



RUNAWAY CHILDREN – CHOICE OR FORCE

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Abstract

'Children' whom we call as the future of any nation are today engulfed in the dark clouds of poverty, child labour, abuse and violence. The threat of trafficking and kidnap hover around our children .India claims and boasts of being one of the 'Rapidly Developing Economies' in the world. May be, we need to redefine what is Development. Having children drop out of school at a tender age of 10 years and join hands with their family to make a living, is certainly not a sign of a developing economy. Children indulging in drugs and other juvenile crime are surely not what development is all about. Child trafficking and abuse definitely does not reflect development of a nation. 36% of the missing children in India land up in the traffickers net and fall prey to torture and exploitation.

Today, we don't need to work hard to sight cases of child abuse and child right violations. Its omnipresent, it is an epidemic which is getting uncontrollable by each passing day. Rescuing and rehabilitating are the two key words when it comes to Child Protection. But strengthening our education and value system lies at the core of protecting the children of our country from being kidnapped, trafficked, abused, molested and tortured. What is the role of the Government in protecting its children from exploitation and abuse? Where do the NGO's step in? And are the NGO's aiming at solving the core issue or is it all a window dressing? These and many more questions need to be answered if we wish to provide a safe and healthy environment to our children.

1. INTRODUCTION

Life is not easy when you are too young or too old, both stages childhood and old age call for dependence. This dependence can be in terms of physiological needs, security needs and social needs. These needs have to be met by the family, friends, society and the government. But does it happen? Are our children and elderly provided with these needs and if they are not, then who is to be blamed? Sometimes family can be dysfunctional, or unsupportive as a result of which a child leaves home and finds himself amongst strangers. These children are commonly referred as 'Runaway Children'.

Whenever we spot a child begging on a railway station, bus stand, or working in a hotel what do we think? The common thought would be "Look at him, instead of being in school, he is here making a quick buck, the parents are just unconcerned". Do we actually stop by and ask the child as to why is he here begging? Why is he working when he should be in school? Where is his home? What is his problem? No, none of these questions are posed and we simply assume that nothing can be done because India is a poor country and there are millions who are unable to meet their basic needs, so why bother about this child begging or working in a hotel. This indifferent attitude is what is resulting in more and more child beggars, child labourers, and child prostitutes. Crimes against children and crimes committed by children both are on the rising trend. Where are we going wrong? Are we not aware about the magnitude of the problem of child rights violations? We as a society need to adopt a more sensitive approach and deliberate on the issues related to child care and protection.

2. RUNAWAY CHILDREN

A **runaway** is a minor or a person under an arbitrary age, depending upon the local jurisdiction, who has left the home of the parent or legal guardian without permission, or has been thrown out by his or her parent and is considered by the local authorities to lack the capacity to live under his or her own accord (the latter is sometimes referred to as a "throwaway"). Runaways are equally male or female, with females the most likely to seek assistance. In India, the percentage of females leaving home is relatively less.

A child who is unknowingly brought out of his family is termed as a missing child, on the other hand, when a child leaves home willingly and knowingly, we term them as 'Runaway Children'. The term 'Runaway' itself sends out a message that the child is at fault. He has committed a sin of leaving home. In our culture, home is the best place for a child's growth and development. Parents are equal to God and are always right; and children have no right to decide what they would like to do in future.



Source: Sathi India.org



Source: Railway Children.org

The scenario in the educated middle and elite class is just the opposite, here children decide and parents agree, children lead and parents follow. So the question of a rich child running away from home is very rare. When a child is well looked after, why should he or she even think of a life outside home. This leads to the question, “Who are these runaway children”? “Why are they risking their life” “What is that they need”?

India is home to more than 400 million children and according to NHRC approximately 12,000 children go missing every year. Of these only 36% return home and remaining are lost in oblivion. They are either turned into child labour or child prostitutes or they become runaways. On an average, annually 70,000 children land up on railway stations across India, unaware about their future destination. Indian Railways because of its far and wide reach prove to be a potential carrier for these runaway children.

