

LOST SPRING

About the author

Anees Jung (1964) was born in Rourkela and spent her childhood and adolescence in Hyderabad. She received her education in Hyderabad and in the United States of America. Her parents were both writers. Anees Jung began her career as a writer in India. She has been an editor and columnist for major newspapers in India and abroad, and has authored several books. The following is an excerpt from her book titled *Lost Spring, Stories of Stolen Childhood*. Here she analyses the grinding poverty and traditions which condemn these children to a life of exploitation.

Notice these expressions in the text. Infer their meaning from the context.

looking for, perpetual state of poverty, slog their daylight hours, dark hutments

roof over his head, imposed the baggage on the child

'Sometimes I find a Rupee in the garbage' "Why do you do this?" I ask Saheb whom I encounter every morning scrounging for gold in the garbage dumps of my neighbourhood. Saheb left his home long ago. Set amidst the green fields of Dhaka, his home is not even a distant memory. There were many storms that swept away their fields and homes, his mother tells him. That's why they left, looking for gold in the big city where he now lives. "I have nothing else to do," he mutters, looking away. "Go to school," I say glibly, realising immediately how hollow the advice must sound. "There is no school in my neighbourhood. When they build one, I will go." "If I start a school, will you come?" I ask, half-joking. "Yes," he says, smiling broadly. A few days later I see him running up to me. "Is your school ready?" "It takes longer to build a school," I say, embarrassed at having made a promise that was not meant. But promises like mine abound in every corner of his bleak world. After months of knowing him, I ask him his name. "Saheb-e-Alam," he announces. He does not know what it means. If he knew its meaning — lord of the universe — he would have a hard time believing it. Unaware of what his name represents, he roams the streets with his friends, an army of barefoot boys who appear like the morning birds and disappear at noon. Over the months, I have come to recognise each of them. "Why aren't you wearing chappals?" I ask one. "My mother did not bring them down from the shelf," he answers simply. "Even if she did he will throw them off," adds another who is wearing shoes that do not match. When I comment on it, he shuffles his feet and says nothing. "I want shoes," says a third boy who has never owned a pair all his life. Travelling across the country I have seen children walking barefoot, in cities, on village roads. It is not lack of money but a tradition to stay barefoot, is one explanation. I wonder if this is only an excuse to explain away a perpetual state of poverty. I remember a story a man from Udipi once told me. As a young boy he would go to school past an old temple, where his father was a priest. He would stop briefly at the temple and pray for a pair of shoes. Thirty years later I visited his town and the temple, which was now drowned in an air of desolation. In the backyard, where lived the new priest, there were red and white plastic chairs. A young boy dressed in a grey uniform, wearing socks and shoes, arrived panting and threw his school bag on a folding bed. Looking at the boy, I remembered the prayer another boy had made to the goddess when he had finally got a pair of shoes, "Let me never lose them." The goddess had granted his prayer. Young boys like the son of the priest now wore shoes. But many others like the ragpickers in my neighbourhood remain shoeless. My acquaintance with the barefoot ragpickers leads me to Seemapuri, a place on the periphery of Delhi yet miles away from it, metaphorically. Those who live here are squatters who came from Bangladesh back in 1971. Saheb's family is among them. Seemapuri was then a wilderness. It

