A LONG WAY HOME

As a five-year-old in India, I got lost on a train. Twenty-five years later, in Australia, I found my way back. This is what happened in between.

SAROO BRIERLEY

A MEMOIR
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Discussion Questions

1. What propels Saroo Brierley as an adult to search for his birth home, especially as he writes, "I am not Indian…and I have family bonds [in Australia] that cannot be broken (p. 252)? If that is the case, why the drive to find his Indian roots?

2. What role does memory play in shaping our self-identity? What are the memories Saroo has of his early childhood, and how have those memories, many of them traumatized, shaped Saroo's sense of himself? How did Saroo continue to "work" his mind in order to keep his childhood memories alive for 25 years?

3. Discuss Saroo's ordeal on the streets of Kolkata. Also, what about the railway worker who took him in for a time. Why does Saroo run away from the man's seeming kindness?

4. Talk about the genuine kindness of other people Saroo encounters in Kolkata: the ISSA orphanage and Mrs. Saroj Sood, in particular.

5. Describe Sue and John Brierley as parents and the kind of family they provided for Saroo and his brother Mantosh. What were Sue's experiences in her early years? To what degree did her background as a refugee influence her desire to adopt two Indian children?

6. What are some of the darker aspects of this book surrounding poverty. Consider this passage from the book:

Today there are perhaps a hundred thousand homeless kids in Kolkata, and a good many of them die before they reach adulthood…. No one knows how many Indian children have been trafficked into the sex trade, or slavery, or even for organs, but all these trades are thriving, with too few officials and too many kids..

7. Talk about Kamala as a single mother and her struggles to keep her family fed. Is her experience typical of Indian village women? Also, consider her insistence on remaining in the same home in hopes that her son might someday return to her. What does that suggest about the kind of woman Kamala is and the strength of her optimism and her faith?

8. Discuss Saroo's use of technology to locate his family—Facebook and Google Earth, in particular. Would this story have had a different outcome absent the internet?

9. What was your experience reading A Long Way Home? Did you find it one-dimensional, too focused on Saroo's experiences? Or did you find that the story captured the multiple experiences of Saroo and his two families? Was the story engaging, suspenseful, heartrending? Was there one part of the story you found more interesting than the other: the story of Saroo as a lost child in Kolkata...or the story of his five-year-long search for his birth family.

With Memories And Online Maps, A Man Finds His 'Way Home'

June 22, 2014 4:33 PM ET
Heard on All Things Considered

More than 25 years ago, Saroo Brierley was one of many poor children in rural India. At 4 years old, he couldn't read: He didn't even know the name of his hometown. His mother was raising four children on her own, and they were constantly hungry. Brierley's older brothers would hop trains to nearby towns to search for scraps to eat.

One day, Brierley tagged along to the next city down the rail line. He took a nap in the station, and when he woke up, he couldn't see his brother. Finding himself alone, the 4-year-old decided his brother might be on the train he saw in front of him — so he hopped on.

"It was just an impulse decision," Brierley says, "that, in fact, changed my destiny for life."

That train took him across the country to Kolkata (then called Calcutta), where he spent five harrowing months. He was more than a thousand miles from his home, in a city where he did not speak the language.

He lived on the streets, then in a juvenile home and, finally, in an orphanage. There, he was adopted by an Australian family and flown to Tasmania.

As he recounts in his new book, A Long Way Home, Brierley couldn't help but wonder about his hometown back in India. He remembered landmarks, but since he didn't know his town's name, finding a small neighborhood in a vast country proved to be impossible.

Then he found Google Earth. He spent years searching for his hometown in the program's satellite images, zooming in and out of the map, exploring the web of railway lines criss-crossing India. Then, in 2011, he came across something familiar.

Brierley tells NPR's Arun Rath about his years-long search for his family and their emotional reunion.

SAROO BRIERLEY: My earliest memory would have been going to sleep during the night and looking at the stars in the sky with my mother on one side of me and my siblings on the other.

RATH: His mother was raising four children on her own. They were constantly hungry. Saroo's older brothers would hop trains to nearby towns to search for scraps. One day when he was just four years old, Saroo tagged along to the next city down the rail line. Ordered by his brother to wait at the station, he decided to take a nap.

