

Asha Kiran

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Waiting for the Rajdhani...

By *Preeti and Raj Chauhan*, Asha New York volunteers

Meet Kailash, Mahadev and Shankar. Kailash - a confident 10-year old who is already financially independent, Mahadev - a 7 year-old whiz kid who can solve any complicated addition/subtraction questions in a jiffy and Shankar, who has been the subject for an American photographer. Sound familiar - could Mahadev be your neighbors' bright son, or Kailash your nephew who has already found ways to finance his candy without asking his parents for an allowance, or Shankar - that cute little kid on TV!

That might well have been the case, but we met these extraordinary children leading extraordinary lives at Platform No. 4 of Bhubaneswar Railway Station. With ruffled hair and not so clean clothes, they looked no different than the children we see on the streets in any big city in India - those that many of us would try to avoid expecting them to beg or even worse pick pockets. Sure, like millions of other street children in India they don't have a home, no family that will take care of them, no promise of a meal and no toys to play with. What makes these children special is that they are not only fighting for daily survival, but are self-motivated to get an education. Each one of them has a story to tell-it is not all about their sorrows, their daily struggles-- it is about their hope and dream to become "normal" adults after schooling. Kailash opened up to us and we would like you all to know this amazing child's story.

On a bright and sunny Tuesday afternoon in April 2002 we first met Kailash at Bhubaneswar Railway Station. We were visiting the platform schools run by a NGO called Ruchika in the city.



"Hundred Years from now, it will not matter what my bank account was, the sort of house I lived in, or the kind of car I drove. But the world may be different because I was important in the life of a **CHILD**"



Kailash along with other children was sitting on the platform fully engrossed in what was being said by the instructor, unaware of the loud, crowded and filthy world around him. He seemed unaware maybe because the platform is his school, his playground, his office, and his bedroom. He lives, studies, and earns a living, all at the railway platform. Our presence didn't bother or disturb the children one bit as they have become used to commuters gathering around and watching them from close quarters. The sight is a peculiar one-well-dressed passengers in a circle around the teacher and the children as if the platform school were a movie and they had been granted front-row seats.

Since we were associated with Ruchika, the children got candid and gave us a peek into their lives. The way each child has ended up at the railway platform is different-some have run away from their families, some were lost and some have found livelihood at the platform. Kailash has run away from his family in Puri. He has been coming to the platform school for over a year and can read, write and do some basic math. Like some of the other children we met that day, Kailash earns a living by selling water in bottles (not bottled water). These children pick up used water bottles, fill them up with water and sell the bottles at about Rs. 5 per bottle to the public at train stations (the bottles are not sealed and the customer knows it). Some of them also clean train compartments and then ask passengers for money for their work. On a daily basis, these children work all over the eastern corridor from Andhra Pradesh to West Bengal. For example, they might take an up-train in the morning and then come back later in the evening or next day on a down-train. A few children proudly pointed out they had even been to big cities like Mumbai and New Delhi but weren't too impressed-too crowded (agree with them on that one!) and people weren't very nice. In fact, some had left Bhubaneswar for months and eventually made their way back to Bhubaneswar and back to the platform schools.

Kailash cherishes his independence and his ability to earn a livelihood. Hence, when we asked him and his friends

whether they'd want to go back to their families or to school full-time, they all emphatically said, "No". They want to earn money. Kailash over the years has become street smart- he said to us "in this environment you have to become shrewd quickly otherwise people take advantage of you". Quite a profound statement from a ten-year old - Kailash has had to mature well beyond his years and if you look closely, his stern face and rough hands give it away. He told us that he had spent some time in Surat, Gujarat learning how to cut gemstones. Although the money was good he preferred to return to his home state. He now visits his parents in Puri once a month and takes home the money he has been able to save. Kailash has diversified from just selling bottled water. He sells water aggressively in the mornings, earns about 80 rupees and then buys eggs, bread and kerosene for about 40 rupees. He makes toasts and omelets on a borrowed kerosene stove and sells them to the evening commuters. By selling food Kailash makes another 70 rupees and on a good day he saves approximately 80 rupees.

Kailash's good business acumen was evident when he told us about how he hoards the plastic bottles he collects and sells the bottles filled with cold water at the right time to maximize his earnings. There is a direct correlation between the bottles you have at your disposal and your daily income. That is why; the children eagerly wait for long distance express trains that pass through or terminate at Bhubaneswar. Even before trains enter the station, the children line up the platform preparing to board them. Like children anywhere they all seemed to get excited at the sight of a train entering the station. This is a sport for the children and winning here ensures a good meal for the day. The children especially get excited about the luxury train Rajdhani, as it is "the train" for empty water bottles. On the day of our visit, as the Rajdhani approached the platform the teacher didn't even try to stop the children from leaving the "school" and continued on with few young girls still sitting there. In a few seconds of its arrival, the children had already disappeared into the air-conditioned luxury train of India.