still is, but it is no longer empty. In structures of mud, with roofs of tin and tarpaulin, devoid of sewage, drainage or running water, live 10,000 ragpickers. They have lived here for more than thirty years without an identity, without permits but with ration cards that get their names on voters' lists and enable them to buy grain. Food is more important for survival than an identity. "If at the end of the day we can feed our families and go to bed without an aching stomach, we would rather live here than in the fields that gave us no grain," say a group of women in tattered saris when I ask them why they left their beautiful land of green fields and rivers. Wherever they find food, they pitch their tents that become transit homes. Children grow up in them, becoming partners in survival. And survival in Seemapuri means rag-picking. Through the years, it has acquired the proportions of a fine art. Garbage to them is gold. It is their daily bread, a roof over their heads, even if it is a leaking roof. But for a child it is even more. "I sometimes find a rupee, even a ten-rupee note," Saheb says, his eyes lighting up. When you can find a silver coin in a heap of garbage, you don't stop scrounging, for there is hope of finding more. It seems that for children, garbage has a meaning different from what it means to their parents. For the children it is wrapped in wonder, for the elders it is a means of survival. One winter morning I see Saheb standing by the fenced gate of the neighbourhood club, watching two young men dressed in white, playing tennis. "I like the game," he hums, content to watch it standing behind the fence. "I go inside when no one is around," he admits. "The gatekeeper lets me use the swing." Saheb too is wearing tennis shoes that look strange over his discoloured shirt and shorts. "Someone gave them to me," he says in the manner of an explanation. The fact that they are discarded shoes of some rich boy, who perhaps refused to wear them because of a hole in one of them, does not bother him. For one who has walked barefoot, even shoes with a hole is a dream come true. But the game he is watching so intently is out of his reach. This morning, Saheb is on his way to the milk booth. In his hand is a steel canister. "I now work in a tea stall down the road," he says, pointing in the distance. "I am paid 800 rupees and all my meals." Does he like the job? I ask. His face, I see, has lost the carefree look. The steel canister seems heavier than the plastic bag he would carry so lightly over his shoulder. The bag was his. The canister belongs to the man who owns the tea shop. Saheb is no longer his own master!

"I want to drive a car"

Mukesh insists on being his own master. "I will be a motor mechanic," he announces. "Do you know anything about cars?" I ask. "I will learn to drive a car," he answers, looking straight into my eyes. His dream looms like a mirage amidst the dust of streets that fill his town Firozabad, famous for its bangles. Every other family in Firozabad is engaged in making bangles. It is the centre of India's glass-blowing industry where families have spent generations working around furnaces, welding glass, making bangles for all the women in the land it seems. Mukesh's family is among them. None of them know that it is illegal for children like him to work in the glass furnaces with high temperatures, in dingy cells without air and light; that the law, if enforced, could get him and all those 20,000 children out of the hot furnaces where they slog their daylight hours, often losing the brightness of their eyes. Mukesh's eyes beam as he volunteers to take me home, which he proudly says is being rebuilt. We walk down stinking lanes choked with garbage, past homes that remain hovels with crumbling walls, wobbly doors, no windows, crowded with families of humans and animals coexisting in a primeval state. He stops at the door of one such house, bangs a wobbly iron door with his foot, and pushes it open. We enter a half-built shack. In one part of it, thatched with dead grass, is a firewood stove over which sits a large vessel of sizzling spinach leaves. On the ground, in large aluminium platters, are more chopped vegetables. A frail young woman is cooking the evening meal for the whole family. Through eyes filled with smoke she smiles. She is the wife of Mukesh's elder brother. Not much older

in years, she has begun to command respect as the bahu, the daughter-in-law of the house, already in charge of three men — her husband, Mukesh and their father. When the older man enters, she gently withdraws behind the broken wall and brings her veil closer to her face. As custom demands, daughters-in-law must veil their faces before male elders. In this case the elder is an impoverished bangle maker. Despite long years of hard labour, first as a tailor, then a bangle maker, he has failed to renovate a house, send his two sons to school. All he has managed to do is teach them what he knows — the art of making bangles. “It is his karam, his destiny,” says Mukesh’s grandmother, who has watched her own husband go blind with the dust from polishing the glass of bangles. “Can a god-given lineage ever be broken?” she implies. Born in the caste of bangle makers, they have seen nothing but bangles— in the house, in the yard, in every other house, every other yard, every street in Firozabad. Spirals of bangles —sunny gold, paddy green, royal blue, pink, purple, every colour born out of the seven colours of the rainbow — lie in mounds in unkempt yards, are piled on four-wheeled handcarts, pushed by young men along the narrow lanes of the shanty town. And in dark hutments, next to lines of flames of flickering oil lamps, sit boys and girls with their fathers and mothers, welding pieces of coloured glass into circles of bangles. Their eyes are more adjusted to the dark than to the light outside. That is why they often end up losing their eyesight before they become adults. Savita, a young girl in a drab pink dress, sits alongside an elderly woman, soldering pieces of glass. As her hands move mechanically like the tongs of a machine, I wonder if she knows the sanctity of the bangles she helps make. It symbolises an Indian woman’s suhaag, auspiciousness in marriage. It will dawn on her suddenly one day when her head is draped with a red veil, her hands dyed red with henna, and red bangles rolled onto her wrists. She will then become a bride. Like the old woman beside her who became one many years ago. She still has bangles on her wrist, but no light in her eyes. “Ek waqt ser bhar khana bhi nahin khaya,” she says, in a voice drained of joy. She has not enjoyed even one full meal in her entire lifetime —that’s what she has reaped! Her husband, an old man with a flowing beard, says, “I know nothing except bangles. All I have done is make a house for the family to live in.”