BRIERLEY: But when I woke up, my brother wasn't there anywhere to be seen. And I was thinking, you know, he should be here by now. You said you'd only be a few minutes away. And all I saw was a train in front of me. You know, I thought perhaps he's on this train. It was just as an impulse decision, which in fact changed my destiny for life.
RATH: He ended up over a thousand miles from home in Calcutta. It might as well have been an alien planet. They spoke a different language. Saroo couldn't read, didn't even know the name of his hometown. He spent five harrowing months, first on the streets, then in a juvenile home and finally in an orphanage. There he was adopted by an Australian family and began a new life in Tasmania. As he recounts in his new book, "A Long Way Home," Saroo Brierley never stopped thinking about his hometown in India. But finding a small neighborhood in a vast country where he could only remember landmarks proved impossible until Google Earth came along. Saroo spent years zooming in and out of satellite photos examining the web of railway lines across India, until one night in 2011, he saw something that he thought looked familiar.

BRIERLEY: I thought to myself, well, you know, the first thing you've got to see before you come to your hometown is the river where you used to play with your brothers in the waterfall. And, you know, the architecture of this particular place where I used to play with my brothers in the water was exactly the same. And I quizzed myself. Well, that's a bit unusual, but there could be another place that looks exactly the same, too. You never know. And so I thought to myself - well, why don't we just scroll a little bit more? I scrolled up a bit left and a bit right and a bit straight here - no, you've got to go underneath here. And before you know it, I was looking from a bird's-eye view at the town's central business district right in the middle. And I thought, well, on the right-hand side you should see the three-platform train station. And there it was. And on the left-hand side you should see a big fountain and there it was. And everything just started to match. And I said well, from this point I pretty much know how to get back to my suburb. And so I just traced a road that I would follow back as a child. And before I knew it, I was sort of looking at the suburb where I had grown up. And just on the right of it was the house that I grew up in.

RATH: Was your heart just pounding when you're, you know, having these realizations, making these connections and recognizing those things?

BRIERLEY: Yeah, it was. I was - I was trying to think, you know, is this a dream? Am I in reality? Get a hold of yourself, Saroo. And, you know, I sort of did the zoom-in, zoom-out - sort of looked at different angles, 3D angles - to make sure that, you know, what I'm looking at is not something that sort of looks the same, but it is what it is. And it is my hometown and I just couldn't sleep for that whole night.

RATH: Let's skip several months ahead 'cause you go to India. You make the trip. You show up at your old house - just show up there. But no one's there. What happened?

BRIERLEY: I sort of almost fell to my knees and I thought the worst. I've come all the way to find something that I had found on Google Earth and now I'm standing there. Here's the house that I grew up in as a child and the door's shut and it's locked. And there's no one there. And I can't believe how small it is. I thought perhaps everyone's gone. My whole family's, you know, died. They've passed away. But lucky for me, there was - this lady came out of a doorway holding a baby. And she said can I help you in a very sort of English-Hindi tone. And I said to her my name is Saroo. And these are my family members' names. I tried to be animated, too, by pointing this is the house that I grew up in. She sort of, I think, understood what I was talking about and later on in the conversation, she said these people don't live here anymore. And, you know, that sort of got me down again. And I thought what do I do? And another person comes in
and I sort of spill my mantra to them as well. And then that sort of went on quite a few times with other people that kept wanting to know this person that's just a foreigner that's coming to a town that's never seen a foreigner. And people are starting to congregate and gather. And by the time the fourth person had come, they said just stay here for a sec. And within 10 minutes, they came back around. And they said now I'm going to take you to your mother. And I couldn't believe it because when I went around the corner, there was three ladies standing in front of an entrance to a house. And I looked at the second one. I thought oh, there's something about you. And it took me, you know, a few seconds, but I decrypted what she used to look like to what she is when I saw her. And you looked so much shorter than as I remembered when I was a four-and-a-half-year-old child. But she came forward and I walked forward. And my emotions and tears and the chemical in my brain was like a nuclear fusion. I just didn't know really what to say because I never thought this point in time of ever seeing my mother would ever come true. And here I am standing in front of her and I don't know what she was thinking. But I think she was quite gobsmacked as in how can this day be so true because, you know, later on she really wanted to see me again and waited in the same place for a long time for my return.

RATH: It sounds like this is something that obviously - it changed your life. I have to imagine that also reconnecting must have changed the lives of your Indian family.

BRIERLEY: Yes. Well, you know, from my brother's point of you it's the time that I went missing and later on he found out that my oldest brother had died. It was a big loss to him. He had two brothers and all of a sudden within a week apart, they're all gone. And I think, they're very grateful and very happy. Now there's two in the family - two sons and one daughter. And she couldn't be, I reckon, any happier than what she is. So it's a big thing for her and the whole family. And perhaps they don't really know how to take it. But it's only time before it all sinks in that, you know, this is true. I am here. It isn't a dream. This is reality.

