

NOMINATED • Pages 41–65

INDERJIT KHURANA

When Giri Rana was seven he ran away from his job as a domestic slave. His own father had sold him to get money for drugs and alcohol. That night, Giri slept at the train station, alone and hungry. Today, thanks to Inderjit Khurana, he has a totally different life.

Giri soon discovered that lots of children lived and worked at the station. Some begged for money, others collected rubbish or polished shoes. Some of the children had run

away, just like Giri. Others lived with their families in the slum next to the railway tracks. Giri got to know the children and they showed him how to survive at the station.



When Giri was seven he was a domestic slave. The platform school was his way out to a better life. Now he's 15 and a top student, and has won lots of awards.



Inderjit tells the children at the platform school an old story from Orissa.

Greetings!

The most common way of saying hello and goodbye in India is to put your palms together, raise them in front of your face, bend your head slightly and say “namaskaar” or “namaste”. Of course, people of different ethnic groups and religions do it differently. For example, Muslims raise their right hand to their forehead and say “adaab” or “salaam aleikum”, to which you reply, “waleikum salaam”.
Suni, 14.



WHY IS INDERJIT KHURANA BEING NOMINATED?

Inderjit Khurana is being nominated for the WCPRC 2007 for her long struggle for the poorest and most vulnerable children's right to education. She opened her first railway platform school 21 years ago. Today her organisation, Ruchika, runs 12 platform schools, 6 nurseries, 75 slum schools, 20 nursery schools, preventative HIV and AIDS projects, 2 “schools on wheels”, vocational training and clean water and sanitation projects in the slums. Inderjit and Ruchika also offer healthcare and run an ambulance service for emergencies. In addition, Ruchika has two helplines for children and women and gives scholarships to gifted poor children. Inderjit believes that if the child cannot come to the school, the school has to come to the child. She and Ruchika seek to give a basic education, building up children's self-esteem and opening the door for them to have a life free from poverty, child labour and violence.



Rama sweeps the train. She goes to the platform school when she has time.



It was a hard life, but Giri liked being able to come and go as he pleased. But at night he felt lonely and afraid. The children at the station were often beaten, robbed or, worst of all, raped. Many drank alcohol or sniffed petrol in the evenings, to help them get to sleep.

Giri and his friends seldom stayed long in one place. They travelled by train and worked all over India. One day, when Giri was 9, he got off the train in a town called Bhubaneswar. In the middle of the platform, he saw a strange outdoor classroom. The children sat on the ground and wrote on their writing slates. All morning long they sang together with their teachers,

danced and recited the alphabet so loud that it echoed around the station.

Giri had always dreamt of going to school, but he felt suspicious. Was it a trick to capture children and lock them up? But when the

teachers started giving out food, he couldn't resist.

First platform school

Today, Giri is 15 years old and is a top scholarship student at a state school. He lives in a children's home run by Inderjit Khurana and her organisation, Ruchika. Inderjit also founded the platform school that changed Giri's life.

It all began over 20 years ago. Inderjit had her own private school for rich children in Bhubaneswar. Sometimes she saw poor children stop outside the school gates. They were dirty and dressed in rags and looked longingly at the pupils in their crisp and clean school uniforms playing in the schoolyard. They themselves had neither

As the train pulls in, the child workers prepare to jump off and run to the platform school.



the money nor the time to go to school.

When Inderjit used to take the train from the central station, she met many working children of school age.

"Why aren't you in school?" Inderjit once asked a little boy who was sweeping the floor in her train carriage.

"My father is dead and my mother can't manage without my help," the boy explained.

Inderjit knew that many people tried to help poor children in India. But that help didn't reach the poorest children at the station. They have to follow the train schedules to survive. In rush hour, and when the large express trains come in, the stations fill up with people. And that's when there's money to be earned.





“All children have a right to education,” thought Inderjit, “but how can these children get to go to school?” She could only think of one solution:

“If the children can’t come to the school, we have to bring the school to them. I have to open a school at the station!”

“They are dirty”

When Inderjit told her family, colleagues and friends

about her idea, they were horrified.

“Don’t go to the train station, it’s dangerous and dirty,” they said. “Street children fight and steal! They could infect you with dangerous diseases!”

But Inderjit had made up her mind. One morning, she packed two sacks full of picture books, toys and chalk, and headed off. Only one of the teachers from her school dared to go with her.

Inderjit unpacked her things on the platform and waited nervously. A little boy looked at her with a mixture of curiosity and suspicion.

“Do you want to learn to read?” Inderjit called out. After a while he plucked up the courage to come up to her, and the lesson began.

Threatened by gangsters

For a long time, that little boy was Inderjit’s only pupil. Every day, many of the train passengers would ask Inderjit what on earth she was doing. Some were kind, but others were suspicious and angry. Some thought she was a missionary who wanted to convert the children to Christianity. When Inderjit said that she just wanted to give the children an educa-

Inderjit jokes with Ranjan, 12. He has begged and worked at the train station since he was four.

tion, hardly anyone believed her. They were still very suspicious. Police and railway staff tried to drive her away, and she was threatened by gangsters and drug dealers. Sometimes angry parents would come and shout at her because she was stopping their children from working.

“Your children have a right to go to school,” Inderjit would say to them, “and if they learn to read and write, it’s good for the whole family.”

Although Inderjit was exhausted and often afraid, she didn’t give up. She sang,



Inderjit talks to Rama, 12, who lives in the slum near the train station.





Inderjit dances with the children at the platform school.

told stories and played games with letters and numbers. The news about the platform school spread. After a couple of months, there were over 100 children at Inderjit's platform school!

4500 children reached

Since then, Inderjit's organisation, Ruchika, has grown from strength to strength. Now it reaches 4500 children every year, through schools and projects at train stations and in the slums. Ruchika runs everything

from nurseries to vocational training and HIV/AIDS programmes.

"At the beginning it was really hard," remembers Inderjit. "Now we have more support from local politicians and from the railway company. I've learned a lot too over the years, for exam-

ple, that if the children are malnourished and sickly, we have to give them food and medicine. Otherwise they have no energy to study."