3. REASONS FOR BEING RUNAWAYS

Current studies suggest that the primary cause of a child’s homelessness is family dysfunction in the form of parental neglect, physical or sexual abuse, family substance abuse, and family violence. Family conflict can also be caused by sudden or drastic changes in the family composition (i.e. a divorce, re-marriage, death of a parent), parental substance abuse or the child involved in substance abuse. Once the child becomes a runaway, the most common concern becomes the possibility of acceptance upon returning home. There are a lot of reasons behind children taking the adventurous decision of leaving home and being on their own.

3.1. Ineffective and Unattractive Education System:

Children, a bundle of innocence become an easy prey to the watchful predatory eyes of traffickers and brokers. A child trusts an outsider or a stranger only when he loses trust in his own people, which means if a child has a strong and affectionate support system, he / she may seldom be exposed to the threat of anti-social elements.

Support system doesn’t mean only parents, though they form the foundation of the system, yet sometimes the pillars of this system are far more important. Teachers form one of the most important pillars of this support system and are bestowed with the power to shape a child’s future. School is the place where a child spends maximum time, next to his / her home. So the treatment that the child is exposed to in his / her school can play an influencing role in redefining his / her behavior.

The schools that the children of poor, rural working class go to are not ideal for children’s growth and well being. Our teaching methodology and education system are a catalyst in killing the innovative mindset of our children. The ROTE learning techniques followed by our teachers create a feeling of fear in the minds of children who cannot cope up with the pressure. Report on Child Labour shows that children in the age group of 14 – 18 years take up employment in factories, shops, farms, hotels etc. When these children are asked the reason for not being in school instead, the common answer heard is “I don’t like studying”, or “I don’t want to study”. So when a child dislikes going to school and dislikes studying, what options are the care givers left with. They can force the child to go to school but how would they ensure that he / she attends the school. The child may end up lying, and bunk school to loiter around and pick up habits which are not right for his age.



When caught in this wrong act, children end up running away from their homes. Teachers, instead of counseling and paying extra attention to slow learners, use punishment as a tool to improve their performance in studies. The data collected from runaway children indicate education related issues as the primary reason for leaving home. Studies conducted by NGO's like Sathi reveals the fact that majority of the runaway children face problems at school. Lack of interest, fear of punishment, and poor performance are few reasons why children dislike the school and also their knowledge providers and drives many a children out of schools. Hence, poor and ineffective delivery of education is one of the push factors in children becoming runaways.

3.2 Socio-Economic Hurdles

Data collected from surveys show that runaway children come from the underprivileged, downtrodden, uneducated, and poor section of society. They are running away from home not because the world outside is better but because the home they live in isn't any better. Any child apart from the basic necessities of food, clothing and shelter also requires love and affection. There has to be an emotional connect between the parents and the child and when this connection becomes weak, the child starts thinking about breaking free. Poverty is one of the main reasons why children end up becoming a source of family income. Though education in our country is made free up to the age of 14 years, yet a lot of children drop out of school or there are cases where the child has never been to school. Children of construction workers fall into this category.

The metropolitan cities in India are major attractions for parents in tiny hamlets who are struggling to make their ends meet. They are willing to send their little ones to these big cities through agents and brokers in lieu of financial gains. There are also cases where the child himself realizes the financial burden of his family and decides to leave home in search of work. He then falls under the category of runaway child. The children who have left home out of choice are the ones who do not aim at returning back because the scenario at home could be worse than the one they are presently in. The children who had to leave home out of no choice and who were compelled to fend for their own owing to circumstances are the ones who keep in touch with their families.

3.3. Political and Societal Neglect

Runaway children if not attended to, very soon turn into street children. Out of an estimated 11 million street children living in India, majority of them live in and around railway stations as platforms become a source of their basic needs, food, and shelter. In Delhi, Mumbai and Kolkata, approximately 1 – 1.25 Lakh street children figure in the list of missing, runaway, abandoned or trafficked children. They come from all over India to find work, escape ill treatment at home, or they simply believe that a better life awaits them in the big city. The condition of these children is of serious concern as they are often ignored. To grant them recognition would imply the acknowledgement of child labour and the failure of the state. Children do not form part of any vote bank, hence they draw the neglect from all political and official sources. They are ignored and the state does not seem to shoulder the responsibility of their safety and welfare. They are extremely vulnerable to torture and are seldom able to voice their protest.