RATH: That's Saroo Brierley. His new book is called "A Long Way Home." Thank you so much.

BRIERLEY: Thank you very much for having me.

RATH: Again, it's ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR West. I'm Arun Rath.
Saroop Brierly on set to see his life story take shape

EMMA HOPE, Mercury
January 30, 2015 6:00am

HOBART’S Saroo Brierley is watching his life play out on camera in front of his eyes.

Brierley is on set in India as shooting begins for a movie based on his life, starring Nicole Kidman and Dev Patel.

Filming will move to Hobart later in the year.

The film, Lion, is based on Brierley’s memoir, A Long Way Home, about his incredible journey from begging on the streets of India as a five-year-old to being adopted by a Tasmanian couple.

Brierley was separated from his family as a youngster after he and his older brothers went begging at a railway station.

Using childhood memories and Google Earth, he spent 25 years searching before finding his Indian family in 2011.

Against all odds, in a tiny town in one of the world’s most populous countries, he found the family he feared had died.

Speaking this week from Kolkata, Brierley said a cast and crew of more than 300 were bringing his story to life.

“Everything is going to schedule and plan,” he said.

“I’ve met the little me, which was really good, he’s full of life and full of beans.”

Brierley said it was his first time on a movie set.

“It can get repetitive, but it’s all new to me, so it’s something great I can say that I’ve seen.

“The screenplay is just amazing. When I read it, it brought a tear to my eye, even though it’s my story.

“It’s a real Oscar winner and a lot of awards will come this way. It’s got a great director and crew and I think a lot of people are going to be amazed when they see this movie.”

Lion is filming for another five weeks in Kolkata, then will break for a month and a half before
filming begins in Melbourne and Hobart.

*Slumdog Millionaire* star Patel will play grown-up Brierley, while Kidman will play his adoptive mother, Sue.

It has not yet been announced who will play Brierley’s dad, though there has been speculation Hugh Jackman is being considered.

Brierley said his mum, Sue, had had conversations with Kidman, “just girlie chit chat”, and he would schedule a meet-up with Patel when he returned from India.

Major film studio The Weinstein Company paid $12 million for worldwide movie rights to Brierley’s story, excluding Australasia.

It is being directed by Garth Davis, who co-directed the mini-series *Top of the Lake* with Jane Campion, which won a Golden Globe, with production by Oscar-winning *The King’s Speech* producers.

Some of India’s biggest Bollywood stars including Nawazuddin Siddiqui, Priyanka Bose, Tannishtha Chatterjee and Deepti Naval also join the cast.

Saroo Brierley: I lived in a multicultural atmosphere, but never faced racism in Australia

Chandna Arora | TNN | Updated: Feb 15, 2017, 01.43 PM IST

Even though an official Indian nomination hasn't gotten close to an Oscars win in many years, there's often the odd Indian story in the lineup of Oscar hopefuls. The movie getting Indian hopes up this time, a bit like 'Slumdog Millionaire', is 'Lion', starring the same actor, Dev Patel. Those hopes are even higher now that Dev's won the Best Supporting Actor award at the BAFTAs for this role. But 'Lion' is a real-life story, and the man whom Dev portrays, the Australian Saroo Brierley, has been a global celebrity long before Hollywood happened to him.

His by-now-famous story is that in 1986, Saroo was Sheru Munshi Khan, a five-year-old from a poor family in Khandwa, Madhya Pradesh, out for the night at a nearby railway station with his older brother. Their father had left their mother and started a family with his second wife. Left alone, he boarded a train that took him to Kolkata. Scared, lost and illiterate, he couldn't communicate enough to ask for help, and somehow survived the streets of that city for months, dodging dangers like abuse and drugs, fighting poverty and starvation. Eventually, he was taken in by an orphanage, and from there, he was adopted by Sue and John Brierley of Hobart, Tasmania. Saroo, which is how he mispronounced Sheru (hence the film's name, Lion), stuck, and the boy grew up into a regular Aussie guy - except with very vivid and detailed memories of his childhood in India, including of the way his home and locality looked.

It helped that his family, especially Sue, were extremely inclusive and open - they chose to adopt two Indian children despite having kids of her own - and when he was about 25, Saroo finally started looking for his Indian family using Google Earth. Five years of obsessively poring over much of the Indian landscape later, he finally chanced upon Burhanpur, the railway station from where he'd boarded the train.