Inderjit wants to give a basic education to as many children as possible. It's not just a matter of being able to read – it's also about know-

ing the rights of the child.

"I want the children to have self-respect and realise they have value. We must reach them before they are too badly affected. Once that happens there is no going back." ☺



All the staff and children at Ruchika, outside the organisation's new building.





Bijay studies on the platform

The shrill sound of the train whistle makes Bijay cover his ears. When the train rolls out of the station, he runs towards the platform school and the first lesson of the day.

Bijay is a shoe shine boy at the main train station in Bhubaneswar. All day long he chases after passengers with dusty, dirty shoes. All the shoe shine boys at the station have agreed that they won't take less than \$0.10 per polish. Bijay has to earn as much as possible in a short time. Otherwise his mother will force him to stop school.

Writes on the concrete

When Bijay arrives at the platform school, many of the children are already there. The teachers show pictures that they have drawn themselves. The chil-

dren guess the words and practice spelling. Bijay practises forming letters on his writing slate.

"That looks great, Bijay," his teacher congratulates him.

This classroom has neither desks nor a blackboard. The children sit on the ground. Sometimes they and the teachers write straight onto the concrete platform with their chalks. Bijay, who has been attending the school for several years, enjoys it and has managed to learn a lot in the short lessons. He likes it best when the class gets to sing, dance and play. The school day ends with a simple meal. For some of the

children, that is the only food they eat all day.

After school, Bijay manages to fit in a couple more customers before running home and helping his grandma with lunch. He lives in a slum area right next to the station. Nearly all the men who live here work with leather. They make shoes, mend and polish leather. Bijay's father did that too, before he drank himself to death.

Liked his dad

Bijay was out playing when his father died. When he got home, the whole family was sitting around the dead father, crying and wailing.



Bijay, 12

Likes: Cricket. Singing and playing.

Doesn't like: Alcohol and drugs. Working.

Dreams of: A roof for our house. Going to school full-time.

Happy: When I get something to eat, like biscuits.

Scared: Of becoming homeless.

Wants to be: A doctor.

Looks up to: My mum. My teachers.



The teacher helps Bijay write Oriya letters on his writing slate.

What is the platform school?

At Bijay's platform school, which is open every morning, the teachers often use pictures, songs, puppet shows and games. Inderjit Khurana, who started the first platform school 21 years ago, believes that it should be fun to learn. The aim is to give the children a basic education and better self-esteem. Those who want to continue their studies are helped to find a place at a state school when they have learned enough basic skills.

Learn to speak Oriya!

India has at least 800 languages and over 2000 dialects. One of the languages is Oriya, which is spoken in Orissa.

What's your name?	Tuma nama kana?
Name	Nama
What is your favourite colour?	Kyon ranga tumaku bhala laage?
How are you?	Tume kipari acha?
I am fine	Mu bhal achhi.
I love you	Mu tumoku bhalpae.

Bijay started to cry too.

Bijay's father was an alcoholic. That is very common among the men who live in the slum. Some of the women drink too. As they are very poor, they buy the cheapest kind of alcohol. It's really a medicine and you're only meant to take a few drops per day. But Bijay's father and his friends used to knock back a whole bottle at a time. He bought the alcohol from gangsters in the slum. Bijay became angry and sad when he saw them doing business on the street corner. They didn't care that the alcohol actually killed people. But he couldn't stop them from selling to his dad.

When his father was drunk he used to shout at and hit Bijay, his mum and his brothers. He also gambled the family's money away and he couldn't work. Bijay often ran away from home and slept at the station to avoid being beaten. Still, he loved his father very much.

Work, said grandma

The day after his father's death, Bijay's grandma said

he had to start working.

"Your father is gone and you are the oldest son. You have to provide for the family now."

Many of Bijay's friends were already working, but his mother had let him go to school instead. But now his mum bought a brush, a cloth and shoe polish. Bijay's best friend, Suresh, showed him what to do.

"Smear the shoe polish into the shoes and rub them with the cloth. Then brush them, as hard and fast as you can



to make them shiny."

Bijay says that the first day working at the station was the worst day of his life. It was hard to find customers and almost impossible to make the shoes shiny. He was slow, and the customers became angry and impatient. They had trains to catch, after all. Bijay cried himself to sleep that night.



Up before sunrise

After a couple of months as a shoe shiner, Bijay can work faster. And against the will of his mum and grandma, he still goes to the platform school every day.

"Your education is losing us money – you should work more instead," they say.

However, Bijay refuses to stop, because school is so important to him.

He gets up at four o'clock every morning, the first in the family to get up. He lights an oil lamp and makes dough for chapatis, the family's breakfast bread. Mum makes rice and curry. After breakfast, he runs to the station, jumps on a train and looks



Most people in Bijay's neighbourhood work with shoes and leather.



Bijay with his family: mum Bhavani, grandma Budhi, great-grandma Laxmi, and brothers Bijay, Papparau and Arnand.



for customers along the crowded carriages. The train is packed with people on their way to work. Most pretend not to see Bijay. Others are kind, and a couple agree to have their shoes polished. After a few stops, Bijay and his friends jump off and walk back along the railway tracks.

At seven o'clock in the evening he heads for home, exhausted. His back and head are sore and his hands stink of shoe polish. He gives everything he earns –

between \$0.25 and \$0.65 per day – to his mum. She works as a domestic help for two different families, but earns less than her son and is often ill. Bijay's younger brothers are also almost always ill, from the dirty drinking water and bad food.

"Sometimes I worry about my younger brothers," says Bijay. "Will they have to work as hard as I do? I want them to be able to go to school too." 🌐

Bijay walks back to Bhubaneswar with his friends along the train lines. He has a group of friends at the station and they are always together. Bijay's best friend is called Suresh. Bijay can talk to him about everything.

Longing for a roof

When Bijay was younger his family lived right next to the train tracks in a shack made of bamboo poles and plastic sheeting. But when Orissa was struck by a terrible storm – a super-cyclone – the shack and everything they owned was washed away by the floods. Just like hundreds of thousands of other poor people, Bijay and his family were forced to live on the street.

"We had no food, no water, no home," says Bijay's mum.

