

The Street Children of Calcutta

by
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Prabha and I were in Calcutta recently; this was my first visit to the city. She spent the first twenty odd years of her life in that city, however, and speaks Bengali better than she does her own mother tongue.

I had been looking forward to this visit. I had always had a high regard for the Bengali culture. It is known for its warmth, refinement, and gentleness (and somewhat incongruously, for its argumentativeness and quarrelsomeness).

Calcutta did not disappoint me; my stay there was a very rich one. The richness, of course, came from Prabha's deep roots in the city. Besides her brother Kali, his wife, and their son, she has a vast assortment of aunts, uncles, cousins, and friends in Calcutta.

The richness of my stay in Calcutta came from something else too, a certain experience with a certain group of children, a very significant experience that could well prove to be life changing: I visited one of Kali's places of work.

Kali is a doctor by training. While still a medical student, he ran a health clinic in one of the slums of Calcutta, providing primary health care to the slum dwellers. At about the same time, he seems to have come under the influence of Dr. Chaudhuri, an older medico and visionary who had decided to devote his life to the uplift of the poor. Dr. Chaudhuri had started an organization in 1974 called CINI (the abbreviation stands for Child In Need Institute) that works towards improving the lot of poor rural children. CINI works largely by targeting the health of expectant mothers, and by educating these mothers about nutrition, hygiene, and the value of primary education for their children. (CINI has a host of other activities, as well, by which it reaches out to the rural poor.) Kali joined CINI immediately after graduation.

In the nearly twenty-five years of its existence, Kali claims that there have been very visible changes in the populations that CINI has been working with. The literacy rate in these areas has gone up tremendously, as have various indicators of health. The progress is necessarily slow, and changes are best detected over a generation, rather than over months.

While CINI had been concentrating on poor rural children growing up with families, there is another unfortunate lot of children that needed help: the *street children* of Calcutta. In 1989, CINI formed an offshoot organization called CINI-Asha to try to improve the lot of this hapless bunch.

Who are these street children? These are children, mostly born to very poor families, who have run away from their homes to escape emotional and physical abuse, and who now live with no adult supervision in their lives. Typically, they have run away from an abusive stepmother or an alcoholic stepfather. They have often been beaten and tortured. They are products of families in which the rigors of extreme poverty have stamped out most urges for caring and kindness;

disturbed families from which they had felt it better to escape to a life of uncertainty on the streets.

Kali estimates that there must be about 50,000 street children in Calcutta. They live anywhere they can: on the streets, on railway platforms, under bridges, inside sewage pipes laid out for construction. They go around doing odd jobs, anything that will help them survive. They are often found begging, or else picking through the huge piles of garbage that dot the city, looking for things that will have value in the recycling market. As they wander about trying to eke a living from their harsh environment, they are drawn into a world of crime, and many are physically and sexually abused by the adult representatives of Calcutta's vast nether world.

With the constant hardship, abuse, and exposure to the seamy side of life that a lifetime of psychological counseling will not completely cure, it would be hard to imagine that there is any childhood left in these children, or that there is any hope of a decent future. But a visit to CINI-Asha soon dispelled such notions.

According to Ms. Sulagna Roy, a lead social worker at CINI-Asha, the organization's goal, admittedly ambitious, is to *mainstream* the street children. This involves establishing a relationship of trust with them, providing them with a safe and supportive atmosphere, imparting learning skills and teaching them subject matter so that they will be ready for school at a level appropriate to their age, placing them in schools that are willing to accept them and are sensitized to their special needs, mentoring them through school, and in the end, finding jobs for them after school. Every step in this plan is fraught with difficulty--and perhaps the hardest step is the first, the building of trust in the children. Since these children have often been abused by adult members of their families, and since they are constantly harassed and abused by a range of adults as they try to survive on the streets, they are mistrustful of just about everybody. Yet, CINI-Asha's workers are undaunted; they feel that even one child in hundreds that is mainstreamed is worth their efforts, and what is more, that just spreading awareness among the street children that a better life is possible is itself worth their while.

CINI-Asha chooses to focus on kids in Central Calcutta, a zone with a high level of economic activity, and a natural magnet for many street children. Kali took Prabha and me one evening to visit three of CINI-Asha's bases. It was one of the most moving evenings of my life.