Using his vivid memories, he followed the digital trail to Ganesh Talai in Khandwa, to the very room they lived in. Almost a year later, he landed up at that tumbledown dwelling, and just as serendipitously as the rest of his life, found his birth mother living just a few metres away. He was reunited with his siblings too, except for his eldest brother, who'd passed away the night Saroo was lost.
It's a staggering story and certainly movie material - it was little surprise that it was a media sensation from the day after he first met Fatima (earlier Kamla), his mother, in Khandwa. Innumerable TV appearances followed, one of which documented Sue's emotional first meeting with Fatima in India. There were book and movie offers, which led to the book A Long Way Home, and now Lion, directed by debutante Australian director Garth Davis. It stars Dev and Nicole Kidman, and won two awards at the BAFTAs on Sunday. It also has half a dozen nominations at the Academy Awards.

That's certainly a conversation starter with Saroo, who was at the Australian high commission in Delhi recently. But the typical 'Tassie' also discusses how 'where you're from' is dividing people today, and what he hopes his story stands for, in a chat with DT.

**For the past five years, you and your two families have been under a spotlight, starting from when you found your birth mother here in 2012. Has this global fame affected you or your families in any way?**

The media attention started from the day I met my (Indian) mother - just an hour later, and for the next four days. The local policeman told the media in my hometown and it went viral - there were people from Delhi coming down, from Mumbai, Khandwa, relatives... so many people flocking in to get a piece of this amazing, profound story. From there, it just went viral when I came to Australia, and before I knew it, there was a heap of media attention - TV, magazines, newspapers - and extreme interest globally.

I don't think the fame affected (anything) in a detrimental way. For me, it's like, I guess, an athlete that's been running every day to achieve, ultimately, the gold medal at the end. I don't think it's really affected us or has altered my mum or my dad in regards to becoming someone we're not. I'm still so grounded and so regimented too, I've developed myself for such a long time - my characteristics and who I am - that if I try to change myself, my origins will pull me back.
When you were in the middle of your search for your hometown, from 2008 to 2010, there was a lot of angry discourse on racism against Indians in Australia - were you aware of that at the time?

No, I was never aware of that (racism). Even though I heard it in the media, there are always two sides to a story. I never came across any such stuff. I don't know whether I was living underneath a rock or something, but I was living in a multicultural atmosphere, a lot of international students. I never saw anything, so I can't comment on it.

The people you encountered, most of all the Brierleys, have all had a very open, inclusive attitude towards other ethnicities and cultures. Do you find that attitude less common now, or more so, when you look at what's happening in the world?

Well, I can't comment on other countries and other people. But we always hope there are people more in touch in a humanitarian way, and who acknowledge that there are people less fortunate out there in the world.

I don't get asked this much -'would you ever wanna see your father again?' And the answer there is that I would like to see him again. I'm just questioning and answering myself, but 'aren't you really angry at him because he left your mother and siblings to pretty much die and go through poverty and adversity. If he was there, the breadwinner of the family, everyone would still be alive and you'd have a mum and dad and who knows, you'd be married by now with kids and all, and life would be different and we wouldn't be having this conversation'. But going back to 'would you wanna see him', I said yes I would, but I'm not gonna be the guy that would have bitterness.
What are the conversations you hope the film will start?

I think it will resonate in so many different ways, from social to science to a shift in the community in regards to adoption. For a couple that wants to have a child, there's the option of IVF, but then have a look at adoption as well. And in some countries, adoption isn't available, and that's quite sad because the mom who doesn't want to go through having a child herself or IVF, and prefers to adopt, and it's not available - I think politicians need to lower their guard in this area.

You have a movie made on you that's now in Hollywood and winning awards - where does someone go from here?

I'd say that you go back to normal everyday life and you embrace this new change. I think for me it'll be writing a prequel to A Long Way Home, and hopefully in the future the sequel. Why make life so dull when you can make it exciting and meet amazing people and go to countries and see things? You make life the way you want it to be. A lot of people don't realize that at the end of the day, the ultimate control of what you do and your destiny, it lies in the way you want to direct yourself. For me, it's embracing this and getting into writing unique, profound, humanitarian stories that make people feel that they're alive, more than flesh and blood, stories that are a testament to the human spirit. I think there should be more stories and movies like this out there, but they're hard to come by because people don't want to tell them, because it's so personal. You don't want the stigma, you don't want to be labelled as different because you've spoken out.

