



HOT SHOT
Just aim. And shoot!



SATURDAY TIMES



HOT SHOT
MACRO

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All grown-ups were once children — although few of them remember it.

— Antoine de Saint-Exupéry,
The Little Prince

They make their own homes. On railway platforms, under bridges, near open gutters, garbage dumps, in meat markets, temple courtyards, mosques or right on any Bombay street itself. A roof overhead is not the reason that has driven them here. Escape has.

Children have been known to bolt from their families in village and small town settlements for several reasons. Three among those common are ill-treatment at the hands of a step-parent, physical abuse from a drunken father or elder brother, and abject poverty. The last in fact, often results in a frustrated breadwinner fleeing initially, leaving the orphaned child with no option save to fend for himself in another place. Specifically, seizure of land, debts, unemployment and the loss of a wage-earner either through death or desertion, contribute to parental desertion.

While volumes of statistics are generated profiling children of prostitutes, beggars and lepers, juvenile addicts and slum-dwellers, not even an approximate figure can be hazarded for migrant children. The itinerant nature of this vagrant population effectively defies estimate.

What is evident is that Maharashtra happens to be the single largest state young migrants hail from, followed by Tamil Nadu, Goa, Gujarat, West Bengal, Tripura and Orissa in succession. A

scattering belong to the Hindi belt of Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan. Consequently, the predominant languages spoken are Marathi, Tamil, Kannada, Gujarati and Bengali, though after years of living on Bombay's streets many forget a mother tongue partially, ending up using the colloquially corrupt brand of *Bambaiya* Hindi.

Subbaiah Selva Kumar, co-ordinator at the Society for the Promotion of Area Resources Centre (SPARC), observes that a majority of these children — about 75 per cent — are boys. Girls find it more difficult to run away because of problems related to their femininity. "Boys rough it out readily, eating, working and sleeping where they can without fear of exploitation. Only the desperately unhappy girl child leaves home to head for the city." Concerned with issues of urban poverty, SPARC offers research and training support to underprivileged areas,

undertaking documentation and detailed analysis. The earliest stop for a runaway is almost always the nearest railway station. From here the next, a longish halt, is a town close enough to reach taking an outbound train. Then it is Delhi or Bombay, clustering in the latter metropolis around shanties in densely populated central Bombay, Byculla, Nagpada, Dongri, Sewri, Mahim, Dharavi, Goregaon and

Mankurd. Well, over half of them maintain no contact with the family. Guilty about their new-found freedom, some write or send a sum of money periodically. For the most, they harbour deep-seated bitter grudges against the home situation, expressing not the slightest inclination to return. Roughly around 6 to 10 years old when they arrive "to see the city," runaways are forced to find a job literally the

moment they enter it. Ragpicking is considered the easiest point of entry for survival in Bombay. From there they graduate to other levels — becoming coolies, vegetable sellers, *wadi* workers (cooking and taking on odd errands at wedding functions) and *chai-pani* bearers at tea stalls or cheap hotels.

But dreams die first. City lights, bright sights were what they thought would have in store. Optimism dissolving, the disillusionment soon sets in. Contrary to wild expectations of life in the country's commercial capital, the child, who has as it is lost the security of a family, suffers untold further misery. "Yahaan aake hero nahin, zero ban gaya," quips an urchin, typifying the idyll gone sour.



Snehasadan, Andheri.



Camp for deprived children at Bandra East Community Centre.

INNOCENCE ON THE RUN

They form a part of the city's swelling population — the runaway children. Harassed and exploited continually, what forms of shelter does the city offer them? MEHER MARFATIA surveys the scene

A basic need like rest is often a remote prospect; they must sleep in secluded spots beyond the beat of patrolling policemen. No matter if they have a fair idea of medical services they are entitled to, wounds and injuries they want dressed are regarded with suspicion "Ab kya naya lafda kar baitha re tu (Now what trouble have you got into)?" Necessity makes them bathe in the sea, beneath faulty municipal taps, leaking pipelines... anywhere free-

flowing water is detected. Denied his very existence on the city's mean streets, the vagrant is not even allowed the right to move from kerb to kerb. There are few things more unfair than a child being picked up from a sidewalk only so that some adult, assigned a daily "quota" of routine round-ups, can be seen as performing his duty.

Obviously, the girl migrant goes through more than the others' share of harassment. Little

street girls at times don masculine clothes simply to resemble boys in a crowd. When not prowled around by procurers, pimps or just any depraved man out to violate her sexuality, she contends with discrimination treating her contemptuously just because she is out on the road. "Respectability is an alien concept. She actually bathes with her clothes on," says Suresh Mhaske, a volunteer for the Bandra East Community Centre (BECC).

Employed chiefly as domestic help, construction head-loaders, ragpickers and tailoring assistants, they cope with a marked disparity in wage received as well, since it is presumed that they are ultimately being geared towards marriage. "So many don't, finding their way into brothels instead," reveals SPARC's Kumar. "They view police and doctors alike as objects of fear rather than of protection."

Waiting For Tomorrow, a study on four groups of migrant children in Bombay was published in 1990 by SPARC, commissioned by the Government of Maharashtra's department of social welfare. Sponsored by UNICEF, it shows these children's incomes determined by their age, the number of hours they work and, if pickers, what material scrap they collect. Younger children are unclear in accounting for what is due to them but older ones declare an