

## **BRAVING EVERY DAY**

*A true story based on the life Ratul Das, a street child who lives in New Delhi Railway Station. Written by Harsh Mander to share Ratul's story, and highlight the experiences, hardships, and trauma street children face.*

It is a freezing winter night on the streets of Delhi. Through the swirling smog, on pavements, side streets, road dividers, under bridges, in subways, shop fronts and lofts of staircases, in railway platforms and bus stations, one can dimly make out the huddled forms of sleeping children. If one cares to count, the numbers on any night would cross fifty thousand, among an estimated ten million homeless and children in cities and towns all across India, who live, work, play (and rarely study), eat, fall sick and recover, fight and love, despair and dream, all under the open sky.

One of them is Ratul Das, a boy of twelve, who sleeps with other homeless street children around the water tank in New Delhi station. For most of the five years since he left his home in Shantipur, a small town in Kamrup district of Assam, this has been his only home.

Like many children who flee their families to escape intolerable abuse, Ratul is unwilling to talk about precisely what drove him from his home. But one night at the age of seven, he walked away decisively from his truck driving father, mother and two younger brothers, never to return. It was an act of incredible courage for a child so young, echoed and repeated in the lives of tens of thousands of street children who decide at very young ages to escape violence and abuse in their homes – alcoholic fathers, physical and sexual violence – by fending for themselves, whatever it costs. Even most adults continue to live on in highly oppressive environments, because they are unable to muster the courage to fight and rebel, but children of the street have the spirit and strength even at very young ages to refuse to submit to oppression, even if it means moving out on their own, to struggle and survive without protection in a harsh and hostile adult world.

Other children leave home so that there is a little more food for those they leave behind. Some earn to send money to their families. A few are on the streets only because they have no one in the world, having lost their parents to sickness, hunger or disaster.

Ratul walked along the railway track near his home, and mounted the first train that left the station. He alighted in Alipur in Cooch Behar. He had 200 rupees which he had stolen when he ran away from home, and bought food from the stalls. He lingered at the platform itself, and watched children, some older, some younger than himself, earning money by selling water to passengers in plastic bottles which they filled at the public taps in the station. Their clothes were grimy, often oversized shorts or trousers

held up by little more than a string tied around their thin waists. They seemed carefree, with ready laughter, they walked with a cheeky swagger, and sparkling eyes shone through their grubby faces.

Ratul's money quickly ran out in a few days, so he decided to also try his hand at selling water in bottles left behind in railway carriages. Some of the boys in the station beat him up, but an older boy, their leader, restrained them and said that he was like one of them. They welcomed him into the gang, and taught him their trade. The bottles sold at 5 rupees each, and he easily earned around fifty rupees a day. At night they slept on the platform, and three or four boys shared a sheet to cover themselves. They gave their savings to the stall owners for safe keeping. There was no place to store their clothes, so they would wear the same clothes until they were so dirty that they would throw them away and get a fresh set.

A couple of months later, some of the boys in the gang decided to go to Delhi, for the adventure, and because the earnings were better. Ratul decided on impulse to go with them. They took a train first to Howrah, and then to Delhi. Ratul was excited by the ever-changing landscapes, colours, clothes, people, sights and smells. Once in Delhi, they were guided by one in their gang of four who was a little veteran of the city. He knew of a shelter in St Anthony's School. They gave a space in an open corridor of the school for about a hundred children to sleep, but there was no food or activities of any kind. Soon they shifted to the open space near the water tank at the New Delhi Station, where he has lived since.

Before long, Ratul learnt to earn his living by rag-picking, the most common occupation that a street child takes up, as it does not require any prior skill or investment, and this accessible form of self-employment also preserves their 'freedom' which they value so much, because it entails no dependence on others. These children start out in the early hours of the morning, each with a huge sack on their shoulders, often bigger than their own small frames, with separate pockets for bits of paper, cloth, plastic pieces, scraps of iron and other trash. Often barefoot and in tattered clothes, they trudge through rubbish dumps through all seasons - the cold winter, the hot and humid summer and in the heavy rains. At the end of the day, they sell their daily collection to the traders at exploitatively low prices. Ratul sells his daily foraging to wholesale waste traders near the Shiela Cinema Bridge, who in turn sell to recycling units which the materials on trucks that load through the night.

Some of Ratul's friends also take up other seasonal occupations like working with caterers in the wedding season, reserving places in the trains during vacations, selling cinema tickets at higher rates, cleaning cars or taxis, buses or lorries, even trains, as vendors for tea and food stalls, apprentices in roadside automobile repair garages, carrying loads and shoe polishing. Some boys and most older homeless girls are trafficked into some kind of casual sex work. Contrary to common prejudice, only

one in ten street children begs for a living, and most of these are very young. Even fewer beg as part of organized gangs. Studies establish also that less than 6 per cent street children are in conflict with the law, not more than children who live with their families.

Most of the food Ratul and his friends buy are at food stalls. On bad days, some eat at dargahs or temples, and even younger ones even forage for food in rubbish heaps. Not surprisingly, they frequently fall sick. Illness is a time of trial, because no government hospital will admit these urchins in sullied clothes. But they do not go hungry in these times, because others in their gang invariably buy them food and take care of them.

There is no place to play games like other children, but Ratul and his friends always find ways of having fun. Street entrepreneurs have set up makeshift video parlours, especially on lanes where they sell their rags and waste. These are nothing more than a space marked off by faded curtains with a television set. For five rupees, you can watch as many films as you like. The parlours are packed with the rejects of the city, street boys and lonely migrant workers, rickshaw pullers, head loaders, construction workers, watching raptly Hindi cinema interspersed with pornographic films.

Police and railway constables at the Delhi station tend to be much harsher than they were in Alipur. On days when Ratul is beaten particularly badly, the ready and reliable companionship of his street comrades, the video parlour, and inhaling 'solution' are his only solace. Ratul like most street children was introduced to the easy but deadly escape from pain and loneliness offered by soft drugs early in his days on the streets of Delhi. Thinners are readily available at any stationery shop for 25 rupees a bottle. Shopkeepers know that the children who buy these are not using them for painting, but they do not hesitate to sell to the street urchins who flock to their stores. Two bottles are enough for a day for one child. They soak a rag and inhale the fumes of solution, and it transports them to a world free from hurt and violence. But it also destroys their lungs, rendering them vulnerable to TB. Many children graduate to hard drugs like smack, but Ratul has steered himself away. He knows that for those who succumb to smack, it is virtually the end of the road.

They have learnt to nimbly escape the batons of the police, and succeed to hold fast on to their freedom most times. But on one occasion, Ratul found himself thrown into a police van. A grim judge in a juvenile court sentenced him to a remand home. They were dressed in khadi kurta pyjamas, slept in beds without mattresses, and went to classes where they were taught by stern instructors to read and write, as well as to operate computers and trades like welding. But Ratul found the bullying, beating and sexual abuse by older boys in the remand home barracks intolerable, and one night climbed the walls and escaped.

I asked Ratul who was the finest adult he knew. He did not hesitate. It was Obhra bhai, a pickpocket in the New Delhi Station. I must confess to have been startled by his choice. Ratul explained: he protects us from older bullies, buys medicines for us when we are sick, and discourages us when we inhale solution and other drugs. 'I was on this platform since I was younger than you', he tells us. 'I know this world. If you take to drugs, you will never escape to a better life. You will die here. I will not let this happen to you'.

There are winter nights when all of us drive past the huddled forms of children sleeping on the streets without a thought, let alone a word of love or dreams for the children's future. I realize then that Ratul was probably right when he chose the pick-pocket over all of us.