Hearing him, one wonders if he has achieved what many have failed in their lifetime. He has a roof over his head! The cry of not having money to do anything except carry on the business of making bangles, not even enough to eat, rings in every home. The young men echo the lament of their elders. Little has moved with time, it seems, in Firozabad. Years of mind-numbing toil have killed all initiative and the ability to dream. “Why not organise yourselves into a cooperative?” I ask a group of young men who have fallen into the vicious circle of middlemen who trapped their fathers and forefathers. “Even if we get organised, we are the ones who will be hauled up by the police, beaten and dragged to jail for doing something illegal,” they say. There is no leader among them, no one who could help them see things differently. Their fathers are as tired as they are. They talk endlessly in a spiral that moves from poverty to apathy to greed and to injustice.

Listening to them, I see two distinct worlds — one of the family, caught in a web of poverty, burdened by the stigma of caste in which they are born; the other a vicious circle of the sahkars, the middlemen, the policemen, the keepers of law, the bureaucrats and the politicians. Together they have imposed the baggage on the child that he cannot put down. Before he is aware, he accepts it as naturally as his father. To do anything else would mean to dare. And daring is not part of his growing up. When I sense a flash of it in Mukesh I am cheered. “I want to be a motor mechanic,” he repeats. He will go to a garage and learn.

But the garage is a long way from his home. “I will walk,” he insists. “Do you also dream of flying a plane?” He is suddenly silent. “No,” he says, staring at the ground. In his small murmur there is an embarrassment that has not yet turned into regret. He is content to dream of cars that he sees hurtling down the streets of his town. Few airplanes fly over Firozabad.

LISTEN TO THE STORY

Click on the link below to listen to the story being read. Note the pronunciation of the words and read along.

[Class 12 | Lost Spring | Anees Jung | Audiobook](#)

SUMMARY

Anees Jung wrote this story to highlight the lives of poor children and showed how poverty trapped them in a life they struggled to escape. It is divided mainly into two parts: **Saheb-e-Alam** and **Mukesh**.

Part 1: Saheb-e-Alam (Ragpicker)

Saheb-e-Alam was a young boy who lived in Seemapuri, a slum on the outskirts of Delhi. His family had migrated from Bangladesh in search of a better life but now survived by ragpicking. For Saheb, garbage was “gold” because it gave him money for daily survival. He dreamt of going to school but did not get the opportunity. When he finally got a job at a tea stall, he lost even the little freedom he had as a ragpicker. His story showed how **poverty stole childhood and freedom**.

Part 2: Mukesh (Bangle Maker)

Mukesh lived in Firozabad, famous for its glass bangle industry. His family had been making bangles for generations under tough and unhealthy conditions. Children worked in dark, hot rooms which often damaged their eyesight and lungs. Despite this, Mukesh dreamt of becoming a motor mechanic— something different from the family tradition. His story showed **exploitation, and the difficulty of breaking social barriers**.

Key Themes

Child labour and exploitation
Poverty and lack of opportunity
Loss of childhood (“lost spring”)
Dreams vs. harsh reality
Social injustice and inequality

Picture of rag pickers.



Homes of rag pickers.



Child labour in bangle making.



VOCABULARY

1. Adolescence: the stage of life between childhood and adulthood / teenage years
During **adolescence**, many students start thinking seriously about their future.

2. Analyses: detailed examinations of something to understand it better
She **analyses** the advantages of technology through her essay.

3. Grinding: extremely hard and tiring

He is stuck in a **grinding** routine at his job.