An aid organisation wanted to build a house for the family. But the money was only enough for foundations and walls. Now, the family are forced to move from place to place while they save up for a roof.

"It will cost at least \$215 to build the roof," says Bijay. "We are saving as much as we can, but between mum and I we only earn \$20 a month."





We are train workers

All over India, hundreds of thousands of children work on trains and at railway stations. There are lots of people moving around and opportunities to make money. For these children, the platform schools are their only hope of an education.

Beggar

Bira Reddy, 14

Job: Beggar.

Earns: \$0.65-\$1 per day.

Comes from: Bolanpur.

Likes: School.

"On my fifth birthday, I fell into the fire that my mum was cooking over. My nylon shirt caught fire. I was badly burned and had to stay in hospital for six years. My parents thought I should just stay there for ever, since we were so poor and I got free food there.

Dad is an alcoholic, and he always used to beat me. That's why I ran away from home. Now I have lived alone at the train station for three years, and I earn a living by begging. People feel sorry for me when they see my burns. Sometimes I help out at a café and get some food in return.

I go to Ruchika's open platform school. My teacher has said that she's going to help me find a more stable job. I hope she does."



Bottle collector

Mitun, 12

Job: Bottle collector.

Earns: \$1-\$2 per day.

Comes from: A village near Puri.

Likes: Dancing like his idol, Salman Khan.

"I collect empty plastic bottles. Usually I travel with a group of friends and we help each other. I've travelled all over India, to Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai... everywhere. The trains are my work-place. When the trains come in to the station I have to work. Sometimes I only stay on the train for a bit, sometimes for several hundred kilometres. In between I go to school on the platform.

I grew up in a small village. My dad is a day labourer in the fields and my mum gathers wood and sells it. I had to work in the fields too when I was little, but I didn't like it. I ran away and made it to the train station. The only thing I'm scared of is the police. They beat us, so we run away whenever we see them.

I save as much money as I can. So far I have saved \$10. When I'm older, around 17, I'll go back home and give the money to my father."

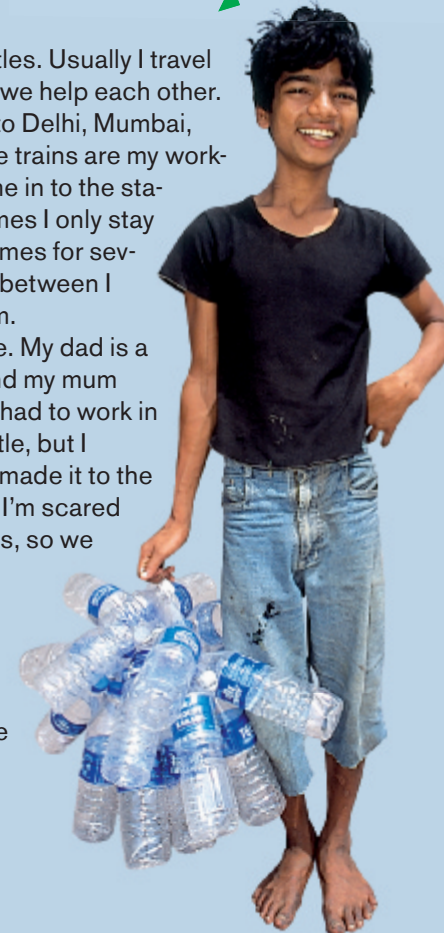
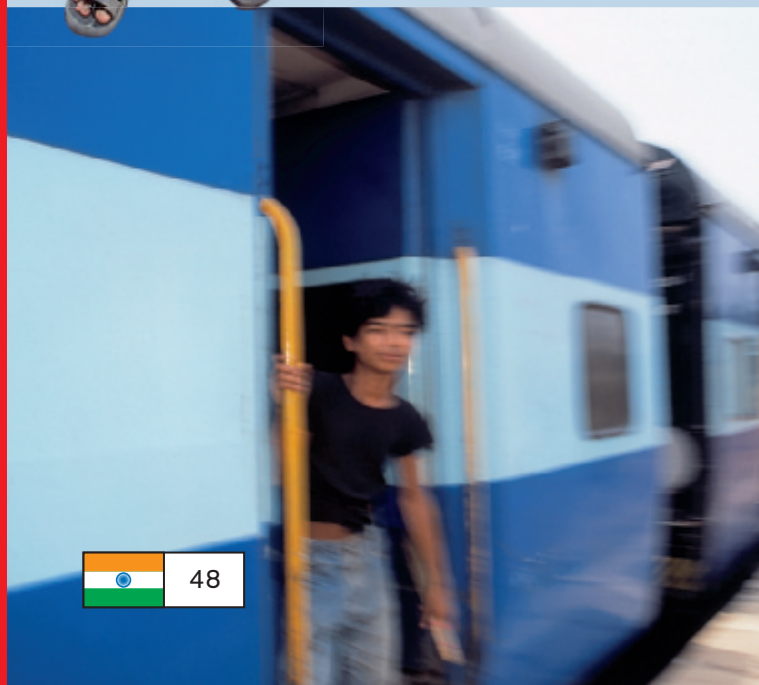


PHOTO: KIM NAYLOR





Rag picker

Nirmala, 12

Job: Rag picker.
Earns: \$1-\$1.20 per day.
Comes from: Bhubaneswar
Likes: School.

"I live with my family in the slum near the station. My brothers and sisters and I collect rubbish from 9am to 4pm every day. We usually walk along the railway line to Khurda station, 30 kilometres away, and back again. Sometimes we jump on the trains. There's always new rubbish along the train tracks that people have thrown out of the train window. We pick up plastic, rags, iron, glass and metal. When we have filled our sacks, we sort the rubbish, because different things are worth different amounts. A plastic bottle is worth almost twice as much as a piece of iron. Around five o'clock we sell the rubbish to an old man in the slum.

When I'm older I'm going to sell dried fish. That's what our family does. That's why I try to go to the platform school as often as I can. I want to have some education, so that I can write letters and do numbers. That's important when you're doing business. Also, if for example an accident happens, I want to be able to write down the names and addresses of everyone involved."



