

# YOUTH CULTURE IN *Asia*

WEEK TWO

As you read through Youth Culture in Asia, try to imagine what it would be like to live in these other lands. This Newspapers In Education series is in partnership with the University of Washington Jackson School of International Studies and runs through March 20.

Photo courtesy of Keith Snodgrass.



Photo: Boys at Jama Masjid [mosque] in Old Delhi, 2006

## Children's Work in India

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Every afternoon when the Kanchenjunga express train enters Malda Railway Station, Raju swiftly maneuvers through the crowd and boards the train without a ticket or a reservation. Raju doesn't need either. With a small broom in one hand and a soiled rag in the other, he confidently jumps on board for his day's work and wage. Every day, on the Kanchenjunga Express headed to Kolkata, Raju crouches down and sweeps the floor in one compartment after another, clearing peanut shells and cigarette butts, and wiping spilled drinks in return for a couple of rupees from resistant passengers. If Raju is lucky, he'll earn 25 rupees for the day; about 50 cents.

Not even a teenager yet, Raju works to support himself and his little brother. He is one of the 12.6 million children in India, under the age of 14, who are defined by the world as child laborers. Many activists in India claim the number of child laborers is much higher than the official government census; they estimate 40 to 60 million children in India work for a living.

Children like Raju work in many jobs and different places. In the cities, they sell goods on the street, serve food in roadside shops and restaurants, shine shoes, collect trash and ashes, make cigarettes in factories, clean and cook in homes and work in construction. In rural areas, children graze cattle, work in fields and plantations, transport goods, and make bricks, beedis (hand-rolled cigarettes), incense and jewelry. Whether in cities or villages, the list of jobs is endless and the wages are always meager. Children working in such conditions are vulnerable to emotional, physical and sexual abuse.

The Indian government has made efforts to eliminate child labor, enacting child labor laws including the 1986 Child Labor Prohibition and Regulation Act, under which children under 14 years old can't be employed in

hazardous occupations. The revision to this Act in October 2006 also bans children from working in restaurants and domestic settings.

Despite the laws, children throughout the country work as laborers like an illegal but visible workforce. The problem of child labor is complex and deeply rooted in social and economic inequity. Children work because they have to support their families or themselves. Child labor is an important source of many household incomes. In Raju's case, it is the only income. Children like Raju have no choice but to work to ensure their next meal.

Children who spend their childhood working are often unable to go to school. Raju quit school in the 4th grade when he left home in search of work to support himself and his brother. He could have gone to a government home for children; but he didn't want to live in an institution notorious for its poor conditions. Instead, Raju made the streets and railways his source of income as well as his source of learning. Raju's work as a laborer teaches him to be a practical accountant keeping track of cash and railway timetables. He struggles with reading and writing, but practices by reading every street sign he sees. In between working and learning, Raju finds moments of happiness in games and conversations with friends who live a similar life. He has also befriended community social workers who help him make informed choices in his daily life. Although Raju is making the best of his childhood, he wonders at times, what life could be like if circumstances were different.

Even though the Indian government addresses the issue of child labor by passing and implementing laws banning the work of children, activists in India question this solution. At the end of the day, law or no law, Raju needs to work in order to survive. His past of limited rights and lack of privileges has brought him to his current difficult situation. If Raju doesn't work, how will he live? What are his alternatives? For Raju, to work as a child laborer is a step towards empowering himself in his own way. At the same time, it is a step that further exposes him to the cycle of exploitation and disempowerment.

## COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

- 1) What kind of work do children do in India?
- 2) What do some of the working children do to educate themselves?
- 3) What, besides passing laws, can be done to help end child labor in India?

## MORE TO EXPLORE

Are there any American companies that you know of that use child labor in their overseas factories in Asia? In The Seattle Times, find advertisements for items that you think may have been produced in a country that employs child laborers and research the manufacturers' labor practices. Share your findings as a class.

### NEXT WEEK: KEEPING IN TOUCH IN JAVA

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