

# Young Stars

## **Akbar, secretary – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

In India, we have very many working children – especially in the south, where sometimes parents borrow money from the company owners. When they can't pay it back, they just send their children as slaves. Once the children have been exposed to money, it is very difficult for them to get back to the situation of school and continue their education. As a member of the Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association, I have a dream that in ten years there should not be any more child labour abuse in India.



## **Bangalore, India**

## **Akbar, secretary – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

Bangalore is a very big city and it is a very beautiful city. But if you just observe the inner part of the city, the children are actually in very difficult circumstances. They are in poverty. They are starving for their daily lives.

## **Ramachandra, member – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

My father is an alcoholic who drinks everyday, and my mother is a housemaid. Day by day, my father increased his alcohol consumption, and he was not providing us the proper food and clothing. As a result I stopped going to school and I went to work. There was just no other way out.

## **Shivalingala, mother of three children**

Our children are sent by us to work because we need money to run our families. We don't have much money so we send the children to go and pick onions. If children don't work, they don't eat. Nobody's there to feed them. So the children have to work.

## **Akbar, secretary – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

I would like to ask the Canadian people to get to know the situation of working children better in India. I would also request them to speak on behalf of us at the United Nations, and in every way support the pro-child policies of India.

## **Narrator**

Meet Akbar, a rising star in India's child labour reform movement. At the age of 16, Akbar is one of India's millions of child workers, but he also is a leader in a new Bangalore-based movement called "Yelenakshatra" or the "young stars."

## **Narrator**

Supported by Canada's World Vision, the Young Star Associations work on the principle of children helping themselves. Indian youth - both boys and girls - come together to learn about their rights as children, and as workers and citizens. They learn how to protect those rights and help other child labourers in difficult situations.

## **Vijay Kumar, programme manager – World Vision India**

Unfortunately we have to accept the fact that there are more than forty thousand children on the streets. And more than fifty thousand children who are working in the city of Bangalore.



**Akbar, secretary – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

Most of the girls are working as housemaids. We see a lot of boys working in the garages as scooter mechanics.

**Sarah Austin, child advocate, World Vision Canada**

In many cases children are working to be able to support their families, and their families depend on that income for their own survival. But what World Vision would advocate though is that we protect children from exploitation so that they're not working in conditions that are harmful to their health or that impede their education.

**Henry Waller, programme manager – South Asia, World Vision Canada**

In the urban areas most of the children seem to be working in hazardous areas which involves working in factories, working in construction sites, which is risky not only to their physical well-being but also to their health. For example, working in the ironsmith cottage industry or even manufacturing. Some of these children tend to inhale all kinds of powders which come out of that and that tends to affect their health on a long-term basis, so their life-term is shortened.

**Akbar, secretary – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

There are several rights that we need to achieve in the future. I feel that we should have the right to work, but under conditions that are fair for children. We must be able to continue our education. We should have the rights to talk, we should have rights to oppose when the adult community makes mistakes. These are some of the basic rights that we want to achieve. But we are happy to discover that we already have some rights. We have something to build on.

**Akbar, secretary – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

In Bangalore City, some of the grown-ups have bad habits, like using drugs and other alcoholic products. Children become addicted. And they start stealing and fighting and lose all interest in studying.

**Henry Waller, programme manager – South Asia, World Vision Canada**

Most of the children seem to be drifting away from the society. The temptation of money seems to be driving them towards being away from home, away from parents, and to live off the street.

**Akbar, secretary – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

Once the children have been exposed to money, it is very difficult for them to get back to the situation of school and continue their education. They hear the media say if you study and do your education you won't get a suitable job. So the children decide to go on working so they can survive.

**Vijay Kumar, programme manager – World Vision India**

The employers would prefer to employ a child rather than adult because he can pay less for the same amount of work that a child does. So the employers prefer children. And as a result adults are unemployed and children are employed.

**Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association meeting, Ragiguda**

**Akbar, secretary – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

I would like to read the agenda that we are going to discuss for the day. The first one is, what are the successes we have achieved so far in Yelenakshatra?



**Elavarasi, member – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

We had an illegal alcohol shop in our area. Some men were spending their wages there, leaving nothing for their families.

**Elavarasi, member – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

So all of us, together as children and adults, we went to the government and fought to close the shop. The alcohol shop is closed, it is no more.

**Ramesh, member – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

Before coming to Yelenakshatra, I was working in a place where I was paid 450 rupees, or 14 Canadian dollars per month. By eight o'clock in the morning I would start, washing the cars and I used to come back home by 11 at night. I did not even know there was anything wrong with any of this. But after joining Yelenakshatra, I knew my rights.

**Akbar, secretary – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

We know our movement should go beyond the Bangalore level. So we have promoted it to the state level and the national level. And we also went and approached the Labour Commissioner to find out more about the government action plans to eradicate the child labour system, and the plans to help us win our rights as child workers. The government has already produced a good action plan to completely reform the child labour system in this state by 2007. But we want to make sure that they keep us involved in the policy-making. We want to be part of the decisions, to have our experiences and opinions become the basis for what they decide.

**Girija Korgi, State Ministry of Labour – India**

Akbar and your colleagues can always approach me, or our Labour Commissioner or any of our officers for any help or assistance you need from us.

