

Van brings books and smiles to kids



Children browse books brought by the mobile library in Sonagachhi on Monday. Picture by Gautam Bose

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Sonagachhi: She studies in Class III and dreams of being a teacher. She loves reading, especially comics with funny illustrations. But getting her hands on a book isn't easy for this eight-year-old daughter of a sex worker.

A mini van full of books pulled up at BK Pal Park in the redlight district on Monday and around 25 children of sex workers were made members of the mobile lending library launched by NGO Apeejay Anand Children's Library.

The Class II girl grabbed a copy of *Asterix and the Chieftain's Shield*. "I have never read an English book. It will be fun trying to read this one. The pictures are so amazing," she said, her eyes lighting up as she leafed through the book.

Another 11-year-old was pleasantly surprised when her play session was interrupted. "We come here to play every evening. Only today it turned out to be different. We got to browse so many books and were even told a story. I don't know which book to choose," he said before picking up a book of stories about kings and queens.

A Class V girl chose a collection of stories in Hindi. "I can read a little English. I will try one later," she said.

The mini van donated by Coal India is stocked with around 500 books, most of them gifts from Apeejay Anand Children's Library.

From an abridged version of *Pride and Prejudice* to a biography of Jawaharlal Nehru in Hindi, the books covered a wide range of genres.

The van will visit the redlight areas of Sonagachhi and Kidderpore from 2pm to 5 pm on Mondays and Wednesdays respectively. On Fridays, it will reach out to children of leather workers in Topsisia.

"The children can keep a book for a week. Few of them get a chance to read. A storyteller will accompany the van to hold sessions and activities with the kids," said Ruchira Gupta, the founder of Apeejay Anand. "We hope to hook them with books."

Priti Paul, the director of Apeejay Surrendra Group, promised to add to the collection. "The books are for children from four to 13 years and many have lovely illustrations to interest first-time readers," she said.