We went to *Amader Bari* first. *Amader Bari* (the name means "our house" in Bengali) serves both as CINI-Asha's headquarters and as a halfway house and a hospital ward for the street children. I went there with some degree of trepidation. I think I was secretly expecting to meet browbeaten, emaciated kids wrapped in protective shells. What else should I have expected? I had heard horror stories already about the history and the present circumstances of some of these kids from Kali. Like the story of the girl who went about the streets dressed like a boy to escape the constant attempts at rape by the thugs on the street. Like the story of the girl who, while wandering around with her baby sister, simply *lost* the baby amidst the confusion of the streets, and is to this day traumatized by the thought of what could have happened to her sister. Stories from a world I could hardly imagine, stories that made me cringe.

Instead, I mostly found warm, affectionate, bright, articulate kids! I was totally overwhelmed. Amader Bari occupies several floors of a building just off Park Street, a major commercial avenue in central Calcutta. The kids were housed in various rooms, and every time we would enter a room, the children would come running to the social workers and give them bear hugs. Then, with bright faces, they would greet Prabha and me, "Namaste Uncle! Namaste Aunty!," and then they would go back to hugging the social workers. It was clear that they were very fond of the CINI-Asha staff, and it was clear that they trusted them. Some of these children would come up to Prabha and to me and talk to us. They were shy, but they were not frightened, and they were awfully sweet and affectionate.

One area of Amader Bari serves as a sick bay where children who are ill are housed as they recuperate. They are examined by Dr. Rakesh Agarwal, a staff physician who monitors the children's health and runs the sick bay. "It takes some effort to convince children who are sick that they need to rest, they would rather stay on the streets and continue to earn," the staff told me.

On a wall at Amader Bari hangs a chart. It contains the names of "graduates" of Amader Bari, kids who have successfully been placed in schools around Calcutta, as well as the names of the schools they have been placed in. Each name on the chart is a success story, it is the name of a child at least *some* of whose wounds have begun to heal, a child who has developed at least some measure of trust in the world and who is poised to rejoin society and lead a productive life.

We drove with Kali and Sulagna from Amader Bari to Sealdah Railway Station. Sealdah station handles all the local train traffic in Calcutta. With the huge numbers of people passing through, it is a fertile economic arena for street children. As trains pull in and disgorge their teeming riders, these kids clamber aboard and swarm through the compartments looking for discarded plastic bottles, newspapers and magazines, anything that can be resold, if only for a pittance. They hire themselves out as porters or attach themselves to vendors as odd-boys. Or else, they simply beg.

CINI-Asha found a very creative way of reaching out to these kids at Sealdah. They recognized that to be successful, they would have to center their own activities close to where the kids work. Working with a welfare organization attached to the Indian Railways, they managed to procure a small shed located right between two platforms at Sealdah. They run this as a drop-in center for boys. In parallel, they located a few rooms in a tiny crowded street very close to the station; this is their drop-in center for girls.

The idea of a drop-in center is this: it is meant to be a nearby place that the kids at Sealdah can simply drop-in at if they want to rest, or if they want someone to talk to. CINI-Asha's staff fan out amongst the platforms of the station and talk to the kids about the drop-in center, encouraging them to visit it. This is the first phase of trust-building, and it is a difficult phase; the kids need to be convinced that CINI-Asha's staff are sincere, and are not just another group of adults out to exploit and abuse them. Once at the drop-in center, the kids continue to be suspicious; it sometimes takes them a few years of constant visits to the center before they can trust the staff enough to open up and talk about themselves. However, once they start to visit, CINI-Asha's staff at least have a chance of reaching out to the kids and letting them know about the possibilities of a better life.

That the concept of drop-in centers was working, that there had been a critical mass of kids built up who trusted CINI-Asha and were already on the road to education and towards realizing their potential, was soon obvious.

There were some twenty odd boys at the drop-in center at Sealdah. They were sitting on the floor, rather quietly, waiting for their dinner. In front of them, also on the floor, were two young men. It turned out that these two men were CINI-Asha instructors who lived at the drop-in station, and served doubly as guardians and counselors. Like the children at Amader Bari, the boys at Sealdah greeted us very enthusiastically, but they were hungry, and did not immediately come to us.

