



Tamil Nadu is home to adoption rackets and child-labour gangs

Jaya Menon Posted online: Fri Feb 16 2007, 01:29 hrs

CHENNAI, FEBRUARY 15 : • *When E Kathirvel and Nagarani, pavement-dwellers in Pulianthope, woke up on an October morning in 1999, they found their 18 month-old son Sateesh missing. On May 3, 2005, police located the boy. But he had been legally adopted by the Bisessars, a Dutch couple, who had named him Anbu Rohit Bisessar and lived in Almere in the Netherlands. Sateesh spoke only Dutch. The police showed Nagarani a picture of the boy, pinned to a register of a Chennai-based adoption agency, Malaysian Social Service, which was being investigated. "We want him back," said Nagarani. The police have sought the Centre's help to bring back Nagarani's child, now 9.*

• *Lakshmi Parveen lost 18-month-old Fathima in December 1998. Fathima too was stolen while asleep on a pavement. Seven years later, Varadarajan, an alcoholic who knew Lakshmi's father, told her it was he who had stolen and sold the child for Rs 2,000. She took him to the police station and his confession uncovered a major adoption racket. Fathima was traced to Neyveli where she lives with her adopted parents. It was during this investigation that Nagarani's son was traced to the Dutch couple.*

If Tamil Nadu police prove that the more than 350 adoptions that Malaysian Social Service processed during 2000 were of children kidnapped from the slums, this could be one of the biggest cases of child trafficking to reach the courts. Booked in the case are P V Ravindranath (who died last year), his wife Vatsala, and son Dinesh Kumar, besides some brokers.

The police record of tracing missing children is, however, good. From 2003 to 2006, of the 8,681 children who went missing, 8,014 were "traced" and 667 were recorded as "untraced". But much of the credit for the work goes to NGOs who run child helplines in 24 of its 30 districts and work in perfect tandem with police stations and child welfare committees (CWCs), which have been set up in 18 districts. The helplines have proved a lifeline for runaways and children abused where they work.

It was in April 2004 that the police HQ in Chennai provided space to two NGOs, the Indian Council for Child Welfare (ICCW) and Don Bosco, in their control room to supervise the child lines. The lines rarely stop ringing, thanks to a well-entrenched network of volunteers and enlightened members of the public, who immediately call the child line when they spot a child who appears to have run away. Since 1999, the organisations have been operating independent helplines too.

The government also has a Missing Child Bureau, under the Department of Social Justice, but the criticism it faces is that it is short-staffed and impeded by bureaucratic lethargy. However, it maintains a website with details of some 300 missing children.

ICCW's joint secretary Girija Kumar Babu says: "The police in TN are more responsive and responsible than their counterparts in other states." She said it wasn't as if police always register cases on their own, but NGOs often play an active role and even help in locating children.

The police and NGOs are also focussing on railway and bus stations. Said T Alagappan, member of a Child Welfare Committee of Chennai, "Trains are the main refuge for runaways." He gives the example of a girl who ran away from her home in Nepal in 1998 and went to Chennai. Apparently, she wanted to see actor Sridevi.

Many such children are restored by the committees to their parents. Some, like one Pratul from Pune, has refused to go back and now stays and studies in Anbu Illam, a home run by Don Bosco.

Said Chennai Police Commissioner Letika Saran, "We cannot take even a single case lightly. There is a huge risk to children wandering around on their own."

But Tamil Nadu's bane has been the alarming number of its children being trafficked, particularly from Cuddalore, Villupuram, Madurai Theni, Dindigul and Ramanathapuram, for labour and prostitution.

"Children of poor families flee villages to cities like Chennai, Madurai, Coimbatore and Tiruchy looking for work. Many of them end up in hotels and tea shops as cheap labour or on the roads begging, perhaps even part of an organised begging racket," said a senior police officer.

In December last year, police bust a begging racket in Tiruchy on the tip-off from a 12-year-old boy who had been held for pick-pocketing. District Collector Ashish Vachani chatted up the boy at the remand home he was kept in and the boy described his horror tale of how he was taken away from his parents when he was seven and tortured with burning cigarettes into learning to pick pockets and steal.

The same night a police team raided two houses in Thiruverambur serving as hideouts for training kidnapped children in burglary and thievery. Four children, including one aged four months, from Nagaland, were freed. They are now in government homes.

"Not always are the police so responsive," pointed out Vimal Raj, project coordinator of Cuddalore's Child Line. In January 2006, nine-year-old Ezhilarasi was found with a raw burn wound on her left hand, which she said was caused when her employers poured hot water on her hand. Howling with pain at the Parangipettai bus stand, 30 kms from Cuddalore town the little girl was picked up by members of the public and handed over to the ICCW staff. She had run away from home a year ago, fearing scolding from her mother for beating up her younger brother. According to Vimal Raj, the girl was picked up while wandering around Chidambaram town by a man who sold her for Rs. 2,000 as a domestic worker to Basheer Ahmed, a businessman.

But Ezhilarasi's woes didn't end there. She wanted to go back home. "But, the Parangipettai station inspector refused to help. He disbelieved the girl's story and asked us how her father's name was Nataraj (a bullock cart puller living in Chidambaram town) when she herself was a Muslim girl," said Vimal Raj. The ICCW approached the then Cuddalore District SP, Panneerselvam, and managed to reach the girl to her parents. "Now, she is back home and going to school again."

In fact, the industrial belt in Cuddalore is notorious for touts who buy children from poor villagers and sell them to factory owners.

One such case was that of 14-year-old Lenin. He was purchased by a broker from his parents, Boopathy and Jyothilakshmi of Naduveeranpatti, 5 km from Cuddalore town, to work in a leather factor near Bangalore, with the promise that they would be given Rs 1,000 monthly for their son's services. After about five months last year, Lenin's parents wanted him to come home for Diwali. But the employer refused to send the boy. The monthly payments too stopped.

When the father went along with some relatives to meet the boy in the factory, he was told Lenin was not there. Even ICCW's attempts to trace the boy failed, with the factory owner, whose relatives live in Cuddalore, claiming they had no clue of the boy's whereabouts.

Said Tiruchy SP Ashok Kumar Das: "All the missing cases in the districts are kept alive. Whenever we get a case of a missing child, the information is immediately passed on to our seniors, who in turn inform the state police headquarters in Chennai and a state-wide search is activated." People in TN are also very aware of their rights, pointed out the officer, comparing the scenario to Orissa, his home state.

"Once we got a case of two minor boys (brothers) running away from their home in Lalgudi (about 20 kms from Tiruchy). Even as we were trying to follow up the case, the father of the boys had dashed off petitions to the district Collector, DIG, DGP and even the Chief Minister," said the SP. The two boys were finally traced to a factory in Bangalore, where they had been working. They were restored to their family. But information collated by the Crime Records Bureau for the year 2005 is quite disturbing.

Of the total 1,143 female children and 772 male children reported missing that year, 27 girls were kidnapped (probably for prostitution); a girl and a boy were trafficked; six girls and a boy kidnapped for begging on the streets; one boy child murdered (suspected to have been offered as sacrifice by a tantrik); 250 boys and 289 girls ran away from their homes after being scolded by their parents; 140 boys and 59 girls fled their homes after failing their examinations; five boys and seven girls ran away fearing arrest for petty acts of rebellion like throwing stones at their neighbour's houses etc; and 170 boys and 263 girls were feared to have been lost during temple festivals and big gatherings and for "other reasons."