
Linnea's India Blog II: Down by the Railway

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Clay Pot Seller

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Finding our way to the Salaam Baalak Trust City Walk is the day's first challenge. We are armed with internet drawings of the curving neighbourhood streets. Its description says it is a simple 5 minute walk to the meeting place near the New Delhi railway ticket office - which predictably translates into 20 minutes for Linnea and Dave (how can two people who are so poor at direction-finding survive travelling so much??). No-one ever seems to know where anything is with certainty unless it exists along the 100 metres that is their own

street. When asking for directions, I recall that the way Indians gesture to indicate that a street runs *this* way or crosses *that* way is entirely different from the North American. So, even when people are perfectly clear about how to proceed, I keep asking for another certainty. This is often greeted with a headshake that means “Yes”, but looks like “No”, or a head-wag that means “Ok, sure”, but looks like “you could do it, but I gravely fear for you.” Who knows where north or south is? Nobody. And few in the Pahar Ganj area speak more than a few words of English.

Men crowd the street - hardly a woman to be seen all day long in this neighbourhood. They invite us to take their auto or to come into their dhaba for a meal. I have remembered that it is important to be clear with ourselves about what we are doing and how we are getting there. Our ‘no thank-you’s are respected when said with firmness, but when we stand squinting at one other in the middle of the sidewalk about whether it’s taxi, auto or walking, or how much we think we should spend, then we require intervention and assistance by everyone within 50 metres. We adopt a polite, fake confidence and soldier on.

Still, David says it first: It is quieter here, the demand less overwhelming, the touting less aggressive than we remember it in past. Has it changed or is it us?

Salaam Baalak Trust is a programme that started up to enable street kids to have an education and a home. Anchored near the Delhi Metro Railway, the place houses a number of modest rooms and offices, from which the staff leaves every morning to find children at the rail station, invite them back for food, programme, teaching, and possibly for re-locating. It is all by invitation. Friday nights are movie nights - a popular gathering.

Devraj, at 18, is an old pro at leading tourists through this part of town. He and his 16-year-old counterpart, Nisha, guide us through back streets, in an area populated by “rag-pickers” - an old word that has come to encompass those who go through dumpsters and bags of trash, to separate it into useable metals and waste products. “Watch out for land mines,” he says as we walk, and for a moment we believe him. “I mean cow pies,” he adds with a mischievous smile. He would like to be a movie actor.

Salaam Baalak has taught these two and others how to educate us about life on the street for children - and to share their own story. Both of them have families who, because of addiction, lack of money, lack of coping skills, stopped caring for them. Lured by stories of the prosperity of the big city, Devraj hopped

a train for Delhi. Nisha was brought by a woman who was tutoring her.

The Trust brought in 8000 children last year. Some just come during the day, for schooling and adult attention; some decide to go to a satellite home to live. Supported by foundations and by the government, the staff is optimistic about their work and helping children find a home to grow in.

Devraj brings us into a narrow passageway between buildings, stopping by a wall on which are affixed colourful painted tiles of various divinities. "Who can tell me why these are here?" he asks. Astute guesses are made, but the answer is entirely Indian, if I may say: Because all efforts to stop men from urinating on the building walls had been futile, they cemented these pictures in. The walls are now respected and pristine.

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Linnea Good

"Enlivening Faith through Story and Song"



Devraj and a divine wall



An old bike



Rag Pickers



Our group playing with kids



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