4. Poverty: the condition of lacking basic needs like food, shelter, and money

In many parts of India, people work hard but still face **poverty**.

5. Condemn: to force someone into a difficult or unfair situation

Lack of opportunities can **condemn** people to a life of very few choices.

6. Exploitation: unfair treatment of people for personal gain

Many children face **exploitation** through hard labour and no access to food or water.

7. Encounter: to have an unexpected or sudden meeting

She hopes she will **encounter** one of her friends at the park.

8. Scrounging: searching for or collecting whatever is available, often in a desperate way

He is **scrounging** for food in the cupboard because he is hungry.

9. Garbage dumps: places where trash/waste is collected and thrown away

All of our waste ends up in the **garbage dumps**.

10. Amidst: surrounded by or in the middle of something

She studied hard **amidst** all the chaos at home.

11. Distant: far away in space or relationship

Graduation still feels **distant** for many senior school students.

12. Mutters: speaks quietly and unclearly, often to oneself

He **mutters** in anger when things go wrong.

13. Glibly: speaking well but without any real understanding or feeling.

Some people talk **glibly** about poverty without understanding it.

14. Hollow: empty or lacking real meaning

His promises sounded **hollow**, as if he wouldn't keep them.

15. Abound: to exist in large numbers

Challenges **abound** in communities facing poverty.

16. Bleak: having little hope or happiness

The future looked **bleak** without proper support.

17. Roams: moves around without a fixed purpose

He **roams** outside with his friends after school.

18. Barefoot: without wearing shoes

He likes to walk **barefoot** on the grass.

19. Perpetual: continuing endlessly without change

She is annoyed by the **perpetual** barking of dogs outside.

20. Briefly: for a short duration

She **briefly** played cricket with her friends before going home.

21. Drowned: overwhelmed or covered completely

His voice was **drowned** in the noise of traffic.

22. Desolation: a feeling of emptiness and deep sadness

There was a sense of **desolation** in their house after their dog died.

23. Panting: breathing quickly due to exertion

She was **panting** heavily after finishing the race.

24. Granted: given or allowed

He was **granted** a scholarship from the school.

25. Acquaintance: someone you know but not closely

He waved at an **acquaintance** he encountered on the street.

26. Ragpickers: people who collect recyclable waste

Ragpickers play an important role in waste management.

27. Periphery: the outer edge of an area or system

They live on the **periphery** of the city.

28. Metaphorically: in a symbolic or non-literal way

He is **metaphorically** carrying the weight of his family.

29. Squatters: people illegally staying on land or in buildings

Many **squatters** build small homes on unused land.

30. Wilderness: a wild area without cultivation and human activity

The land looked like a **wilderness** before office buildings were built.

31. Identity: official recognition of who a person is

She requires her Aadhar card to prove her **identity**.

32. Aching: experiencing continuous pain

His body was **aching** after long hours of work.

33. Tattered: old, torn, and in poor condition

He wore a **tattered** shirt because he could not buy new clothes.

34. Pitch: to set up something like a tent

They **pitch** tents wherever they find space.

35. Transit homes: temporary housing provided when moving from one place to another

Families stay in **transit homes** while they look for permanent homes.

36. Survival: the ability to continue living

She needs to work hard and earn money for her family's **survival**.

37. Acquired: gained

She **acquired** skills through training.

38. Proportions: the size or extent of something

The issue has reached serious **proportions**.

39. Leaking: allowing liquid to escape unintentionally

The water bottle is **leaking** because he dropped it.

40. Wrapped: covered or enclosed

The baby was **wrapped** in a thin blanket.

41. Hums: make a low, continuous sound with a closed mouth

He **hums** his favourite song while he works.

42. Content: feeling satisfied

She felt **content** after helping her family.

43. Discarded: thrown away as useless

They collect **discarded** plastic bottles.

44. Canister: a container for storing liquids or gases

He carried a **canister** full of petrol.

45. Carefree: without worries or responsibilities

Almost everyone dreams of having a **carefree** life.

46. Furnaces: very hot ovens used in industries

Workers stand near burning **furnaces**.

47. Welding: joining metal parts or glass using heat

He learned **welding** at the factory.

48. Dingy: dark, dirty, and unpleasant

They do not like to live in a **dingy** room.