The next day at 10 in the evening we were waiting at the train station to board Purushottam Express going to New Delhi. And guess who we see there selling water-Kailash. Had we not met him earlier he would have passed by us like any other "poor" boy. However, we called out his name and somewhat surprised he recognized us-with a big smile he came towards us (He had got his right ear lobe pierced that morning and was wearing a thin gold earring!! It had cost him 25 rupees.). He was busy going in and out of different compartments with three bottles of water in his hands. He asked us to wait and said he would be back soon. After about 5 minutes he came back having sold all his bottles. He was happy, as he had earned about Rs. 80 that day. We asked him if he was saving any of his money. Kailash gives his money to one of the Ruchika teachers for safekeeping. We advised him to open an account just so he can earn some interest on his savings, which he plans to do with the help of the same teacher. When we asked him what he wanted to do in the future, he said, "Not sell bottles of water because as

adult I will be embarrassed to do that". Our train arrived and soon it was time for us to leave. He wanted to write to us or even try to visit us and we gave him our address. Our meeting that night was special for us and for him too, as we had "connected". We will remember his smile and charming face in the years to come.

Kailash and his friends will be back on Platform No. 4 at Bhubaneswar station, some to learn how to read and write, but all of them definitely to make a living. And as long as that is the case, they will all be eagerly waiting for the Rajdhani...

WE NEED YOUR SUPPORT....

Asha Seattle works with over thirty different communities in India on a recurring basis. We maintain very close contact with our project partners in India. **Our annual commitments are in the range of \$300,000.** We are looking for your continued support to help us meet our yearly goals. Like most non-profits we are also affected by the economic downturn. We would like you to come forward and join us in continuing to support good effective work which affects the lives in so many underprivileged communities.

We would like to encourage you to come forward and adopt the expenses of specific schools or projects. Our goal is to build a sustained financial support for every partner group that we work with. This way, you can be sure of how your donation is utilized and our partners in India benefit tremendously from uninterrupted support. Please do contact us via email or telephone if you would like to participate in our school adoption program. We need and strongly encourage your involvement.

Some sample projects requiring support are listed below -

? **SUPPORT** is a group dedicated to fighting AIDS and Drug Abuse among street children in Mumbai. It also work with girls who have been sexually abused. It began its work in 1985, creating awareness on drug abuse and AIDS with children of the higher strata of society. In 1989, SUPPORT moved its focus to the most vulnerable of our children, those who live on the streets, and a project was initiated at Victoria Terminus Station covering 300 street addicts. **Annual Requirements: \$15,000.**

? **Champa Mahila Society (CMS)** is an organization that is working among the financially underprivileged community in Basanti, a part of Sundarban. It runs 15 non-formal schools, along with an orphanage, and has been successful in creating a demand among the local people for children's education, various income generating schemes like kitchen garden, animal husbandry, micro-credit savings. They also have been successful in building small help groups among the village women, to strengthen their economic condition. **Annual Requirements—Non-Formal School:\$2200, Orphanage:\$4500, SAC:\$3400**

We can provide information on many more groups requiring support. If you are keen on addressing a specific geographical region of India we would be happy to work with you.

Dates: October 5th 2002 (7.30 PM)
Venue: Carlson Theater
 Bellevue Community College
 3000 Landerholm Circle SE
 Bellevue, WA - 98007 - 6484.
 Ph : 425-5641000

Tickets: \$50, \$20, \$10 (advance)
 \$50, \$22, \$12 (at the gate)

For More Information and tickets, please contact
 Madhuvanesh
 (madsri2@hotmail.com, PH: 425-2695405) or
 Vijay (vijays@expedia.com)

Asha -Seattle

Presents
Slaves

A play in English by Sujatha
 (Produced by VIP Productions, Seattle)



Hit Events

2002 Subeer D. Manhas Charitable Golf Tournament on September 8th

As many of you know, Subeer Manhas of Morgan Stanley has been organizing a golf tournament for the past two years. This has become a popular event and he was able to raise over \$3200 at the tournament. Please join us in a big THANK YOU to Subeer for organizing this and for raising funds for Asha!

AllGoRhythms Musical night on September 8th

A HUGE thanks from Asha to AllGoRhythms for putting together an awesome show on September 8th! Great song selection and great execution! You guys simply rocked!!! Congratulations to each one of you!! It wouldn't have been possible without your support and help.

Success Stories

National association for the Blind

This is an Asha Seattle project working with the National association for the Blind in Bangalore. Some of our volunteers have been involved with this group since 1999 in making available JAWs (software) so computer classes could be given to visually impaired students. Not only has this really worked well - they are now starting programming classes for them as well! 84 students have graduated till date and 70% of them are earning a living using the knowledge. A remarkable achievement beyond our expectations.

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asha-seattle-info@yahoogroups.com

Learning Network Initiatives

This is about a new initiative approved by the Seattle chapter of Asha called the Learning Network initiative. Our effort is to create a network of groups and individuals with a strong background in exploring learning, pedagogy and education quality related issues who specifically want to work with economically poor children. The hope is to create a platform for mutual learning and also long term impact the quality of education through question/reform related activities. Network members will be groups and individuals who are willing to commit their experience, time and knowledge towards improving the quality of education and educational resources. The first meeting is planned in Bangalore in January 2003 during which details on how the network can function will be worked out. Our hope is that more Asha chapters will join in long term in this. More details are at <http://www.ashanet.org/seattle/proj/LearningNetworkInitiatives.htm>