Baby sitter

Shayama, 10

Job: Baby sitter.
Earns: Nothing.
Comes from: Bhubaneswar.
Likes: Maths.

"I take care of my younger brothers and sisters every day, so that my mum can work. Otherwise we won't get any money and we'll starve to death. Mum cleans and does laundry for several rich families. She leaves early and comes home late. She has to work very hard, because my father is dead.

I go to the platform school every day. Maths is my favourite subject. My younger siblings come too of course, but they're still too young to study! There are lots of us at the platform school who have to look after our brothers and sisters. The teachers help us with the children sometimes, so that we have time to study. We get food at school. I make lunch and dinner for the family at home. At school I learned always to wash my hands before cooking And to be careful with hot sauce-pans and fire. I know children in the slums who have spilt boiling water and burnt themselves terribly while making food. Some of them died."



Sweeper

Muna, 12

Job: Sweeper.
Earns: \$1-\$2 per day.
Comes from: Bhubaneswar.
Likes: Nothing special.

"I work as a sweeper on the trains, along with my best friend. He's older than me, and he knows how to act at the station and on the trains. He has taught me a lot about how to survive. We jump on the big trains and sweep the floors wherever they are dusty and dirty. Then we ask the passengers for money. The nice ones give us some money. There are real cleaners who are employed by the train company, but they never need to work. We children do it for them! I sometimes go to the platform school, but it's hard to find the time. I have run away from home and have to look after myself. So I have to work hard."



A day at the railway s

The train station is rarely quiet and peaceful. But when 12-year-old Ranjan wakes at dawn, the rush-hour hasn't yet begun.

06.00

06.00 Morning rush hour

The station starts to fill up with people on their way to work. Raja, 8, is ready to start begging from the passengers.

"I wear my dirtiest, most torn clothes. That way I earn more. In one day I can make about \$0.60. I give the money to my mum. Foreigners give the most, but I try to beg from everyone. Some shout at me and say bad words. Then I walk away. There are lots of children begging and sometimes we fight. But we always become friends again."



05.30

05.30 Toothbrush sticks

The children at the station brush their teeth with sticks from the neem tree. Ranjan and his friends buy sticks for about one cent at the station.



07.00

07.00 Sibling love

Lots of children come to the station from the slums next to the railway line. Many bring their younger brothers and sisters. They can't stay at home when their parents are at work, so they go with their big brother or sister to work or school.

Mahmina, 12, fixes her little sister's hair on the platform.



Raja is not the only one starting work in the morning rush hour. Suresh, 11, shines the shoes of an early-bird policeman.



08.00

08.00 The platform school begins.

The crowds of people at the station thin out – most people have arrived at work now. So the working children can also take a break and go to the first lesson of the day at the platform school.



Shayama dances with a friend at the platform school. "I've learned to dance by watching films!"



tation

09.30

09.30 Tiger fight

The children have made funny and scary masks from papier maché. Here, a tiger is fighting a powerful God. The other children cheer them on.

Hiding behind the masks are Kanha and Jagan, both 8.



10.00 Puppet show

The teachers at the platform school often use puppet shows to make the lessons more fun. Ranjan and a classmate hold up a piece of cloth to create the stage.

10.00



11.15 Time for food

If the children don't get to eat they have no energy for learning. That's why the teachers give them chhathua, a dish made from flattened rice, peanuts, sugar and milk powder that's a bit like rice pudding. For some of the children, that's the only food they eat all day.



Of course, everyone washes up their own plate at the sink in the station.



The school medicine box has everything from painkillers to bandages and de-worming tablets. If a child gets injured or is seriously ill, the teachers call the Ruchika doctors.



11.15



11.45

11.45 Saturday bath

Every Saturday it's time for the weekly bath. The teachers help to scrub, rinse and dry the children.





The teachers give the children vitamin drops.



12.00

12.00 Thanks, that's it for the day!

When the lesson is over, the whole school gets packed up. Everybody helps to carry the school sign and all the materials to a small shed next to the train tracks.

12.05

12.05 Games time

After school, lots of children have to run home and help their mothers make lunch. Others are able to stay at the station and play, as long as no big passenger trains come. Ranjan says he has over 300 friends at the station.

"My best friend is called Parama. We play together and help each other. Once I had an upset stomach and he took me to hospital. When he broke his leg I took him to the doctor and paid the medical bill with the last of my money."



Ranjan and Rama climb trees.



16.00

16.00 Rush hour again

In the afternoon, people start to make their way home from work. The trains fill up with people and the children start work again. A crowded train has come into the station. Mithun prepares to jump on board with his broom.

17.30

17.30 Bottle jackpot

Mithun and his friends have run through the carriages and found empty bottles that they can sell. The temperature outside is over 40 degrees celcius and it's hot and sticky in the carriages. A lot of passengers bring water to drink.



19.30



19.30. Finally quiet

The last packed train has left the station. The platforms are quiet and empty for once. Most of the children have run off home to eat dinner with their families. Ranjan, Rama and Bijay have earned enough today to be able to buy their favourite dish at one of the station's food stands: chicken and rice.

21.00 Good night

The children who sleep at or near the station almost always sleep together. It feels safer that way. When it's dark, both boys and girls run the risk of being beaten and raped, by both older children and adults. Ruchika staff walk around the stations in the evening to help children who are on their own get home to their families or to the children's home.

21.00



Ghouri likes yoga

Ghouri, 11, lives at the station with her father during the school holidays. The rest of the time she lives at a children's home and goes to school there, but in the holidays she goes to the platform school. She's good at yoga and loves showing the other children her art.

"My dad only has one leg. He lost the other one in a train accident. He can't work and is always saying that he wants to die, so I give him food and stuff."

When Ghouri was four, she and her sisters were abandoned by their father.

"Dad put me and my two younger sisters on a train and disappeared when the train left. In the end we got off at a station. A foreigner found us and took us to a hospital. We lived there for a couple of months, till our mum found us. We got to come home for a while, until she got re-married. Suddenly she didn't want us any more. We lived with our dad for a while, but that didn't work out. He drank a lot and beat us every day and wouldn't let us go to school. In the end we moved to a children's home.

Ghouri misses her mother a lot.

