

## The Railway Children Walk the line

**F**OURTEEN YEARS AGO, Javed arrived in Delhi, alone and penniless. Now 21, the erstwhile street kid leads us into the underbelly of New Delhi Railway Station, on a walk organised daily by the Salaam Baalak Trust. Over two hours we are guided into a Dickensian world we never knew existed: a secret attic above a railway bookstall, a Contact Point where 'new kids' are brought every morning, and a teacher called 'Mummy'.

Starting from the station entrance, we walk to the 'Luxury

Platform'. Kids sneak here to feast on goodies like chicken and cutlets, prized leftovers from the Shatabdi trains. Javed points to a coveted sleeping space on the roof of Platform No. 5—"safe, since fat cops can't get through the grills". Looking down at the 'bathroom', where water was gushing out of a railway pipeline, Javed muses about the weekends: films at Sheila theatre, and getting high on Tipp-Ex. "Our life is like stagnant water and sometimes we want to feel free of pain," he explains. The railway children can earn around Rs 60 a day

working as sweepers and rag-pickers. Some of that goes towards protection money—collected by a juice-walla. "You can't survive in the station without connections," Javed says.

Next we saunter down an alley in Pottery Market, popular for its "cheap non-veg food." At the end of a neighbouring cul-de-sac, lined with crumbling havellis, was a shelter home for young children. Our interruption was welcomed in the busy classroom.

Finally, in another shelter at Paharganj, where Hrithik Roshan disbursed dreams from a wall, teenagers buzzed around in groups. Being trained to become "responsible members of society", they would leave the shelter on turning 18. This final destination of their street life also marked the end of our tour and we walked out—humbled. • {Mayank Austen Soofi}

**Charge** Walkers are welcome to donate what they like, but Rs 200 is good **Contact** Javed (9810975284); see [www.salaambaalaktrust.com](http://www.salaambaalaktrust.com)

SHASHWAT SAXENA

Javed leads visitors on the Salaam Baalak walk