Saroo Brierley, the inspiration for the film Lion: 'My mother saw my face after 25 years'

When he was five, he fell asleep on a train and ended up 1,000 miles from home. His journey from Indian street-child to adopted Australian is now the subject of an Oscar-tipped film. Here he and his biological mother talk about their reunion

Saroo Brierley is fresh off the plane, sitting in a movie studio office overlooking Beverly Hills, once again adapting to an alien environment. The Academy Awards are on Sunday, and Los Angeles is in full Oscars mode, with limousines ferrying stars, executives and other film folk through the winter sunshine to receptions and cocktail parties.

The mood is febrile. Some nominees starve themselves in order to fit into tuxes and gowns. Others get last-minute Botox injections. Soothsayers stake reputations on whether Moonlight will spoil La La Land’s expected sweep, or whether Denzel Washington will pip Casey Affleck. The Hollywood Reporter has published an article headlined: “Nervous about the Oscars? 4 tips for dealing with panic attacks.” And of course there is Hollywood’s expected declaration of war against Donald Trump in the podium speeches.

Brierley, casual in a white T-shirt and black jeans, shrugs off the frenzy. “You can really submerge yourself in it and get lost – let it cloud you. But I just don’t really want to get into it. I’m sitting back, listening, you know, taking it in day by day.”

That is quite a feat, given his stake in this year’s awards. The story of his life, Lion, is up for six Oscars, including best picture. “The feelgood movie we all need,” blares the promotional blurb, and for once the hype may be justified.
It tells the story of how, in 1986, Saroo, an illiterate, impoverished five-year-old in rural central India, got separated from his brother at a railway station in Burhanpur, and accidentally ended up alone on a train that took him almost a thousand miles to Kolkata (then called Calcutta). Unable to speak Bengali, and unaware of the name of his home town, he had no way to return. He lived as a street urchin and survived on his wits and scraps of food. He was later taken in by an orphanage, and was eventually adopted by an Australian couple, Sue and John Brierley, who took him to start a new life in Tasmania.

A quarter-century later came the implausible twist. Saroo – by now a robust, happy, windsurfing, fully fledged Aussie – used Google Earth, a handful of visual memories and immense dedication to identify his home town: Khandwa, in central India. In February 2012 he travelled there and – spoiler alert – found his biological mother, Fatima.

“It was such a pivotal moment,” he recalls, seated in a low chair high above the LA traffic. “She saw my face, after 25 years of separation. I still have that sort of babyface within me. A mother like her would not have forgotten one of her children’s looks. She knew who I was, and I knew who she was. The memory of her face had been embedded in my mind for such a long time.”

Fatima did not speak English and he had forgotten his Hindi. It did not matter. “We were tactile, using our hands and faces to express what we felt. The tears spoke for themselves.”

Lion’s box office numbers speak, too: it is now roaring past a $100m take. Directed by Garth Davis, it stars Sunny Pawar and Dev Patel as young and older Saroo respectively, and Nicole Kidman and David Wenham as his adoptive parents. It has been largely well reviewed, and has earned cast and crew multiple nominations and awards, but it chugs into the Oscars as a longshot contender.
Will it be nerve-racking to sit in the Dolby Theatre? Brierley, affable and easygoing, bursts out laughing. “No! It definitely won’t be nerve-racking. The only nerve-racking thing is these cameras. I know it scares my dad. Because they’re all going flash-flash-flash, and people are saying: ‘Over here, over here, this way, this way.’”

Saroo can vividly recall his early childhood – the hunger and scavenging, the bond with his mother and siblings – but can also “disassociate” himself from the experience, he says. “I’ve moved on. I’ve moved to Australia, to amazing parents who gave me unconditional love, to being educated and submerged in an amazing country and society.”

The Weinstein Company, a shrewd awards strategist, has marketed the film as a feelgood antidote to dark, turbulent times – the true story of a life lost and found across continents and cultures. It helps that Brierley is an upbeat, engaging soul who is thankful for his good fortune. “At the end of the day, this is a story about a boy going through trials and tribulations and triumphing at the end,” he says.

On a night when much will be viewed through the prism of the Trump presidency, the story of a dark-skinned foreigner finding welcome in the west could be viewed as political, but Brierley hopes it won’t.

“I really don’t want to talk about politics – at all,” he says, the only time in the interview when he prickles. “I tend to keep politics out of this story, and I think that goes for everyone else that is producing the movie.”