"I love my parents, but neither of them wants me. Mum comes to visit sometimes, but I don't think she's told my new brothers and sisters that I exist. That makes me really sad. When I have children, I'll never abandon them."



Platform magician

Kusman, 9, goes to the platform school at the station in Khurda. His father is a magician.

"He taught me how to do magic tricks with coins and with this snake!"

Kusman's favourite trick is making a coin disappear, but he doesn't want to become a magician like his dad.

"I'm going to be a car mechanic and open my own workshop."



Prize-winning dancer

Mahmina, 11, lives in the slum beside the train station. She used to go to the platform school, but now with Ruchika's help she has started to go to a state school.

"I had learned enough, and I also got a scholarship so I don't have to work," says Mahmina, who loves dancing.

"I do drama and dance at my school. I've performed and won prizes. When I grow up I want to be a dance teacher."



All over India by train

Although Balaram Chowdhuri is only 10, he has travelled all over India by train, alone. He ran away from home because his mother beat him. By the age of six he was a seasoned traveller.



Balaram has travelled by train to all of India's big cities, like Mumbai, New Delhi, Chennai and Hyderabad.



"I have lots of bad memories from cities that I don't like. Mumbai, however, is my favourite city," says Balaram. "I lived there for a few weeks, at a good children's home near the station. One day a famous Indian film star, Sunni Deol, came to visit. He gave us clothes and we got to shake his hand."

Many abandoned children travel around India by train and work, just as Balaram did.

"I often travelled with a group of friends," he says. "We took care of each other and helped newcomers. I swept train carriages for money. Sometimes we slept on the night train, under the seats, sometimes at the sta-

tions. In some cities there were aid organisations that could give us a bed for the night, like in Mumbai."

When Balaram ran away, he lived in a slum area in Puri. His mum drank and she used to beat Balaram and his brother and sisters.

"My father is dead. My big brother lives on the street and my two sisters live with a relative.

When Balaram lived on trains all over India, he too started to drink and try different drugs.

"I used to sniff, drink beer, and smoke marijuana and tobacco. It made me feel better for a while, especially when I was lonely and sad. But afterwards I always felt ill. Then you have to take

more drugs. It becomes a vicious circle."

At the station in Bhubaneswar, Balaram started to attend Inderjit's platform school. Now he lives at a Ruchika children's home and goes to school.

"I'm happy, have loads of friends, and I like school and life at the children's home. Sometimes I'm still tempted by drugs but I don't want to go back to that life."



India's longest station name

Try saying:

Venkatanarasimharajuvariapeta.

Rolling palace

India has everything from standard trains to luxury trains with restaurants, libraries, bars and servants. Rich people can travel on the Palace on Wheels, or the Fairy Queen, the world's oldest steam engine, which still puffs its way along the tracks.

INDIAN TRAIN FACTS

India's national railway transports five billion passengers per year. The train company has: 8,702 passenger trains, 11,000 engines, 7,150 stations in 27 states, 108,514 kilometres of railway and 1.6 million employees. That's what it takes to be the world's largest employer!



PHOTO: KIM NAYLOR





Puppet show about washing

Today, the puppet show is about how you should always wash your hands when you've been to the toilet and before you cook and eat food. If you don't you might end up like the puppet child, who vomits, has diarrhoea and has to go to hospital. The children laugh, but they also understand that it's important. They know that people can die from stomach problems.

TEXT: CARMILLA FLOYD PHOTO: KIM NAYLOR

School on wheels

“The school is coming! The school is coming!” The children working on the street shout to each other when they see their teacher struggling uphill on his bicycle. He’s bringing the school on wheels.

The school on wheels is Inderjit’s invention for bringing school to children who live and work on the street. It is, quite simply, a giant wooden box fixed to a bicycle. On the sides there are blackboards and inside the box is everything they need for school work.

Sankar, 10, arrives just as the teacher is parking next to a fence. He and the other children help the teacher lift books, writing slates and chinks out of the box.

Sankar comes from a village far away from the city of Bhubaneswar, but right now he lives on the street with his parents. They work as basket weavers and his

father also plays drums in a wedding band. Sometimes Sankar goes with him to weddings.

Sankar started attending the school on wheels two years ago. That was the first time he’d had the opportunity to learn to read and write. The family is always on the move, travelling back and forth between the village and the city. That makes it difficult to go to a regular school and that’s exactly why this school on wheels came about.

At first, Inderjit wanted to build real schools, but the children in this area were too scattered. Many would have too far to walk to get to school, and you can’t build a school for only five or ten



Sankar, 10 years old.

children. A school on wheels was the perfect solution.

Sankar has learnt to write the whole alphabet and all the numbers. His favourite subjects are maths and science. He likes learning new things. Another plus at this school is that the teacher provides lunch. 🌐

Rolling school

The school on wheels is Inderjit and Ruchika’s latest experiment for reaching children who wouldn’t otherwise be able to go to school. During the day, two teachers cycle around and hold lessons for one to two hours in six different places.

“We regret not having put the school on a motorbike now, because it’s very heavy to pedal,” says Inderjit. “Next I want to open a mobile toy library, where the street children can borrow toys and children’s books. All we need now is a bus to keep the toy library in!”



The children learn both the Oriya alphabet and the Western alphabet.



Swopna ran away from slavery

One day a woman drops in to the restaurant where five-year-old Swopna and her older brother are working. The woman has nice clothes and looks rich. She says that Swopna and the brother can move in with her and asks to see their father.



The woman asks Swopna's father why he makes his children work at the restaurant.

"This isn't a good place for children," she says. Let me take care of them. They can help with the housework. The woman sounds nice, and it seems like she really cares about the children.

Swopna and her brother live with their father and small village; their mother died long ago. The woman pays Swopna's father to let

her take the children to the city. The money is an advance payment of the children's salary. Swopna feels scared but hopeful.

Beaten every day

The woman lives with her husband in a big house in Bhubaneswar, the capital of Orissa. They both work in offices, and want Swopna to have dinner ready for them when they come home.

One day, Swopna is playing in the street outside the house when the woman comes home from work. She is furious that Swopna is

playing instead of working. The woman drags Swopna into the house, beats her and shouts at her.

