

Boys Town

The following article is featured in the current edition of 'Offbeat' (download a pdf of it [here](#)), the quarterly magazine of [Sattva](#), the social development consultancy. Titled "Empty benches, whither children?", the issue marks Children's Day by addressing the inadequacies of India's education system.

In this article, I interview three teenagers who were once street kids, abandoned to vagrancy and child labour, who are now attempting to regain control of their lives at a Bangalore-based rehabilitation centre called [REDS](#).

In a village about thirty kilometres outside of Bangalore, off Hosur Road, is a small Marianist gated community called Deepahalli. It houses a vocational training centre run by REDS -- the Ragpickers Education & Development Scheme -- where destitute and delinquent children, rescued from streets and slums, are sent for a life skills upgrade. The board outside the centre and, more elaborately, a printout stuck to the inside of the center director Brother Arul's door both quote the Gospel of Luke: 'But Jesus called the children to him and said, "Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these."' And 'Deepahalli', literally translating to 'Lamp Village' - - appropriate for a place that seems to draw lost boys to its light like winter bugs to a candle -- is trying its best to live up to this divine entreaty. It provides these boys, those who have the inclination for self-improvement but not for conventional education, with clean accommodation, a disciplined lifestyle and theoretical and practical instruction in different aspects of skilled labour such as carpentry, plumbing, welding, electrical work and so on.

At my request, Bro. Arul picked out three boys -- Ezhumalai, Peter and Raju, all in their late teens -- to speak to me about what led them to an organisation such as REDS, their experiences there, and what they hope to achieve with their new learning. All three are equally reticent as their interviews begin, but slowly open up with some cajoling, revealing difficult pasts, confused upbringings and, for what its worth, a hopeful, if uncertain, future.

Ezhumalai, Age 17

Ezhumalai resembles, and communicates with all the articulation of, a small cornered rabbit. He has large eyes, expressive features and a strangled voice that betrays a mind that understands more than it's readily willing to admit. He has been

studying electrical and plumbing work at REDS in the two years since he was sent there by a social worker.

"Before I came here, just after my studies, I did coolie work for a couple of weeks. And before that I was a cleaner on a tempo for a month." He abandoned his studies, he says, soon after class 9. "I was living with my aunt in Thiruvannamalai then. At the time, my parents didn't understand what was required of them. They were -- still are -- coolies in Bangalore, where they had settled some 20 or 30 years earlier. They don't have any formal education. So I studied under my aunt's care."

Then why did he leave? "My aunt started causing a lot of trouble. She suddenly wanted money for looking after me, and she became more persistent as time passed. My parents couldn't afford to pay her, so I ran away from Tamil Nadu and came to Bangalore." As a child, Ezhumalai reveals, he wanted to join the military, but that no longer interests him as a career option. Now, he's happy just being equipped to pursue a regular trade. "I hope to leave here this month. I'm old enough, and I've learnt a lot. There's a friend of my mother's who has promised me a job as a plumber and electrician." Would that make him happy? "I don't understand the question," he says.

Peter, Age 18

Peter is fair, wears the feathery beginnings of a moustache, and looks like he'd rather be drowning puppies than sit here talking to me. When I ask him to relax, not to worry, he looks nervously at the door and frowns. In this vein, we begin our interview. He arrived at Deepahalli, he says, two years ago having quit a job delivering LPG cylinders. His colleague, a young boy named Rajesh who got him the coolie work in the first place, urged him to quit and approach REDS. "I don't know what's happened to my friend now. We've lost touch," he says.

Five months prior to his gas agency job, Peter had just completed class 8. "I had to leave my boys' school in Austin Town because our family couldn't afford the fees they suddenly demanded." The National Policy of Education, mirroring the earlier Constitutional mandate, states that 'free and compulsory education of satisfactory quality [will be] provided to all children up to 14 years of age'. Presumably, our Peter had failed a year or two and hit age 14 before he could make it to class 10. If only the wording in the policy was the other way around. The devil, as always, lurks in the details. "I would have liked to become a mechanical engineer," Peter says. "But now, I'll just become a plumber or an electrician."

When I ask him about his parents, Peter's eyes well up and his resistance to my questioning finally breaks down. "That's one of the reasons why I'm here. I went home one day after work to find my house empty. No one was there. No furniture, nothing. No one around knew where my parents and brothers had disappeared to. I

hung around afterwards for a few days at my friend Rajesh's house. He told me about this hostel, so I came here. It's been close to two years since then." And his family? "I still don't know where they are. I need to look for them when I leave here."

Raju, Age 16

Raju has a cold. He is the most impish looking of the three boys, full of sly grins, darting eyes and sotto-voce anecdotes, but his style has been cramped today by an irritating sore throat. His story makes its way out in jagged bits and pieces that collect into a compelling, cinematic formula. Sitting before me, I soon realize, is the alpha slumdog. "My father brought me here because I used to roam around a lot." Where? "All over. Lalbagh, Bannerghatta, Mysore, Coorg..." He tells me that, at the core of it, all he wants to do in life is roam. "I got into the habit because of some of my old friends. They used to travel into the forest and hunt wild boar. I'd go with them and catch snakes. Oh, how I love roaming. The other day I jumped over the gate here at REDS and walked into town to buy a packet of biscuits. They thrashed me when I came back, but it was so worth it." Raju, who is now attempting to renounce his colourful past via the art of welding, has been sent to five other hostels by social workers before arriving at REDS. And he says, without pride or regret, that he's caused a lot of trouble at all of them. His parents, who are both gainfully employed, don't seem to bother very much about him, except for the odd visit to whatever hostel he's at.

"The first time I went to jail," continues Raju, with a studied nonchalance, "I was eleven years old. That was because I ran away from my hostel. I was the only kid there. I broke rocks for a few days till they let me go. I went to jail again three times. The next time it was because they caught me sniffing whitener with my old friends. They let me go quickly, because the cops liked me. The third time I walked into jail of my own accord, because I was bored and had nothing else to do. I stayed there for five months. The last time, I was caught hawking some stuff I stole. I used to climb up the sides of hotels and steal electronic things from the bedrooms of foreigners and tourists. Then I'd sell them in the black market. I was caught, unluckily." When he sees that I'm at a loss for words, he grins and diverts the subject with thoughts on his favourite movie. "I like *Pachai Manithan*," referring to the Tamil-dubbed version of *The Incredible Hulk*. "The hero is a small man who runs around a lot, and whenever they shoot at him he turns into a huge green monster. I love it!" As the interview concludes, Raju reaches in his pocket and pulls out a toffee. "This is for you," he says. "It's my birthday today!"