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Children Who Sell Themselves
By SONIA FALEIRO

PATNA, INDIA — While investigating child labor in India last month for a book, I found myself in the northern state of Bihar, an established source of children for trafficking networks.

Here, alongside the expected stories of abduction, I heard of another unexpected and heartbreaking path to servitude. Children as young as 10 had begun to directly offer themselves to traffickers because they could no longer go hungry.

I met 14-year-old Arun Kumar, who told me of his experience.

Kumar lives with his uncle and two younger siblings in Amni village, a day's journey by bus from Patna, the Bihar state capital.

Two days before we met, Kumar had been returned home by a local nonprofit organization, supported by Save the Children, from a rice mill in the state of Haryana, where he had been working 18-hour days, seven days a week. He had been paid 800 rupees (a bit less than \$20) a month.

On a rare day, he said, a machine would break down and the workers would be shooed out for a "holiday." "I'd walk to the next village about an hour away," he said, "to buy biscuits."

The nonprofit organization first entreated, then threatened the factory owner with a noisy protest outside his mill. "I paid for him," the owner argued, before finally releasing Kumar.

This was not the first time the organization sprang Kumar — he had been brought home from another rice mill last year. The police were not approached either time, since it's understood that they're paid off by traffickers.

When I asked Kumar who had sent him to the mill, he said: "No one. I went because I wanted to."

Kumar told me that although his uncle worked, there was not enough money for more than one meal a day.

Better-off families in Amni eat twice a day. The village has never had electricity, running water or land to cultivate. There are no opportunities for education or employment, and the upper-caste families in the neighboring village routinely coopt government provisions meant to alleviate the grim, hard lives of Amni's lower-caste Dalit families.

Poverty has traditionally fed child labor. India has an estimated 17 million child laborers, many of whom are visible in roadside restaurants, bakeries and car repair shops. Urban Indians assume that these children are either locals sent to work by their parents to earn a little extra cash, or runaways.

The truth is that a many of them are trafficked through massive networks. The poverty of the country, the children's needs, the public's blind eye and the profits of this illegal trade afford these networks immunity from India's child labor laws.

The networks pay middlemen to find victims not just in the urban sprawls of cities like Delhi or Haryana, where child laborers are in high demand for work in mills, factories and private homes, but in far-off towns and villages where poverty pushes people to the brink. Because recruiters are so numerous, children like Kumar can approach them on their own, sometimes without even their parents knowing.

Kumar knew life in Amni had no promise, but the fact that he simply did not have enough to eat led him to seek what he called a "labor contractor." He spoke to a few people who'd made it all the way to Haryana and back, a distance of over 22 hours by train. They were all children between the ages of 10 and 15; like him, they all believed they needed to work to survive.

Even though child labor laws prohibit the employment of children under 14, the contractor not only hired Kumar on the spot, but also gave him an advance of 1,000 rupees (\$20). That's a small fortune for a hungry village child, and almost a month's wages for an adult manual laborer.

Kumar soon learned that he was being paid much less than adults for the same work at the mill, and that some of the tasks he was assigned, such as operating heavy machinery, were dangerous. This was also a violation of the law. But he said he was grateful for the opportunity.

The fact that he was made to return home against his wishes not once but twice doesn't perturb Kumar. The activists of the nonprofit must follow their conscience, he believes. But then, so must he.

"When the vegetables run out," Kumar says. "We eat plain rotis" — an unleavened bread. "And when the rotis run out I will return to work."

Sonia Faleiro is the author of "Beautiful Thing: Inside the Secret World of Bombay's Dance Bars."