"Lazy, ungrateful girl. If I see you bunking off work again I'll beat you to death!"

From that day on, the woman kicks and beats Swopna every day. The man doesn't hit her, but he doesn't try to stop his wife. Sometimes the woman hits Swopna's brother too, but he protests and runs away. Swopna doesn't dare do that. She just curls up in a ball and cries. Swopna tries to do all her chores perfectly

but it makes no difference. The woman always finds something to complain about. What hurts most is when the woman hits her with a heavy wooden stick.

Swopna works from five in the morning until one at night, seven days a week. She cooks, cleans and does the laundry. She hardly ever sees her brother, because he works in the garden and the garage. When the woman and her husband come home from work, they want Swopna to give them a massage. They complain that they have to work so hard at their offices

Carrom is Swopna's favourite game.



Many household slaves

In India many poor children, usually girls, live with and work for other families. They often work very long days and are unable to go to school. Most start working when they are between 8 and 12 years old. Many are beaten or sexually abused. Sometimes the children's parents get money when they hand over their children to an employer. It's regarded as an advance payment of their salary, and means that the children become debt slaves in the household.



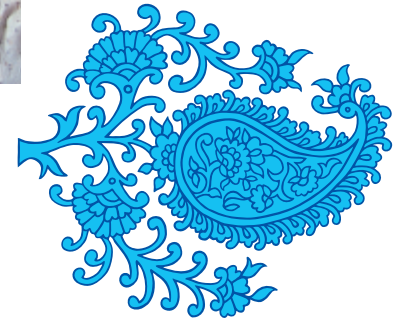
Swopna, 12

Likes: School. Playing carrom and other games.

Favourite film star: Shah Rukh Khan

Doesn't like: People that hit children.

Wants to be: A police officer, to help children who work as slaves.



When evening comes, Swopna and the other girls lay their mattresses on the floor and sleep close together.

and that they have sore backs and shoulders.

Swopna is so tired that when she goes to bed she doesn't even have the energy to cry. Her whole body hurts, and she often dreams of running away.

Swopna escapes

Swopna is 11, and she has now been working for the angry woman for over six years. The father has not been in touch since the day the children left the village. Swopna thinks he must have

married again and had more children.

One evening, the woman starts to beat Swopna with the wooden stick. She beats her even harder than usual. Swopna's head starts to bleed. She is terrified that the woman will kill her this time. But suddenly the woman stops hitting her. She throws down the key to the gate and tells Swopna to lock up for the night.

Swopna staggers out into the garden. She leaves the key in the lock and keeps

walking, out into the street. She doesn't know where to go, but in the end she goes into a neighbour's garden. It's quiet and dark – everyone is asleep. Swopna lies down on the veranda and falls asleep.

When the neighbour finds Swopna outside her door the next morning, she gets a fright. "What are you doing here? What happened?" she asks.

Swopna can't talk, she can only cry. The neighbour gives her some food and

after a while, Swopna explains that she has run away.

"She tried to kill me," says Swopna, and shows the woman her wounds. She is afraid the neighbour won't believe her and will force her to go back to the house. But instead, the woman phones the Childline, a helpline for children run by Ruchika.

Soon, two men who work for Ruchika arrive on motorbikes to get Swopna. They explain that she is going to live at Ruchika's children's home. But first they have to go to the police station to report the woman. At first, the police aren't interested. But the men from Ruchika are stubborn and show Swopna's bruises and sores.

"What's more, she's a child labourer," they say to



Helpline for children

Swopna got help via Ruchika's child helpline, which is open every day. It's called Childline, and is funded by the Indian authorities. Stickers and cards with Childline's phone number are handed out to both children and adults. Since the helpline was set up in 2000, Ruchika has received almost 50,000 phone calls about children who need help urgently. Inderjit knows that in order to help children, you often have to help the mothers first. That's why Ruchika has a special helpline for women too.





Henna hands

During the swing festival, people have their hands and feet painted with henna. A boy who used to live at the children's home is now a professional henna painter. He comes to the children's home to make the girls pretty for the festival.



People use lime or coconut oil to make the henna last longer. When dry, the henna paste is scraped off.



Swopna gets her hand painted with henna.



Ruchika house, and show her around. About 15 girls



the police. It's against the law to make children work. In the end, a police officer agrees to listen and write down Swopna's story.

In safety

When Swopna wakes up the next morning, she doesn't know where she is at first. Two older girls remind her that she is safe at the

Lovely red feet!



of different ages share two rooms and a little veranda. The girls are here for different reasons. Some are the children of women who work as prostitutes, who have asked Ruchika to take care of their daughters. Others have run away from home, been abandoned by their parents, or been res-

cued from slave labour, just like Swopna. The Ruchika boys' home is on the other side of the building. And at the front there is a lawn where all the children can play games and do sports.

The building is also home to the Ruchika office, where Inderjit Khurana works. The girls in the home call her "mama", because she is like a mother to everyone here.

Swopna tells Inderjit what happened.

"You can stay here if you like, and go to school," says Inderjit.

People from Ruchika discuss Swopna's case with the police and the woman who beat Swopna. At first the woman says it's all lies. But eventually she apologises and pays some money towards Swopna's education. Ruchika thinks that taking the matter to court is

hopeless. It could take many years for the case to be heard.

Swopna is happy because she can go to school; however she's still not completely satisfied.

"I think that the people who kept me as a slave should be put in prison for life."

Swopna plans to become a police officer – a good and fair police officer who protects children.

"I plan to make sure that no children have to work and suffer like I did." ☹





Swopna



The children from the children's home build swings.

Look! Our hands are finished.



celebrates swing festival

In June, as the monsoon rains get closer, the girls in Orissa celebrate the swing festival. This is the first time Swopna has been able to play on the swings.

It's fun to celebrate with all my friends at the children's home," she says. "We helped to put up the swings in the garden, and we decorated the ropes with flowers. We swing as high as we can, and we dance and sing. The boys too! And we get our faces painted, and henna our hands and feet."

The idea of the swing festival is for girls to play and have fun, at least for a few days a year. The rest of the time, it's often the girls who work the hardest, both at home and in the fields.