3.4. Psychological and Emotional Distress

Dysfunctional families, exploitation, domestic violence, sexual abuse, neglect, love affairs, alcoholism and drug abuse are some of the psychological reasons that compel children to leave home and live on the streets. Lack of proper guidance and discipline, parental indifference or abusive parenting can lead to a poor self image and personality problems, making children vulnerable to negative influences and can be driven towards running away from their homes. There are times when the situation at home is not conducive to child's growth and development.

Having alcoholic parents can also be one of the reasons why children end up leaving their homes. Exposure to media also creates a desire in children living in smaller towns and villages to leave their home and experience the glamorous life of cities. In adolescence, experimenting with drugs, gambling, drinking, inappropriate sexual behaviour, desire for quick money, and involvement in youth gangs often lead to negative influence on the child and he ends up running away from home and can fall prey to violence and crime.

4. CHILD PROTECTION MECHANISM

When a child leaves home voluntarily or under someone else's influence, he becomes extremely vulnerable to torture, exploitation and trafficking. The CHILDLINE report on missing children states that children are often kidnapped or trafficked for prostitution, organ donations, employment, and similar purposes. Children, the future of a country are often



neglected, their rights are violated, their voices are unheard, their pain unfelt. So where, who went wrong? Can we only blame the family, can we accuse our child protection mechanism, can we curse the agents and the pimps, or can we as citizens of this country take the blame for being insensitive and unconcerned towards these children.

4.1 Government Intervention

The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) drafted by the UN Commission on Human Rights was adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations on 30th November 1989. The umbrella principle of the CRC is “The Best Interest of the Child” and that the essential needs of children should be given the highest priority at all times in the allocation of resources. The Rights cover four main areas: survival, development, protection and participation which enable children to achieve their full potential. India ratified the Convention on 11th December 1992, thereby re-affirming its commitment to the cause of children in India.

In 2006 the Ministry of Women and Child Development (MWCD) proposed the adoption of the Integrated Child Protection Scheme (ICPS). In 2009 the scheme was approved by the central government which aims at providing children with protection and safe environment to develop and flourish. The purpose of the scheme is to provide for children in difficult circumstances, as well as to reduce the risks and vulnerabilities children have in various situations and actions that lead to abuse, neglect, exploitation, abandonment and separation of children.

The situation of children living in railway stations is of grave concern as they are often overlooked. The National Commission for Protection of Child Rights (NCPCR) held several consultations with representatives of railway administration, Railway Protection Force (RPF), Government Railway Police (GRP) and civil society organisations and also conducted field visits to understand the predicament of these children. NCPCR came up with a strategy to address the needs and rights of this vulnerable section of society. The strategy suggested by NCPCR requires a joint intervention by all the stakeholders who come in contact with these children found on railway stations and bus terminals. The strategy aims at identifying children in need of care and protection as soon as possible so as to protect them from falling prey to child traffickers.

The MWCD has constituted ‘Childline’ a 24 hour helpline for children in need of Care and Protection. CHILDLINE India Foundation (CIF) is the nodal agency of the Union Ministry of Women and Child Development acting as the parent organization for setting up, managing and monitoring the CHILDLINE 1098 service all over the country. ‘Childline’ stands for a friendly ‘didi’ or a sympathetic ‘bhaiya’ who is always there to attend to and help vulnerable children. The ‘Childline’ has received 31 million calls as of March 2014 and has helped more than 4 million children in 291 cities across India. Whenever any child requires help or if a concerned adult wants to help a child in distress, ‘Childline’ can be reached by dialling toll free number ‘1098’ from anywhere and anytime. ‘Childline’ was constituted to reach out to every child in need of care and protection by responding to emergencies.

4.2 Non-Governmental Interventions

Many NGO’s have come forward and have taken considerable interest in the issue of runaway, lost and trafficked children. A brief about the major NGO’s working towards rescue and rehabilitation of runaway and street children is as under.

