

Fragile Bodies, Fragile Dreams

By Harsh Mander

A sullied hand tugs insistently at your clothes. You turn to see a little arm outstretched - at the same time peremptory and tentative -, a small head of tousled matted hair, patchy and pallid skin coated with many days of unwashed dirt, bare sprightly feet, and a loose faded frock almost slipping off the little girl's slender shoulders. On those shoulders rests the burdens of survival of a large destitute family. And yet almost miraculously what shines through the grime is the most beautiful pair of sparkling black eyes.

Delhi has far fewer street girls than boys, but those girls who are forced to work on its mean streets negotiate daily the metropolis at its most predatory. Firoza is barely ten years old. From a family of migrants from a village near Kolkata, she is delicate and fragile behind her grubby exterior. She cannot hear or speak, nor can her younger sister. Their father is addicted to smack and lolls about all day in a small rented hut in Shastri Nagar. His two daughters beg with wordless insistence at Hanuman Mandir near Yamuna Pushta. To throngs of waiting beggars, some temple devotees give bananas and other fruit, others bring cooked kulchas and kachoris with halwa; many give away sweetmeats as *prasad*. On festival days or in memory of loved ones, some even distribute clothes. But the day's work for the sisters is not complete without collections of alms of cash, coins wheedled out of those who line up for worship at the shrine. Their mother sits on a side lane, and the deaf mute girls leave with her their collections, and run back for some more.

A group of volunteers are sitting outside the temple gates, talking with a group of girls who live by begging. Suddenly Firoza tenses, visibly wilts, and tries to hide behind one of young women volunteers. An older street girl Salma fiercely runs and grabs the shirt of a disabled old man who is walking past. He also

cannot speak, but he angrily gesticulates and threatens the girls. Salma protectively embraces the younger Firoza. Her unspeakably gloomy and sordid tale then unfolds. Firoza's mother has sold her daughter to this aged man, a veteran of the temple premises. He rapes her regularly, and in return he gives money to the family to enable it to survive from day to day. We find her mother and urge her to let us take the girl under our care. She declines sadly. 'I love my daughter. But if I let her go, how will we live?' While we plan to requisition the police to rescue the girl, I struggle to not judge the utterly defeated older woman, but cannot succeed.

Salma's family migrated years ago from Bihar. They had built a tiny shanty in a slum near the iron bridge across the Yamuna River, not far from the cremation grounds, and lived there for 18 years. But more than three years ago, these were razed by government dozers and they were forcibly shifted to a resettlement site in distant Bawana. The house sites there required a down payment of seven thousand rupees, which they could not afford to pay. So they live now under a blue plastic sheet on a pavement. Each day the family of six takes a two hour crowded bus ride each way, costing ten rupees each, to reach the Yamuna Pushta area. Their father used to ply a rickshaw in Chandni Chowk, but these were recently banned by the traffic police, so he mopes unemployed. His four children vigorously get to work: for the younger two, work is begging at the temple, and for the older ones, earnings are more through rag picking.

The majority of street boys courageously negotiate lives alone on the streets, rebelling against abuse and neglect in their homes by severing links with their families. By contrast, most street girls we encounter in Delhi continue to live on pavements or in slums *with* families, which send them out to earn to support their siblings and parents. This they do stoically and bravely, but with much less of the reckless joyfulness that street boys craft out of their hard-won freedom. In their early years, street girls mostly beg. As they grow older, the majority rag-

pick at waste dumps and markets, earning more than a hundred rupees daily. Bullied and molested, they learn to shout swear words, and grapple with their fists. Many chew tobacco or sniff adhesive solution bought from cycle shops for a high. And either through their parents or on their own, many learn early ways to furtively earn larger sums from older men who seek casual street sex with children.

Lakshmi is fourteen, and is often detained by the local police. They call her an incorrigible thief. For years her family sends her out to earn, beating her if she returns with less than a hundred and fifty rupees each evening. Usually this is not difficult, as she is an expert rag-picker. But she is not just her family's principal bread earner; she is also a child, and there are days when she and her street friends lose track of time in their games in the public park. She realises it is evening, and she will be thrashed if she returns home empty handed. So she breaks into homes and steals what she can clutch and sell in the black market. Other days she finds a man who wants sex: they are easy to spot. She takes money in advance, and they quickly conclude their liaison in a dark corner of a park. Sometimes she is able to nimbly run away with the man's money before he is able to grab her, but mostly she is not so lucky.

Many street girls have single mothers. Rabbo's husband left her ten years ago, and her sons grew into drunken vagabonds. It is her two daughters who help her light the kitchen fires through rag picking. Asha's father also left home, leaving behind three brothers and three sisters. Her mother started living with another man, who drinks away the money that the children bring home from rag-picking. For Rabina, the story was the same but it ended in gruesome tragedy five months earlier, when the man she lived with killed her son in rage when she refused to part with her life's savings of four thousand rupees. He is now in jail, and Rabina is surviving on the pavements of Bawana.

Chandni's blind mother has begged all her life but heroically taken her five daughters through elementary school. Proud that she has studied up to class 7, Chandni insists on speaking in broken English. But most street girls are not so fortunate. Every single girl we have met on the streets longs to study, but this is possible only if the government opens hundreds of residential schools for them. The Delhi government has at last agreed to open four such residential schools for street children, and many more mothers have agreed than we have space for, to sacrifice the earnings of their girls so that they live safe and happy childhoods illuminated by learning.

One girl tells us wistfully, 'Even if my father does not let me go, I want to wear a school uniform even for one day. Can I at least do that? Just for one day.'