During the festival, all the girls are supposed to get new clothes and at least three days' holiday. But during Swopna's six years of slave labour she never had time off, nor did she have a new dress to play in. The dresses for children at the children's home are not brand new. They are second-hand clothes, sent to Ruchika by rich people after their own children have grown out of them.

"But they feel new for us," says Swopna. 🌐

More swings! ➔



Rama, 12

- Likes:** Playing. Drawing.
- Doesn't like:** When I can't afford to eat.
- Sad:** When my mum drinks too much.
- Loves:** My mother.
- Looks up to:** "Mama" (Inderjit Khurana).
- Dreams of:** Being able to travel abroad.
- Wants to be:** A teacher.



Why is the swing festival celebrated?

The Orissa swing festival, also called the Raja, is all about life and fertility, and it's a way of welcoming the powerful monsoon rains and the farming season. For three days Mother Earth doesn't have to work. That's why girls and young women can also take a rest from working in the fields. Big swings are set up everywhere for the girls to play on.

According to tradition,

during the festival, girls aren't allowed to walk bare-foot, dig the ground, cut crops or cook. But most people don't bother with these old customs any more, especially in the cities. Here the swing festival has become more focused on partying and exchanging presents.

After the festival, all the swings are taken down. When the rainy season starts, there's no time for playing – only for hard work.

Banana leaf plate

The finest Raja food is served on a big banana leaf. Another festival speciality is Poda pitha, which means "burnt cake". It is made from ingredients like rice powder and coconut. When friends and relatives visit each other during the festival, they often bring burnt cakes as a gift.



Work clothes



"These are my work clothes. When you're begging, you need to wear your dirtiest, most torn clothes. Then people give more. Now I have stopped begging, and I collect plastic bottles instead. That earns me a bit more money, and seems better.

Everyone used to ask me, 'why are you begging?' and one day I found lots of bottles I could sell. Then I decided to change job."



It's very important for Indian girls and women to have bracelets.

"Otherwise you feel kind of naked," says Rama.

People who can afford it have lots of bracelets, but Rama could only afford two.

"It was hard to choose, but in the end I decided these ones were the prettiest."

Rama's wardrobe



Rama, 12, doesn't wear her best clothes to run to the station in the morning. The children on the platform get dirty and dusty easily, so there's no point in dressing up.

Rama lives with her mum and two younger sisters in a little shack near the railway line.

"My father is dead, and my mother has lung disease. She is very weak," says Rama. "That's why I'm the one who works the most. We also get a little bit of money and food rations from Ruchika every month."

Rama has three older sisters, but they have moved out. That's why she has to do the housework and look after her younger sisters.

"I'm always worried because we live so close to the station. What if one of my sisters falls in front of a train? I take them with me to the platform school every day. I want them to have a better life than I have."

Rama started begging when she was five. Before her mother fell ill, she used to go from door to door swapping metal utensils like pots

and pans for old clothes.

"That's what our family does," explains Rama. "Mum used to fix the clothes and sell them again."

"I never buy clothes for myself, but sometimes I save up some money and buy a second-hand sari for my mum. When my dad was alive, he used to take her out and buy her clothes. But now she's so ill she can't even go out shopping."

Sometimes the teachers and Inderjit Khurana try to persuade Rama to move to the children's home. They think her life at the station is too hard. But Rama doesn't want to leave her mum by herself.

"My dream is to study, get a real job and to be able to buy a better house for my family. But it's hard to plan for the future. First I always have to think about where the money for the next meal will come from." 🌐



Rama goes to the platform school, but she often finds it hard to concentrate.

Too short

"I got this from Ruchika at the swing festival. Lots of people have said it's really nice, but I think it's too short. It shows my legs, and I don't like that.

My dream dress would be blue, with beads embroidered onto it."



Rama always walks barefoot, like many other children at the station.

"I used to have a pair of sandals, but I gave them to my mum."



Sanjukta refuses to quit school

When Sanjukta was elected “president” of the school’s child parliament, she didn’t tell anyone at home. After all, her mum wants her to quit school and start working.

Sanjukta’s parents work on different building sites. They dig, carry bricks and mix cement, seven days a week. Sanjukta’s mum has been nagging her for three years, saying she should go with them.

“Quit school and start earning money for the family,” shouts her mum. Sanjukta refuses, and sometimes her mum gets so angry she hits her. It seems unfair.

“But my brothers get to go to school!”

“It’s different for boys,” says Sanjukta’s mum. She can neither read nor write. Sanjukta’s teacher has tried to reason with her.

“Don’t you want your daughter to learn more and have better opportunities in life than you’ve had?”

However, her mother is stubborn. She thinks that education is wasted on girls. Sanjukta’s father can read and write a little and has nothing against her going to school. But he doesn’t get involved in the discussion.

Wakes up at four o’clock

Since Sanjukta is the only girl in the family, she has to look after the home while her parents work. She cleans, does the laundry, fetches water, cooks and takes care of her younger brothers. None of her four brothers help out.

“It’s a girl’s job,” they say, and their parents agree.

Sanjukta gets up at four in the morning and goes to fetch water. Ruchika has built pumps in the slums so



Sanjukta, 12

Likes: School.

Wants to be: A teacher.

Looks up to: My teacher and “Mama” (Inderjit Khurana).

Music: Religious songs. School songs.

Books: Myths and fairy tales from Orissa.

Favourite God: Lord Jagannath.

that the children don’t get ill from dirty water. On her way, Sanjukta runs into girls and women coming from all directions with their buckets and jugs.

When Sanjukta gets back she lights a fire so that her mother can make breakfast.



Sanjukta has a picture of the Hindu God Lord Jagannath – Orissa’s most important deity – around her neck.

Before Sanjukta can start her homework, she has to...



Sanjukta walking home with her little brother.



...sweep inside and in the yard...



The child parliament put on their white clothes and hats when it's time to meet.



Then she sweeps the floor and the yard as her father and brothers start to get up.

School president

Sanjukta hurries her little brothers along. She always tries to get to school before

the teachers and check that the classroom is tidy and that chalks and books are in place. It might have been her keen sense of order and responsibility that made her schoolmates choose Sanjukta as their leader.

