

# OUT OF THE RUBBLE

Mumbai's soaring tower blocks hide the plight of the children of the migrant labourers who construct them. **Kavitha Rao** reports on the crèches which provide a safe haven for the children who live on these building sites, and the role of the British Asian community in supporting them.

In booming Mumbai, luxury apartments are mushrooming, as newly prosperous Indians look for bigger and better homes. "Tallest building in India," says one billboard. "Luxury clubhouse!" promises another. But these opulent high rises—many selling for over Rs 20,000 (£286) per square foot—mask the horrific working conditions of those behind Mumbai's iconic skyline. Children scamper over construction rubble, babies wail in cradles suspended from girders, and entire families squat in makeshift shanties on building sites. Most construction workers are destitute farm labourers who migrate to Mumbai in search of work, and have no extended family to look after their children. They may work for as little as Rs 120 (£1.70) a day for the men, and less than half that for the women. With no childcare facilities, children have to fend for themselves.

"This city was built on their backs, but we have forgotten them," says Vrlshali Pispati, chief executive of Mumbai Mobile Crèches (MMC), Mumbai's only charity helping the children of construction workers. With 24 crèches across Mumbai, MMC has supported over a 100,000 children since it was set up in 1972.

In one of its crèches in Southern Mumbai's busy Agripada, children ranging from a few months old to 14 years play in three modest but cheerful rooms. The children attend the crèche

**"I never imagined I could stand on my own feet."**

Shaheen Sheikh, 20, has been teaching at MMC for two years. The daughter of construction workers, she herself went to a MMC crèche, before going on to a municipal school. But Shaheen had to stop her education in the seventh grade because of the death of her father. "After I dropped out of school, I thought my dreams of getting a job were over," says Shaheen. "But the MMC workers convinced me to enter the teacher training course." Until Shaheen joined the MMC programme, she rarely left her neighbourhood. Now she travels over an hour-and-a-half every day to get to work. In her Muslim community, most women stay close to home. "I had never travelled on my own before, so it was a real challenge for me to travel by train. But once I did, it felt great," she smiles. "MMC has helped me stand on my own feet. I never thought that would happen."



It is not uncommon for children to accompany their mothers on Mumbai's building sites.



Makeshift cots are suspended from scaffolding.

from 8.45am to 4.30pm. They are provided with two nutritious meals a day plus a snack, and given weekly medical checkups. The younger children learn through play, while the older children are given non-formal education aimed at helping them to enter school.

But these are no ordinary children. MMC's job is made supremely difficult by the highly migratory nature of the construction industry. "The average time that a child spends in the centre is three months," says Pispati. "Most children will drift with their parents from site to site, depending on where they get jobs, making it very difficult to track their progress. Many are migrants from other states, so do not speak Hindi, the main language of instruction. Others are seriously malnourished and have health problems."

MMC's ultimate goal is to get the children accepted in mainstream schools, but this isn't easy either, explains Pispati. "Schools will refuse to accept children who move at the wrong time of year, or those who do not speak Hindi or Marathi (the local language). Once a child drops out of the educational system, it is very difficult to get back in. Many children, especially girls, will be pulled out of school to care for their siblings. Construction sites are usually on the outskirts of the city, so parents are often reluctant to send their children to schools far away."

Hebarunissa Khan, the wife of a construction worker, whose family are migrants from the northern state of Bihar, says, "When we arrived here, the schools refused to take us because we came in the middle of the year." But MMC was able to intervene. "MMC spoke to the schools and got us places." Her three children go to a crèche in the morning and the local school in the afternoon.

MMC crèches are all located right in the middle of construction sites, close to the worker's homes. But establishing one requires the cooperation of builders. "The sites are private land, so we can't set up a crèche without the consent of the builder," Pispati points out.

Crèche children using teaching aids.



Hebarunissa Khan and her son – she is delighted with his progress.

**“When the boss says move, we move.”**

Hebarunissa Khan, 35, and her family of five took four days to travel from her small village in the northern state of Bihar to Mumbai. Her husband is a construction worker. "We have been here for two years, but now we will be moving again much further away because work on this site is over. When the boss says move, we move."