49. Beam: a ray of light or strong support

A **beam** of sunlight lit the room.

50. Volunteers: people who offer help without payment

Volunteers taught the children basic skills.

51. Rebuilt: built again, often after being damaged

The houses were **rebuilt** after the heavy rains.

52. Stinking: having a very bad smell

The drain was **stinking** due to waste.

53. Choked: blocked or filled so nothing can pass through

The roads were **choked** with traffic.

54. Hovels: very small, dirty, and poor houses

Many families live in tiny **hovels**.

55. Crumbling: breaking into small pieces

The old building was **crumbling**.

56. Wobbly: unsteady or shaky

The table was **wobbly** and hard to use.

57. Coexisting: living or existing together

Different communities are **coexisting** in the same area.

58. Primeval: very ancient or from the earliest times

The forest looked **primeval** and untouched.

59. Thatched: covered with dry grass or straw

They lived in a small **thatched** hut.

60. Frail: physically weak or delicate

The elderly man looked **frail**.

61. Withdraws: pulls back or becomes less involved

He **withdraws** from the group conversation when he feels shy.

62. Veil: a thin covering that hides something

She lifted **veil** of her dupatta so he could see her face.

63. Custom: a traditional way of behaving

It is a common **custom** to celebrate festivals together.

64. Impoverished: extremely poor

The family is always hungry because they are **impoverished**.

65. Renovate: to repair and improve a place

They plan to **renovate** the old house.

66. Lineage: family background or ancestry

He takes pride in his royal **lineage**.

67. Spirals: a twisting or circular pattern

She can see **spirals** of smoke coming out of the factory.

68. Mounds: piles or heaps of something

There were **mounds** of sand on the roadside.

69. Unkempt: untidy or not well cared for

He did not brush his hair, so he looked **unkempt**.

70. Shanty: a small, roughly built house

They live in a **shanty** near the railway line.

71. Hutments: small huts, often built close together

The area was filled with **hutments**.

72. Flickering: shining unsteadily

The candle was **flickering** in the dark because of the wind.

73. Alongside: next to or together with

She walked **alongside** her friend.

74. Soldering: joining metal using heat

He learned **soldering** in the workshop.

75. Mechanically: doing something without thinking

He completed the task **mechanically**.

76. Tongs: a tool used to hold hot objects

He used **tongs** to lift the hot chappati.

77. Symbolises: represents or stands for something

The flag **symbolises** unity.

78. Auspiciousness: a sign of good luck or success

The wedding date is chosen for its **auspiciousness**.

79. Dawn: to begin or become clear

A new understanding began to **dawn** on him after the conversation.

80. Drained: having something completely taken away

After the argument with his mother, he felt emotionally **drained**.

81. Reaped: received as a result of actions or circumstances

After years of hardship, she had only **reaped** suffering.

82. Achieved: successfully reached a goal

He **achieved** his aim through determination.

83. Rings: produces a clear, loud sound

The bell **rings** every hour.

84. Echo: a sound that repeats after bouncing back

Her voice created an **echo** in the hall.

85. Lament: to express sadness or regret

They **lament** the loss of their homes.

86. Mind-numbing: extremely boring or tiring

The repetitive work felt **mind-numbing**.

87. Initiative: the ability to take the first step

She showed **initiative** by starting a small project.

88. Vicious: harmful and difficult to escape

They are trapped in a **vicious** cycle of hardship.

89. Hauled: pulled or carried with effort

He **hauled** heavy bags across the street.

90. Endlessly: without stopping

The machines run **endlessly**.

91. Apathy: lack of interest or concern

Her **apathy** is a result of not caring.

92. Injustice: unfair treatment

Discrimination is a form of **injustice**.

93. Distinct: clearly different

Each region in India has a **distinct** culture.

94. Burdened: carrying a heavy load or responsibility

He felt **burdened** with responsibilities.

95. Stigma: a feeling of shame or disapproval attached to something

There is still **stigma** around certain jobs.

96. Bureaucrats: government officials who manage systems

Bureaucrats handle many public policies.

97. Imposed: forced onto someone

Strict rules were **imposed** on the area.

