

A STORY OF RAGS TO RESPECTABILITY!

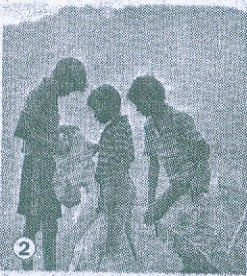
by Daniel Thimmayya

Chennai: In a previous life, 12-year-old Prashanth made more money in a day than most 30-year-olds in Chennai can dream of. Smiling as he throws mock punches at a social worker, at his new 'home' in Perambur, the boy does not miss what his life used to be. In a previous life, as recent as one year ago, Prashanth was a rag-picker, trawling the streets of Royapettah along with his similarly employed father. "I was really fast," he says shrewdly. "My father would drive the vandi (garbage cycle), while I would spot and pick 'good stuff', without him even having to stop!" he recalls with a twinge of fondness.

The sales used to yield between "₹400-500 and ₹800 on a good day". All that is a distant memory now.

He is one of the 20 child rag-pickers who have been picked up and are being rehabilitated by volunteers from the Madras Christian Council of Social Service. "It all began in 2008, when we began studying the community who trawled the dumping yard at Kodungaiyur and how they lived," explains Alexander, a social worker who heads the project. After having seen the pathetic state of children who lived, worked, played and even gambled between the mountains of refuse, they wanted to do something to help. Fortunately for them, in 2009, the Chennai Corporation chose them to partner the 'Night Shelter Project' at the Corporation Primary School, bang opposite the dumping yard. A whole floor was tiled and provided for them, lights were set over the playground and the scene was ripe to bring the children in. That proved to be the difficult part.

Despite living in the street or in slums, even the orphans were suspicious of coming initially. "These children have a love-hate relationship with that yard," opines Isabel, Executive Secretary of the NGO. "It was very difficult to keep them coming when they were used to freedom, no adults and vagrancy—most of them were practically adults in their minds, though they were barely past 10," she adds. Once they offered the children dinner, the numbers started increasing. "These kids were irregular. Exert the slightest control and they'd



CHANGING TIMES: Pics 1&2: Child rag-pickers in their element Pic 3&4: At school, in their new lives

“These children have a love-hate relationship with the dump yard. It was difficult to keep them away

go back to the yard. But we had 60 in total,” says Alexander proudly. Hygiene was first on the agenda for them. “One boy argued with us about why he needed to bathe after a day in the yard. He felt he looked quite handsome!” says Isabel with a smile. However, things began to go wrong when they attempted to send a few of them to school. They bolted at the first chance. “Filth was a part of their social milieu,” she reasons. All was not lost thankfully. Brothers Anand and Surya had been trawling the yard for as long as they can remember. However, after their father died, their mother

consented to let them be brought to the MCCSS home and be schooled. Put in a 'bridge-school', they are doing very well; so well that they dream of becoming policemen, “to round up all the boys in the yard!” Anand, has in fact, been invited to attend a Global Opportunities Conference in North Carolina, USA.

Just when they were looking to expand and bring more rag-pickers in and school them, disaster struck: the project's support extended by the Corporation stopped suddenly. “But we have managed to keep things going with local funds. But there are so many more and so much potential among these children,” concludes Isabel with hope. Like many diamonds in a very big patch of rough.

To support these rag-picking children, contact 919444027375 or mail mccss@mccss.org

...for more on Children's Day, turn to Page 3