

## Educating Calcutta's Street Children

Partha S. Banerjee

More than 30 NGOs are helping educate the city's waifs.

**C**ALCUTTA — Sikandar wants to be a doctor when he grows up. 'When I cure people of their illness, they will bless me,' says the undernourished 14-year-old boy, his eyes glistening as he speaks of his dream. 'And, of course, I won't charge fees for treating those of our community, our neighbours.'

Sikandar's neighbours, like his family, are rural migrants from various parts of eastern India who live in shanties near Howrah Station, the sprawling principal rail terminus of India's largest city, Calcutta. His father, like most other men in the slum, is an unlicensed vendor, selling fruits to earn around US\$30 a month. And like most other men in the slum, he never seriously thought of sending his son to school.

But the Women's Coordinating Council (WCC), a non-governmental organisation that runs a school for street children near the rail terminus, changed the fruit-seller's thinking. 'My father now only tells me to study, and not to worry about helping him with his work,' says Sikandar. He has attended the free school since the WCC teachers visited his parents two years ago and spoke about the importance of education.

Schools like the WCC's are bringing a quiet revolution to the streets of Calcutta, home to an estimated

100,000 children. Most of them cannot gain admission to government schools for lack of a permanent address. While some like Sikandar are now daring to dream of becoming doctors or bankers, most others, says WCC's school coordinator, Nandini Basak, are simply confident their will be a better life than their parents'. Most important, the schools are changing the way many shantytown residents view education: No longer does it seem a luxury their children cannot afford.

India's adult literacy rate was only 48.3 per cent as of 1990. The Principal Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific (PROAP) of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) placed India's total adult illiterates in 1990 at 280,109,000. Unenrolled primary schoolage children numbered 24,629,000 while annual primary school dropouts totalled 12,390,000.

The first schools for street children in Calcutta were set up less than a decade ago. Today, more than 30 non-governmental organisations, with assistance and funding from a variety of agencies, including UNICEF and the Indian government, participate in educating Calcutta's street kids. Even so, barely 5 per

cent of them are covered.

Apart from basic primary education — reading, writing and arithmetic — the students also get some grounding in elementary science and hygiene. Doctors visit most schools once a week for medical check-ups. Students also get refreshments, typically buttered bread and fruit, after class.

The WC school near Howrah station, which is partly funded by the local Rotary Club, is a one-room affair with two teachers and around 50 mostly pre-teen children. There are no desks so the students sit on the floor.

Few street-children schools, in fact, can boast proper classrooms. Most make do with the shade of a tree or tarpaulin shelters at street-corners.

'When it rains, we are often left with no option but to send the children home,' says Jharna Dutta, 25, who holds classes under a tree not far from Mother Teresa's Home for the Dying in Kalighat, south Calcutta. Dutta's school is run by the Institute of Psychological and Educational Research (IPER), one of the largest organisations working with street children in Calcutta.

In some schools for street children, vocational training like tailoring is

part of the curriculum. 'I hope to make dressmaking my profession,' says 15-year-old Sunita, who takes stitching lessons at a UNICEF-aided IPER class held under a road overpass in Kasba, east Calcutta.

Despite their commitment and innovative methods, most education specialists agree that non-governmental organisations can, at best, provide a stop-gap solution to the enormous problem of educating street children in Calcutta and other Indian cities. 'This is the government's responsibility,' says a Calcutta University professor. But the country's performance in education has hardly been impressive, as demonstrated by its 52 per cent literacy rate.

### Problem of Address

The government's regular network of schools could cover these children, argues Mallik. 'What is the need for a parallel system like ours when free government schools already exist? All that needs to be done is motivating the street children to attend class, allowing for flexible hours that would suit them and being not so particular about permanent address.'

— *Depthnews Special*