Dinner was delivered shortly, and with it came the first touching moment at Sealdah. A bright eyed boy in the first row, who had greeted us perhaps the most enthusiastically, came to us very affectionately and offered us his dinner. Prabha and I were teary-eyed. This boy had *nothing* in his life, yet, he thought of offering us his food before eating himself. We declined gently, wondering if our refusal would hurt him. He asked us again, ever so sweetly, so instead, Kali (who, as became obvious during the course of the evening, has a marvelous rapport with these kids) took a small piece of his dinner.

The boys wolfed down their dinners, and the energy level in the room immediately seemed to rise! The boys started chattering among themselves, and many of them now came and talked to us. CINI-Asha had provided these children with their own individual lockers. These lockers were based on a very sound principle: one obvious and significant fact about these kids is their rootlessness, and the social workers had reckoned that just by providing each kid with a tiny locker, there would suddenly be one small location in the world that he could think of as his own place, something that would give him a small measure of identity, and from that, perhaps some self-esteem, some desire to improve his lot. Some of these kids took us to their lockers and proudly showed us their contents. It was so moving, each kid was so sweet. One had a photograph in his locker of himself and a few buddies taken by some visitor, another had a cap; it was mostly just small things like that, but for these kids who roam around the cruel railway station with no parents and no home, these possessions must have assumed the significance of life savings.

We were treated to an amazing success story. One of the boys, with the help and encouragement of his CINI-Asha teachers, had submitted a project on growing plants in urban conditions to a science fair, and he had won an award for his work! He had traveled all the way to Hyderabad to receive his prize, and was written about in various local papers: the street kid who had wowed the world of school science. According to an amused Sulagna (she has a Masters degree in Social Work and seems to love the kids), he was now walking about with a swagger, and was impossible to be around!

After saying good-bye to the boys, we drove to the drop-in center for girls, which was just around the corner from Sealdah station. Just as with the center at Sealdah, there were some twenty-five girls sitting on the floor. Kali decided that the girls would put on a show for us; they did, and we left crying.

Kali sat in front of the girls, and introduced us as visitors from America. Then he asked the girls if anybody would like to sing for us, and the mood in the room seemed to turn electric. A huge number of hands went up, and there was a clamor as half the girls in the room vied for Kali's attention. The eagerness stunned us. Kali called on the girls, and one-by-one, they started to sing. As each one jumped up to perform, the other girls in the room all fell silent and looked encouragingly at the singer; the atmosphere seemed warm and supportive. I saw several girls encouraging some of their shyer friends to volunteer. The songs were in both Bengali and Hindi. After a few such songs, the kids took it upon themselves to broaden their act: some of the kids started to recite poetry. Each performer got a huge round of applause from the other kids, and would sit down looking pleased and happy.

Every girl who performed brought giant lumps to our throats; these were kids who had been badly abused, who lived off the streets, and did not have a home. To seem so trusting, secure, and affectionate, they must have come a very long way.

After several of the girls had performed, Kali (the children seemed to love him) asked the girls, one by one, what they would like to be when they would grow up. The answer always started "I would like to learn to read and write, and then, I would like to be a ..." A large number of them wanted to be teachers, some of them wanted to be doctors, and one of them even wanted to be a lawyer!

After this, the group broke up, and Sulagna introduced us to the staff. These were clearly a very dedicated and talented lot to have wrought such wonders with the kids. As we walked through the remaining parts of the center, the children milled around us. Several of them seemed very eager to talk to us; once again, I was struck by how affectionate they were. It would be natural if the kids seemed starved of receiving affection, but CINI-Asha's kids instead seemed starved of *giving* affection.

We said our good-byes. The kids kept on hugging us, our leave-taking was protracted. We left as very different people from the ones who had set out earlier that evening to see CINI-Asha at work. I recall telling Prabha that we should adopt two of these children. I remember feeling that everything else I had spent my time doing was inessential and inconsequential; that these kids were what life is all about. I recall tears, and lumps in throats.

A few days later, we met the girl who once used to dress like a boy to escape abuse, and who has since been in CINI-Asha's care. This girl is now in her mid-teens, is an accomplished athlete, and is doing very well at school. She is planning to go to college very soon.

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