Khan worries about the future of her children, "I only got my children into school with the help of MMC, but I don't know if I will be able to get them into the next school once we move. I don't even know if there are any schools or crèches there." She is delighted with the change she has seen in her children since they have spent time at MMC "Earlier they were shy village children, now they have big dreams." "I love to draw," says her 10-year-old son who recently won an interschool prize for drawing. "When I first came here, I could not draw at all, but I learnt quickly. I want to be a computer engineer when I grow up."

“We try to convince builders that a crèche increases productivity and means less absenteeism by women workers. Some builders contribute to our funds, but most don’t. On an average, it costs us about Rs 500 (about £7.00) per child per month to run our crèches. About 40% of our budget is now contributed by builders, which is an improvement, but there are so many new sites now that it’s impossible to keep pace.”

Manoj Kothari, project manager of Raheja Vivarea, a luxury skyscraper which serves as the location for the Agripada crèche, says, “Builders need to change their attitudes and look after their employees better.” The Raheja group is one of India’s biggest builders and supports several MMC crèches. “The MMC crèches benefit everyone: the children, their parents, and us employers.”

India has legislation which makes it mandatory for any builder who runs a site with more than 50 women workers to build a crèche for children. But this is rarely enforced. “The government can’t be bothered to enforce the law,” says Pispati, “So it’s up to us to coax builders to support our crèches. We support 5,000 children a year, but there are at least 50,000 children out there who need our help.”

The colourful Agripada crèche contrasts visibly with the squalor of the workers’ homes outside – a cluster of ramshackle tin shanties exposed to the pelting monsoon rain. Inside these huts, as many as eight people may live in a tiny space only a few feet across, with no regular water, electricity or sanitation. “Migrant labourers are the most invisible community in

India,” says Pispati. “They do not have voting cards, ration cards or other identity proof, so they are completely overlooked.”

Beginning this year, MMC will be supported by the British Asian Trust, which was founded by a group of British Asian business leaders at the suggestion of the Prince of Wales. It serves as a ‘social fund’ to support charities within

## I tell the children: “If I can do it, you can do it too.”

Ramachandra Rao, 42, came to Mumbai when he was five, the son of impoverished migrant labourers from southern India. His parents helped build the Jolly Maker Towers, one of Mumbai’s first skyscrapers, and also the site of MMC’s first crèche. Today he is one of MMC’s longest serving school-teachers, having worked for them for 22 years. “My father did not want to send me to MMC,” says Rao. “He only studied up to the second grade himself. But MMC convinced him to send me to the local school. I managed to study as far as the 12th grade, though my father passed away when I was young. My whole family supported me in becoming a teacher.” Rao always wanted to be a teacher. “These children are my blessing. I want to give back to them, especially those who have migrated from distant villages. I tell them: if I can do it, you can do it too.”

the areas of education, enterprise and health in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the UK. “The Trust supports charities that transform the lives of very needy beneficiaries in an area of critical, unmet need,” says Rabia Nusrat, a manager at the Trust. “Mumbai Mobile Crèches is the only NGO in Mumbai that focuses on providing essential services to a vast, yet almost entirely forgotten population: the children of migrant workers.”

Pispati believes in helping the workers to help them. “Our proudest achievement is our teacher training programme,” she says. “Three years ago we started training our construction workers to become teachers. Now nearly 35% of our teachers are former construction workers. Children educated at our crèches have gone on to be lawyers, naval officers, and BPO [Business Process Outsourcing] employees.” The children at the crèche talk eagerly about their favourite subjects and their hopes for the future. “I want to be a police officer,” says Rahmatullah, a nine-year-old boy who has been coming to MMC for three years. “Then I can catch terrorists.” Asked what he likes best about the crèche, he laughs, “Having a bath!”

“With children who move around so much, progress is often hard to measure,” Pispati adds. “But when you see tiny babies playing safely, rather than in rubble, it’s so worth it. Every day counts for them.” **D**

**More information**  
[www.mumbaimobilecreches.org](http://www.mumbaimobilecreches.org)  
[www.britishasiantrust.org](http://www.britishasiantrust.org)



Children from the sites find themselves in a safe, colourful and stimulating environment.