money. When Dhanush failed the third class, Asha sent him to her aunt's house. Here, he had five uncles and aunts, all of them well educated and working. Asha thought this would encourage him to study, but the boy was miserable. He had no company and no one was paying him any attention.

One day, he left home and walked to the shop where his mother worked. She scolded him and told him to return to her aunt's home. He felt abandoned. He went to Kengeri, boarded a random train and landed in Yesvantpur.

When the SATHI staff counselled him, Dhanush said: "My father has distanced himself from me and now my mother is also doing the same. All I want is one *bukka* (morsel) from my mother. Am I asking for too much?" Asha was told not to send Dhanush away and to spend more time with him. And though Dhanush was not smiling when he left, he had a spring in his walk. "The child needs rooting and belongingness. Facilities are secondary," says Pramod Kulkarni, founder of SATHI.



[Journey halted: Nawazish \(left\) with his cousin Sahabuddin. The boy ran away from Bihar and reached Bengaluru.](#)

Nawazish is a great storyteller. The 10-year-old from Purnea in Bihar has no answers for the counsellor's queries, but his thick wad of money points to a rich backstory.

And as he narrates his story, it is clear that his sense of adventure is intact. Apparently, his father asked him to buy some wheat for the house, but Nawazish told him off. The boy was thrashed for his audacity and was locked in a room. The punishment, however, made the boy angrier. When he was let out, he stole money from his father's pocket and ran to the railway station. He had always wanted to go to Bengaluru, where his uncle worked in a hotel. But, in his excitement, Nawazish boarded the wrong train and reached Delhi. He stayed there for two days and somehow managed to board a train headed to Bengaluru. He then took a bus to MS Palya, about 6km from the station.

His uncle, surprised at first, took him in and called up his parents. He then put the boy in a madrasa. But Nawazish did not like it and said he wanted to work with his uncle. But soon, that, too, bored the boy and he stole Rs1,500 from his uncle and reached Yesvantpur. This is where the volunteers found him.

His parents were called and they picked him up. Reunited with his folks, Nawazish remains stoic and refuses to answer questions.

RAJAH Proud and ambitious



No turning back: Rajah, originally from Ganjam, has been at a shelter in Hyderabad for five years.

It was Diwali and all the children, including Rajah, were bursting crackers. But soon he finished his lot and asked his mother for more money. She scolded him and, when he kept insisting, beat him. That was enough to get Rajah, 10, on a train from Ganjam to Hyderabad.

“It’s been five years and I have not gone back,” he says. The boy insists he will return only after making something of himself. He seems shy, but opens up when with his home mates, and proudly declares that he can speak Telugu, Hindi and English.

Hyderabad was familiar as he had been there earlier. He soon started working at a hotel for Rs500 for three months, but was sent to a shelter in a drive against child labour. “I had high fever and they looked after me till I became fine. They are good people,” he says. Now studying in class 8, Rajah says he wants to become a social worker.



Holding on: Sudhir with his mother, Niranjan Devi. He ran away from Bihar and was picked up from the New Delhi station.

Sudhir did not like to go to school and always fought with his classmates. His father, Pukar Sahani, pulled him out of school when he was in class 1 and made him work on the farm with him. His rough behaviour upset his mother, Niranjan Devi, and she would often beat him. After one such beating, he ran away from his home in Sheohar, Bihar, but soon returned on his own.

The second time he left home, he reached Faridabad. Sudhir worked day and night at a hotel for three months, but couldn't handle the workload. He ran away again and reached the New Delhi station. SATHI volunteers found him and sent him to a camp for a month but he found the discipline unbearable. However, the camp slowly transformed him and he even quit smoking bidis, a habit he picked up from some ragpickers. He soon showed interest in returning home and gave them his address. Sudhir's parents had already spent Rs35,000 searching for him, but as soon as his mother heard the news, she rushed to meet him.

RAHUL The fighter



[Back on track: Rahul with his mother, Sunita. He left his grandfather's home in Muzaffarpur and reached Delhi.](#)

Rahul, 13, of Faridabad, lost his father at a very young age. His mother, Sunita, works in a factory and somehow makes ends meet. He has two older brothers—one is an electrician in Delhi and the other works with a small DJ team in Mumbai.

Rahul did not care much for school and Sunita often scolded him for his aloofness. She even locked him in a room a few times. This made the boy angry and he stole Rs5,500 from his mother's bag and went to his grandfather's home in Muzaffarpur. He was enrolled in a school there but soon started picking fights again. Once, during a scuffle, he broke a chair and, afraid that his grandfather would beat him, ran to the railway station. He took a train to Haridwar and stayed there for a couple of days, feeding himself by selling plastic bottles. He then went to Saharanpur, returned to Haridwar and finally ended up in Delhi. Here he bought gutka worth Rs300 and sold it on a train. He even tried it, but did not get hooked.

A SATHI volunteer eventually found him on the platform and he was sent to a home in Alipur, near Delhi. Initially, Rahul said he was an orphan, but soon told them the truth.

He was active in all the activities at the SATHI camp and was a good leader. Soon, he was ready to return to school and finally told them his real address. His mother picked him up and kept saying that a father figure would help Rahul settle down. "I was extremely scared that he had been maimed and used for begging by those gangs. So, I filed a complaint," she says.



[Staying put: Meraj ran away from Banda in Uttar Pradesh and reached Delhi](#)

“The teacher used to beat me with a stick,” says Meraj, 13. Two of his madrassa classmates would hold him while the teacher caned him. His father, Samsul Fauzdaar, agrees and smiles. A farmer in Muzaffarpur, Bihar, Fauzdaar wanted Meraj to be in a good atmosphere and sent him to the madrassa in Banda, Uttar Pradesh. Meraj, however, could not handle the beating, and left the school within ten days. At the Banda station, Meraj found a friend in Mubarak. They went to Kanpur together, stayed there for a few days and took another train to Delhi.

Apparently, there was also a relative's wedding in Banda, but no one from his family came to pick up Meraj. This might have triggered the escape. He said Mubarak had a chadar which they shared to fight the cold, but they could not find food for a couple of days. “Keep me here,” he tells the volunteers at the home he is in. “My sister [his volunteer] will teach me. I'd rather stay here.” Of the children coming from Bihar, many are Muslim and most had run away from a madrassa.