

The platform child

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IN an attempt to explore the hidden world of street children, C. Vanaja, an acclaimed journalist and filmmaker based in Hyderabad, tries unravelling their lives in her documentary, Platform No. 5.

Vanaja's 26-minute film is engaging, powerful and sensitively handled. The film centres around three children who earn their livelihood by collecting plastic bottles strewn around the Secunderabad railway station. How such children come up with their own concept of love, respect, fear, money, in the absence of a home or school, is aptly woven into the story.

"Since the past seven years I have been involved with street children. This bunch at the railway station immediately attracted me. They were more independent and liberated than the rest I interacted with," says Vanaja.

The film revolves around Wajid, the protagonist, and Sandeep and Vinay. All three are between 10 to 12 years old. They have their own reasons for being on the railway platform despite constant efforts by NGOs to put them in shelters and rescue homes.

"All three were sent to rescue homes several times but they ran away in a couple of days. After finishing the film I also put two of them in school but they left in two days. They are bubbly, independent children who don't really know what could happen to them if they keep living off the streets like this. They are enjoying their freedom right now. They don't want to follow the rules of rescue homes and schools," says Vanaja.

The film tries to understand why children run away from these formal institutions and are content with the meagre ₹40 or ₹50 they earn. The parents of two of the children are alive but they prefer to sleep on the street than go back home.

"They feel independent. They can play anytime, go watch a movie, eat anywhere and they don't have to ask for money. This shows that somewhere they want to be treated like adults. That is where the whole problem lies," explains Vanaja.

All three are runaway cases. The mischievous Wajid used to get beaten up by his parents, Vinay's father was forcing him to join a barber's shop and Sandeep's parents are no more. "We know that each one of us is motherless and we have to stick together," says Sandeep in the film.

It took Vanaja almost six months to make the boys comfortable and open up. They used to often come to her place and chat with her.

"For six months everyday I used to go spend time with them on Platform No. 5. They would come around 5 am to the station and they would be there till 10 pm. I used to meet them at 6 am

and stay with them till they wrapped up. I invited them to my house also. We used to have coffee together. That's how I built connections with them and got to know the personal details of their lives," says Vanaja.

But in their desire for a free, reckless life, the children are unaware of looming dangers. The experts interviewed say that after the age of 16 the children disappear from the area. They are either kidnapped for organ smuggling or are picked up by ganglords who turn them into gangsters, burglars, drug addicts or pimps.

"It is scary, when I got to know that these kids



Wajid, left, with Vinay and Sandeep



C. Vanaja

are not seen in the area once they grow up a little. I tried sending Wajid back to his parents. He ran away and came to me. I called his parents again to take him. He is still with his parents but I don't for how long he will stay with them. Also, I have sent Sandeep to stay at a friend's place. He is learning welding," says Vanaja.

Platform No. 5 has been selected for the Short Documentary Competition Section in the Fourth International Documentary and Short Film Festival to be held in Kerala from 31 July to 4 August. The film is supported by the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT), UNESCO, the Ford Foundation and Doordarshan.

PSBT has been supporting independent films and filmmakers since several years. Empowering the filmmaker and mainstreaming the movie are its two aims. "Our project themes are fairly broad in scope and encourage filmmakers to explore imaginative, powerful and creative films that move them the most. We commission all types of documentaries that include experimental films, theme-based films, animation and personal expressions, among others," says Rajiv Mehrotra, managing trustee of PSBT.

To reach the masses, PSBT does not target one kind of audience. PSBT Films are telecast on DD I and DD News every week and reach millions of people, representing 52 independent voices a year. They are also telecast on the Lok Sabha channel and are often part of the NDTV Documentary Series.