(1). **SATHI:** Sathi (Society for assistance to children in difficult Situation) has worked with separated and runaway children on railway platforms since 1992. Sathi’s objective of working with these children is to reunite them with their families. Sathi believes that “A home is the best place for child’s growth” and following this, it has successfully united more than 25,000 runaway children with their families, 80% of them continue to live with their family. In the last 25 years, Sathi has organised nearly 80 home orientation camps for habitual runaway and repeated substance abuse children, and 90% of enrolled children were reunited with their families after the camps.

(2). **Salaam Baalak Trust:** Salaam Baalak Trust (SBT) grew out of Nukkad, a street-based intervention programme that began working with street children in and around New Delhi railway station in 1987. SBT services include long-term full-care residential facilities, with one being exclusively for girls, ongoing contact point programmes, and being the nodal agency for ‘Childline’ in Delhi for children in distress. SBT assists children to find suitable employment once they turn 18. The trust supports promising candidates by providing small loans in order to help establish them in small-scale businesses or jobs. In a 25 year journey, the organisation has already supported more than 50,000 children from all over the country and abroad.



(3). CHETNA: CHETNA (Childhood Enhancement through Training and Action) an NGO founded in 2002 is working towards the empowerment of street and working children using a participatory approach. The core objective of Chetna is to identify, rescue and rehabilitate street and working children living on the railway platforms, trains, or near railway stations through family reunification, education, recreation, health and other development opportunities. It has also worked in the direction of rehabilitating children with substance abuse. Regular counselling and therapy sessions (both with individuals and groups) are offered at select contact points in Delhi and are also treated at the rehabilitation centre of AIIMS (the All India Institute of Medical Sciences).

(4). Railway Children: Railway Children (RC) is an international charity and in India, is focused intensively around railway platforms as large numbers of children arrive at railway stations, some having travelled long distances. RC has reached out to nearly 126000 children in the last 5 years. They also work with police, vendors on the platforms, railway staff and older street children to teach them how to help vulnerable children arriving alone instead of seeing them as criminals or a nuisance. RC has created drop-in centres near the railway platforms where children and young people alone and at risk on the streets can access food, medical attention, emotional and psychological support, and education. RC, through its network of partners, works with government and observation homes in India to ensure children are given the opportunity to safely return to their families, or to live in a child-friendly environment.

(5). Butterflies: 'Butterflies' is a registered voluntary organisation working with street and working children in Delhi since 1989. Its core belief is that "every child has a right to a full-fledged childhood where she / he can have protection, respect, opportunities and participation in his/her growth and development." 'Butterflies' believes that long term institutionalisation may result in the emotional deprivation, separation anxiety, anonymity and lack of personal attention, physical abuse and trauma and may lead to low self-esteem. 'Butterflies' has also developed a concept of The Children's collective, or Bal Sabha, is a collective of street children which allows them to take part in decision making and planning.

5. GLOBAL PERSPECTIVE

Runaways are a worldwide problem; they are not restricted to India only. The reasons for running away could be different in other countries owing to the socio-cultural set up. Runaway turning into child labour is prevalent in many countries around the world. A majority of countries have adopted legislation to prohibit the employment and work of children, much of it stimulated and guided by standards adopted by the International Labour Organisation (ILO).

In spite of these efforts, child labour continues to exist on a massive scale, sometimes in appalling conditions, particularly in the developing world. The gravity of children running away from homes can be understood from the perspective of two of the most developed countries in the world.

5.1. United States of America – In North America, runaway children or youth are widely regarded as a chronic and serious social problem. It is estimated that each year there are between 1.3 and 1.5 million runaway and homeless youth in the United States. Running away from home is considered a crime in some jurisdictions, but it is usually a status offense punished with probation, or not punished at all. Giving aid or assistance to a runaway instead of turning them in to the police is a more serious crime called "harboring a runaway", and is typically a misdemeanor. In the United States there is a different law in every state. The Family and Youth Services Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services funds grant programs to help runaway and homeless youth. The organization also provides funding for the National Runaway Switchboard, a national hotline for runaway youth, youth who are thinking about running away or are in crisis, parents, and other concerned adults.

5.2. China - In Hong Kong, 51.1% of at-risk youth identified by social workers have a tendency of running away from home and fall into the age group of 11 to 18. Social control theory describes the runaway situation in China. Adolescent friendships can interfere with positive influences parents place in the adolescent's life.