**Akbar's Story**

**Narrator**

Today, Akbar is opening doors in high places as India's politicians begin to grapple with serious child labour issues. But it was not always so. Just a few years ago Akbar's circumstances were very grim.

**William Christopher, programme officer – World Vision India**

For the last eight years his father left him and his family, and he got married with another woman. And the family is totally abandoned.

**Akbar, secretary – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

At the age of 12 I was hunting for work. I used to go door to door and ask, "Auntie, is there a job for me to clean your car?" Some people used to scold me and send me away, and others used to give me a job.

**Smitha Anirudh, Akbar's employer**

We've known Akbar for the last 4 years now. We first met Akbar when he came to our gate, and when I went to ask him what he wanted he said he was looking for a job, which is unusual because most of the kids that come, they normally ask for alms, they're looking for something to eat or they're looking for money. Very few boys straightforwardly ask for a job.

**Narrator**

Membership in Yelenakshatra has made a huge difference in Akbar's approach to his own personal life. He returned to school, now dividing his time between school and work, attending class during the week while working on the weekends to help his family cope with the demands of everyday life.

**Akbar, secretary – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

On Sundays and the other holidays, I go in search of work. I work and make money in order to help my family as well as paying for my education. I started by making juices and sweets to sell to people passing by. Then I got jobs delivering milk and newspapers in the morning. Some of the houses I passed by would pay me for washing their cars. And now many of them are regular customers who know me really well.

**Narrator**

Akbar is proud of the difference he has made to his family's economics, and that he has been able to make school his priority.

**Akbar, secretary – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

From my childhood I had decided to become a doctor, so nowadays I'm really concentrating on my studies. I want to become a doctor because I can see there are so many children who are sick and they are not able to have treatment. This is very sad for me. When I become a doctor I want to give free services and free medicine on Sundays. I want to take care of all the children I possibly can. This is my ambition.

**Vinod, member – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

Akbar is a very good boy, and he is a helping person. He helped me personally and he's like that with all the other members of Yelenakshatra. He is very encouraging to us.

**Akbar, secretary – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

Belonging to the Yelenakshatra has taught me a lot about children's rights and how to protect them. Most impressive is the realisation that as individuals, we can achieve very little. We needed to come together as group.

**Narrator**

Akbar and his young followers have come a long way since the beginning of the Yelenakshatra movement in 1998. Key to their new found confidence has been their learning to live lives that maintain a balance between their needs for rest, for play, for work, and most of all, their need to continue their education.

**Akbar, secretary – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

There are problems with some of the public schools for poor kids. It is not a good atmosphere. Some teachers don't seem to care about education. So the children give up on school and go to work.

**Henry Waller, programme manager – South Asia, World Vision Canada**

At this point, most of these children are not in full-time school. So World Vision is trying to bring these children into a forum where they could meet regularly, socialise with each other, learn basic skills and also learn some of the things that would help them to become part of the mainstream in the school. Some of them, at least out of the five hundred, I believe, sixty to seventy children have been able to get back to school by working and going to school – which means a longer day for these children. Some of the children start their day very early. Right from say 4 or 6 in the morning, work for short time in safe occupations. For instance, working as housemaids or domestic servants, cleaning cars in rich neighbourhoods. And then finish all their cleaning up and run to school and spend the day and afternoon in the school and then come back and do some work, homework if possible, and then get back to rest.



### **Narrator**

Akbar's sense of responsibility seems to grow every day. As head of Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association, he travels throughout Bangalore and beyond to spread awareness of the issues of working children.

### **Vijay Kumar, programme manager – World Vision India**

Akbar is so talented that he can speak very fluently many of the Indian languages and he goes around to other places in the country and he gives them the basic rules and regulations that needs to be considered for starting Yelenakshatra. And also what are the problems they will face, the harassments or the non-payment of their wages, these Yelenakshatra associations will take up the matters with the concerned employers and they will go and deal with those employers and see that justice is done for the members of their Yelenakshatra.

### **Dave Toycen, president – World Vision Canada**

One of the most exciting things in our work at World Vision is to see children becoming more and more agents of change. That's going to continue to just expand all over the world. Whether it's World Vision or other agencies that are working. Because children are more and more proving that they are effective bringers of change. They really do it well.

### **William Christopher, programme officer – World Vision India**

Akbar is a great star of World Vision in Bangalore. His knowledge, his power, his wisdom, asking questions. He can face anybody. There should be, not a hundred Akbar's, there should be a thousand Akbar's, in Bangalore city, in Karnataka, in Tamil Nadu, entire India, not only India, it should be all over the world, wherever the child labour system is there.

### **Vijay Kumar, programme manager – World Vision India**

Children like Akbar, who are really empowered, who can really fight for their rights, who will no longer humble themselves and put down their head in shame and bear all torture. But rather they would stand up and boldly say 'that this is my right, and I demand it.'

### **Akbar, secretary – Yelenakshatra Child Labour Association**

I have learned about the varieties of work children are involved in, the struggles they are facing, the needs they have, the problems they have and how they live. I learned about how to speak and how to address others. As I got to know the staff of World Vision and the other people involved, I also learned what love means, and how to love others.