Many of Ruchika's slum schools have a child parliament. When Sanjukta stood for election to be "school president", her friends ran an election campaign with posters and meetings.

After she won the elec-

tion, Sanjukta gave a speech of thanks.

"I'm going to do my best to help all of you and make sure things get done!"

Being school president also means that Sanjukta can participate in meetings



...and wash clothes...



Finally, homework time!



with Ruchika's large child parliament. The child presidents of all the slum schools meet there to discuss issues around education and the rights of the child. All the children are invited to listen and ask questions at the meetings that are held four times each year. Sanjukta is the leader of the opposition.

"I ask questions and challenge their decisions," she tells her classmates. "If an important issue is forgotten it's my job to remind the ministers!"

Wants to be a teacher

The teachers in the slum schools use games, songs, dance and puppet theatre to make learning fun for the children. Sanjukta loves school. Her dream is to get a



scholarship and be able to study at university.

"If I get a good education I can become a teacher and get a good salary. Then my mum might understand how important education is." 🌐

Child-friendly toilets!

There are rarely any toilets in the slums. People have to relieve themselves wherever they can, and this spreads disease. It is more difficult and less accepted for girls to go to the toilet outdoors. That's one reason many girls won't go to school.

Now Ruchika has built child-friendly toilets next to its slum schools. The walls are decorated with beautiful pictures and funny rhymes.



If Sanjukta was a minister in Orissa she would:

- Fix the sewage system.
- Build enough toilets and water pumps for everyone.
- Make sure children get to go to school and don't have to work.
- Put fans in the classrooms, because it gets unbearably hot in the summer.



Their very own school

Sanjukta goes to one of the many slum schools run by Inderjit Khurana and Ruchika. They work with the people living in the slum to build the schools, in areas where children have no access to education. As Inderjit sees it, because the residents help build and pay for the school building themselves, it really is their own school.



New world

Inderjit also runs schools for children from richer families and several children from Ruchika's children's home attend these schools too. The Indian economy is growing fast, and close to 300 million of India's population of one billion now belong to the middle class.

The young people at Inderjit's high school visit the slum schools and get to know children and young people there.

"Some people's parents don't let them go," says Ananya Nayak. They are scared of the slum and think it's dangerous, and that you'll

get ill if you go there. But my parents thought it was good. I did a project where I met girls who are forced to work.

They taught me a lot, and the project opened up a whole new world to me.



Suman gets a straight leg

When Suman Ganta was little he was called Cchota. It means “wrong in the legs”. Suman was born with a bent leg and foot and could only walk on his toes, with the help of a bamboo cane.

“My mother is dead and my father forced me to quit school when I was ten,” says Suman. “He sent me out to work on a building site so that he could get money for alcohol. I only got paid half as much as the others, since I couldn’t walk as fast. I missed school, but if I didn’t go to the building site my dad would beat me.

Suman dreamed of running away from home, but he had never left his home village.

“There’s a children’s home where they can help you go to school,” a man said to him one day.

Suman went with the man to Bhubaneswar and got a place at Ruchika’s children’s

home. He also got a new name there – Suman, which means “flower” or “person with good heart”.

“Now I go to school and have lots of friends at the children’s home. But the best thing of all is that I’ve had an operation on my leg.



Soon I should be able to run and do sports like other children.” 🌐



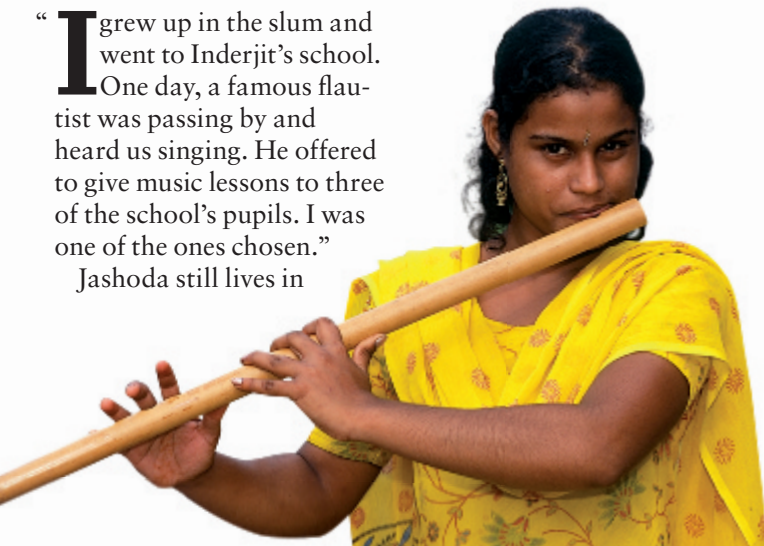
In the slums and the countryside in India, there are many children with disabilities who never receive the help they need. Many children also develop disabilities or problems with their sight and hearing because their parents can’t afford vaccinations or medicines to fight infections. Inderjit and Ruchika run a special programme to help children with disabilities. They also tell parents how to take care of sick children so that they are not permanently damaged. Some children are born with defects which can be operated on. The local hospital and doctors help Ruchika by giving free medical treatment to help these children.

Sweet melody from the slum

Sometimes Inderjit’s old pupils come to visit. One of them is Jashoda, 17, who brings her flute and plays for the children at the children’s home.

“I grew up in the slum and went to Inderjit’s school. One day, a famous flautist was passing by and heard us singing. He offered to give music lessons to three of the school’s pupils. I was one of the ones chosen.”

Jashoda still lives in



the slum with her family. She is the only one in her neighbourhood who has had the chance to go to Orissa’s music college. She was very happy when she found out she had passed the difficult entry test and been accepted.

“Without Mama Inderjit I would never have been where I am today. I look up to her and to my own mum, who is the best mum in the whole world. She has encouraged me and my three

sisters to go to school, even though my brothers don’t think we need to. They say, “get married and have children instead”. But we don’t care what they say!

Jashoda’s dream is to become a teacher at the music school.

“When I have made it in life, I also want to help children in the slums.” 🌐