

India: Street Life Starts Young

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The first time I saw her, the 5-year-old candy seller, she was having a big fight with her elder selling mates. I had boarded the train as usual to go downtown. On the way -- a rather peaceful ride among the vegetable baskets, betel nut chewers, and sari-clad women -- a tearful drama suddenly erupted.

The tiny candy salesgirl was being given some extra candy to sell, and she was in no way going to accept any more. There were a few minutes of transferring the candy from one box to another -- boxes being jerked out of reach, and candy spilling on the floor.

Childhood memory

She was only a little girl, with a ragged dress and disheveled hair. Soon she was crying and pouting, and I remembered my own childhood when my older brother told me he could "build a house" on my lower lip! I could always run to my mother for protection and comfort, but this girl's mother wasn't around. Most likely the girl had been abandoned or kidnapped, or at best her mother was off cleaning someone's house and wouldn't return home until very late.

During the course of the argument, all the little girl's candy fell on the floor. Crying all the more, she picked up the scattered pieces with the assistance of the other passengers.

Because I was watching intently, she headed straight for me with tears in her eyes. She put a big package of candy on my lap and refused to take it back, which meant I must buy it. I traded the big package for a smaller and took 10 paise (about one-tenth of a cent) out of my purse for her. The lady besides me did the same, but not many others bought from her.

On the way out, she had another fight and again dropped all of her candy. After she got off, as a final gesture of defiance, she threw the extra pieces of candy back onto the train as it was pulling out.

Pre-school breadwinner

All day long I was thinking about her. She's just a child -- at the age when a mother should cuddle her daughter and worry over her. Yet already she is exposed daily to the rough world of selling to earn a living. I thought about the ten paise I gave her and wished I had given her more.

Several times after that experience I saw her again. She always headed straight for me, I suppose, because I was foreign she thought I'd have a soft heart, and I did. As I was about to leave the train, I put a shiny rupee coin (about 10 cents) in her hand. She is still a little girl, so she didn't say thank you, and I didn't expect her to.

Although national and municipal governments in India have passed legislation prohibiting begging, there still exist many "Oliver-type" gangs of beggars and sellers. In many cases their origin comes from elder "bosses" who kidnap young children, maim them -- either by blinding them or cutting off a hand or limb to create sympathy and send them out on the street to beg. One rumor has it that such a "boss" may well be able to afford to send his son to a well-known college in London from the proceeds of this begging.

Not all are Indians

Not all the kidnapped children are Indian. There are some European children among those abused, so that occasionally one sees a white-skinned, blonde haired, unkempt boy or girl speaking fluent Hindi to his companions, but unable to speak a word of English.

This begging explains some of the unaccompanied children seen on the streets of many large cities in India.

Other children are born to fathers and mothers who are unable to give them food, love, security or proper physical care. Many mothers do not understand birth control methods and now have no place for a child in their busy, working lives.

Other mothers are too young to know post-natal and child care. Among the lower class, a girl's marriage may be arranged for her when she is only 13 to 15 years old. Many mothers are burdened by drinking husbands who abuse and beat them and their children, causing even 3 and 4-year-olds to be cast out "on the street." There are homes and orphanages run by charities to take care of such youngsters, but the facilities are not nearly adequate to cope with the numbers of homeless youngsters.

Child labor

Those children who have been taken in by richer homeowners may begin working at the age of 5 as helper in the kitchen or performing other household chores. It is not uncommon at all for the servants of the upper class to be young children who can neither read nor write even so much as their own name. Lower class parents often "farm" out their children to various homes to supplement their own income and provide basic needs. Each child eats all his meals and sleeps and works from morning to evening at his employer's. Personal possessions usually include only one or two changes of clothes and a blanket. The child eats all his meals in the kitchen on the floor after the rest of the family is finished eating. And he eats what is left over -- a modern-day Cinderella.

The young candy seller I met was better off than the beggars. She had not been maimed. She had some healthy hope to grow up earning a living, instead of begging. She either was selling with her family or with a group who "found" her. So at least she had someone else to help her, and a place to sleep and someone to help her.

Real determination

I see her from time to time, and I always buy her candy. She sticks to me like glue. For a little 5-year-old girl, she is really determined.

The last time I saw her I was with some friends. She got money from all of us. It was then that I decided to buy all of her candy the next time I see her and to give her a bath, some new clothes and a hot meal. I want to let her play for at least an afternoon as a child should.

But she's only one. There are so many others. What will they be like when they grow up? How can they have faith, hope and love when all they've seen is the hard and ugly side of life? Who is there to care for them?