98. Baggage: emotional or mental burdens

He carries emotional **baggage** from his past.

99. Dare: to have the courage to do something

She did not **dare** to speak up.

100. Flash: a sudden burst of light

There was a bright **flash** of lightning.

101. Insists: demands strongly

He **insists** on finishing his work.

102. Murmur: a soft, low sound

A quiet **murmur** spread through the crowd.

103. Embarrassment: a feeling of shame or awkwardness

His face went bright red with **embarrassment** when he gave the wrong answer to his teacher.

104. Hurtling: moving very fast, often out of control

The vehicle came **hurtling** down the road.

THINK AS YOU READ

Q1. What is Saheb looking for in the garbage dumps? Where is he and where has he come from?

Q2. What explanations does the author offer for the children not wearing footwear?

Q3. Is Saheb happy working at the tea-stall? Explain.

THINK AS YOU READ

Q1. What makes the city of Firozabad famous?

Q2. Mention the hazards of working in the glass bangles industry?

Q3. How is Mukesh's attitude to his situation different from that of his family?

UNDERSTANDING THE TEXT

Q1. What could be some of the reasons for the migration of people from villages to cities?

Q2. Would you agree that promises made to the poor children are rarely kept? Why do you think this happens in the incidents narrated in the text?

Q3. What forces conspire to keep the workers in the bangle industry of Firozabad in poverty?

TALKING ABOUT THE TEXT

Q1. How, in your opinion, can Mukesh realise his dream?

Q2. Mention the hazards of working in the glass bangles industry.

Q3. Why should child labour be eliminated and how?

THINKING ABOUT LANGUAGE

Although this text speaks of factual events and situations of misery, it transforms these situations with an almost poetical prose into a literary experience. How does it do so? Here are some literary devices:

- Hyperbole is a way of speaking or writing that makes something sound better or more exciting than it really is. For example: Garbage to them is gold.

- A Metaphor, as you may know, compares two things or ideas that are not very similar. A metaphor describes a thing in terms of a single quality or feature of some other thing; we can say that a metaphor “transfers” a quality of one thing to another. For example: The road was a ribbon of light.

- Simile is a word or phrase that compares one thing with another using the words “like” or “as”. For example: As white as snow.

Carefully read the following phrases and sentences taken from the text. Can you identify the literary device in each example?

1.Saheb-e-Alam which means the lord of the universe is directly in contrast to what Saheb is in reality.

2.Drowned in an air of desolation.

3.Seemapuri, a place on the periphery of Delhi yet miles away from it, metaphorically.

4.For the children it is wrapped in wonder; for the elders it is a means of survival.

5.As her hands move mechanically like the tongs of a machine, I wonder if she knows the sanctity of the bangles she helps make.

6. She still has bangles on her wrists , but not light in her eyes.

7. Few airplanes fly over Firozabad.

8. Web of poverty.

9. Scrounging for gold.

10. And survival in Seemapuri means rag picking. Through the years, it has acquired the proportions of fine art.

THINGS TO DO

The beauty of the glass bangles of Firozabad contrasts with the misery of people who produce them. This paradox is also found in some other situations, for example, those who work in gold and diamond mines, or carpet weaving factories, and the products of their labour, the lives of construction workers and the buildings they build.

- Look around and find examples of such paradoxes.
- Write a paragraph of about 200 to 250 words on any one of them. You can start by making notes.

Here is an example of how one such paragraph may begin:

You never see the poor in this town. By day they toil, working cranes and earth movers, squirreling deep into the hot sand to lay the foundations of bridges and buildings . By night they are banished to harsh labour camps at the outskirts of the city

EXTRA QUESTIONS

Q1. What is the meaning of Saheb's full name? Does he know it? How does he conduct himself?

Q2. Explain: "For children, garbage has a meaning different from what it means to their parents. "

Q3. How has "a dream come true" for Saheb but what is "out of his reach?"

Q4. What contrast do you notice between the colours of the bangles and the atmosphere of the place where these bangles are made?

Q5. What are most of the bangle-makers ignorant of? What would happen if law were enforced strictly?

Q6. Where is Mukesh's house located? What is he proud of?

Q7. Why do the bangle-makers not organise themselves into a cooperative?