According to the Chinese National Bureau of Statistics, approximately 150,000 runaway children and youth were documented in 2006. Unrealistic expectations of school have caused many adolescents to run away. Many runaways are low achievers who reported they were constantly criticized by their teachers and experienced their teacher's indifferent attitude towards them. Most of the runaways felt that the overbearing, authoritarian, overprotective and neglectful attitude of their parents was the reason why these children left their homes.



6.GAPS IN THE PRESENT CHILD PROTECTION MECHANISM

As per studies conducted on major railway stations across India by RC-UK, every 5 minutes there is a child arriving alone at a railway platform in India. Legislations are plenty, Government schemes are many, NGO's are doing their jobs, but the exodus of runaway children doesn't seem to reduce. So where are we going wrong?

6.1.The rural agricultural joint family set up has given way to urban nomadic labour class, as a result of which children are left uncared and unattended. Increase in domestic violence and alcoholism has led to children especially boys opting to leave their homes in search of independence and dignity. Hence, there is need to strengthen the family bond. Most of the NGO's are working towards providing temporary shelters and Care centers for runaway children but they seldom look at improving the family situation of these children. Is separating a child from his home and institutionalizing him the right solution to this problem?

6.2.Poor but railway-dense states like Bihar and U.P have stations in or near almost every village; density of railway networks and frequency of railway movement in and out of a village is a strong predictor for running away. So how do we identify these children? How should we stop the outflow of children from tiny villages to big metros?

6.3.The role of the police department is crucial. Since both missing and found children cases have to be reported to the police, they have access to a lot of information on missing children. When a child goes missing, no FIR is filed as there is no cognisable offence committed. Hence, only an entry is made into the general station diary at the concerned police office. Are we treating missing children as a priority? Are we using the databases of missing children across states in an effective way?

6.4.Education system seems to be one of the primary reasons for children becoming runaways. The percentage of school drop-outs is alarming in spite of Government's initiative of providing free and compulsory education up to the age of 14 years. So where is the missing link? Why are we not able to retain children in schools?

7. FUTURE PERSPECTIVE

The rate at which children are leaving their homes and getting into wrong hands is indeed a worrying phenomenon for a developing country like India. CSE is on the rise as a result of increasing vulnerability of children. Commercial Sexual Exploitation (CSE) of children refers to using a child for sexual activities for the material or monetary gains of an adult. Those who profit from this commercial exploitation could include parents, family members, community members, procurers/agents, pimps, brothel owners and others.

Child trafficking is akin to slavery, the worst form of exploitation of any human being. The solution lies in a multi-sectoral approach with a child rights perspective and law alone cannot eradicate it. It requires the coming together of government and non-governmental organisations, pressure groups and civil society organizations as well as international bodies to work against it.



Source: Childline India Foundation



Source: Make Runaways Safe.Org



Simultaneously developing family based alternatives with an aim to prevent children from leaving their homes, for instance through family counselling and the development of a vigilant group of community gatekeepers, would go a long way in making the process of repatriation of runaway children truly successful. It is the responsibility of adults to ensure that every child has a childhood. A website (<http://cwc.wcdde.in>) for Missing and Found children in Delhi is being run successfully by the Department of Women and Child Development, Delhi Government, which is an effective move in the direction of protecting the rights of runaway children.

8. CONCLUSION

Childhood is a crucial stage and requires a lot of nurturing and protection. As a society it is our duty to protect our children from falling prey to child labour and other ills. The problem of runaway children needs to be addressed, parents have to be educated, parenting surely isn't easy, teachers need to be sensitized, employers have to be warned not to employ child labour, police need to be more vigilant in spotting a single child and intervening at the right time.

The NGO's need to do more than mere rescuing and institutionalizing the child, the government child protection mechanism needs to be strengthened and last of all we as citizens of this country need to become more sensitive and stretch out as much as possible to help these runaway children. Whenever we spot a single child, it is good to talk to the child, not in a probing manner but in an empathetic manner. We can also take the help of Childline by calling 24 hour helpline 1098. We need to work together in nurturing our next generation and protecting our children from losing their innocence in the hands of perpetrators.

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