

Homeless and Hungry Youths of India

By **BARBARA CROSSETTE** and **SPECIAL TO THE NEW YORK TIMES**

Sonu, Toofan, Bobby and Bhagwan are skinny boys with impish grins and the mischievous ways of children everywhere. But for them, there has been no childhood.

Wily and street smart, they live and survive in a homeless, hungry, lonely and often brutal world circumscribed by New Delhi Railway Station. They scrounge for leftovers from the garbage of incoming trains and dodge the kicks of angry porters as they hustle to carry luggage for a few cents.

There are hundreds of others like them around the busy station, and millions more elsewhere in India, where the population is nearing 850 million.

"About 120 million children, including those helping their parents in farms and shops, are working more than 12 hours a day to earn their own bread, 55 million of them in slavlike conditions," said Swami Agnivesh, a former civil servant who has devoted the last two decades to the cause of freeing bonded laborers. "In this country there are children branded with hot irons and made to work 18 hours a day."

In overpopulated South Asia, where one-third of the children are born malnourished and there is never quite enough food to go around, childhood "is not school and play but misery and oppression," said Prem Shankar Jha, a columnist for the newspaper *The Hindu* and press adviser to the former Prime Minister, V. P. Singh.

At New Delhi station, 30 boys from 5 to 16 years of age are getting a rare chance to change their lives. On a small roof terrace of the railway police station, Bela Sumanth, a social worker, runs the Nukkad Center, an experiment in informal education paid for by the Salaam Balak Trust, a fund set up from the proceeds of the film "Salaam Bombay" by Mira Nair, a story of Bombay street children. Nukkad means "street corner" in Hindi.

From 9 in the morning, when the Nukkad day begins with a bath and meditation, until 1 P.M., when they get a free lunch, the boys are taught basic literacy, a little science and social studies. They are taken to museums and parks, and given bank accounts to encourage saving. Above all, they get care and affection, and advice against the almost inevitable temptations of criminality and drug abuse, to which many homeless children succumb.

"We love this woman very much," a little parentless boy said of Miss Sumanth.

The boys at Nukkad tell their wrenching stories matter of factly. Sleeping Under a Stairway

"I ran away from home when they married off my brother," said Bobby, who is 12. Bobby, who like all the boys adopted a street name not his own, is an unofficial porter, or kuli, the Hindi word commonly spelled "coolie" in transliteration.

"My father drinks a lot, and I wanted to go with my brother, but they wouldn't let me," he said. "So I ran away from home with some money I took from my mother. She sort of knew I would go."

"I went to Nizamuddin station from U. P.," he said -- Uttar Pradesh is a state east of New Delhi -- "and worked in a biscuit factory. But after 15 days they gave me no money, and so I came here." That was nearly a year ago. He has been sleeping under a station stairway since.

Toofan, a 10-year-old who took his name from an express train, said he followed an older playmate into Calcutta from one of its outlying slums five years ago because "I loved playing marbles and flying kites with him." 'Then He Told Me to Beg'

"He took me to the station and told me to sweep the floor," he said. "Then he told me to beg. I felt very shy, and knew my mother would be angry if she knew, but I went. I got 5 or 6 rupees a day, and he took half."

"One day, he took me on a train called the Gitanjali," Toofan said. "I was very small. I thought we were going home. But a day passed and night came, and I began to cry." Toofan was by then on the way to Bombay, at the other end of India. Since then he has stowed away on trains, hung around temples for free food and sold popcorn at stations.

He wants to be a doctor. He has never seen the inside of a school.

As several boys clamored to talk to a reporter and photographer, one slender boy quietly slid his copybook onto the mat in front of the visitors. Newly literate, he had written in Hindi:

"This is my story. My name is Nazir. I am 14. I came from Nepal with my father nine years ago because there was famine and we had no food. We got separated at this station. I looked and looked for my papa but never found him again. What could I do? I made my life here. I am a kuli. I want to be a mechanic and fix cars. My life at New Delhi Railway Station is completely useless."