He pauses, weighing his words. “I just hope it touches those politicians and bureaucrats to open their hearts up. Really that’s about it in a nutshell.” Pressed about the uproar over Trump’s
immigration policies, he demurs. “At the end of the day, it’s not really my fight, is it? Even
though it’s very concerning. I hear it, I’m very conscious of it, but what am I supposed to do,
really?”

Asked about Australia’s controversial detention of refugees, he shifts in his seat and smiles
apologetically. “I really don’t have much to say about that.” In any case, his political opinions
carry no influence, he says. “I don’t really have a worldview. I’m just trying to make the best of
what I’ve got at the moment, in having two families. That’s just enough for me really.”

The film, like the autobiographical book on which it is based, A Long Way Home, focuses on a
true, inspiring story, he says. “It’s about letting people open up their minds in so many different
aspects. And so if we just keep it straight on that, that’s great for me. I never intended to have
politics in this.”

It is PR protocol to laud your film’s performers, but Brierley seems genuinely enchanted with his
depiction on screen. “Sunny does an amazing job. The facial expressions that he projects are
just phenomenal. No experience in acting at all and he’s able to do that. I’ve seen the movie
about 25 times now, and I can understand why it’s so mesmerising when you’re looking at this
kid.”

Patel, who won a Bafta and could win an Oscar for playing the adult Brierley, nailed the role,
including the accent, Brierley says. Kidman – who adopted two children in real life – was ideal to
play his adoptive mother. “They’ve talked so much about it that it almost feels like they’re
sisters.”

Last week he was back in India – he visits regularly – and showed the film to his biological
mother for the first time. “She was just in tears right from the start. It’s so close to her, seeing
the way it all really happened.”

He considered bringing her and other Indian relatives to the Oscars, but decided the shock of
the real la-la land – where he is attending a blitz of parties and receptions – would be too much.
“They’re very conservative people, and that’s fine. They know of Bollywood, but not Hollywood.
For someone as conservative as my mother to fly all the way from India to be among western
culture …” He shook his head. “Her mentality is from 1946.”

Brierley feels heavily invested in Lion. The title is drawn from his original name, Sheru, which
means lion in Hindi. “The trajectory started in my mind. It became a documentary, then a book
and now a film. I guess I’ve been pushing it in as many ways as possible.”

Why Lion should win the best picture Oscar
Read more
The goal, he says, was to let other adoptees know they could trace their origins. “It was a book
for other people like myself, in the hope that they would be empowered and educated to know
that there is a light at the end of the tunnel.”

Just as the train set Brierley on a new life, so, in a way, has the telling of the story. Before the
book and the film, his job was helping his dad run a marine-gear retail business in Hobart,
Tasmania. Now he is a motivational speaker, a gig that seems as if it could endure. “I told my dad I was taking a gap year, but it's a big gap year,” he laughs.

It’s not glamorous and he’s not famous, he says. “I wouldn’t fly my flag so high. I do get recognised, but not as much as someone like Dev Patel or Nicole Kidman.”

The boy from Khandwa does share one trait with celebrities – an ambiguity about his age. Though it is not from vanity or the desire to prolong a film career. “I don’t have a birth certificate.” His best guess: 35.

‘My heart is bursting’: an interview with Fatima Munshi, Saroo’s mother

One day in 1987, when Fatima Munshi’s son Sheru was five years old, he set off from their home neighborhood of Ganesh Talai, Khandwa, in the state of Madhya Pradesh to find his elder brother, Guddu, 14, who was scavenging for food at a railway station about 65km away. Evening came, and neither boy returned. A few days later, the police brought Guddu’s body to her – he had fallen under a train. But they had not found Sheru, and so she set off to look for him herself.

“I went to Hyderabad, Bombay, Ajmer, Bhopal and Delhi to find him,” she says, speaking on the telephone from her tiny, one-room house in Ganesh Talai, her voice loud and high-pitched, as it often is with people unaccustomed to speaking on the telephone. “I had lost my eldest son. I was determined to find Sheru.”

Twenty-five years later, Sheru – now Saroo – arrived on her doorstep. It wasn’t as much of a surprise as it might have been, she says, because he had always been in her thoughts. “I had so many dreams in which my son would turn up. He’d be this big man, a success in life, a film hero or something and he would come back into my life,” she says.

The moment they met was intense and silent. Only two words were spoken: “Sheru” and “Maa” (Hindi for mother). “Since then, I have seen him about twice a year. When he is in India, he comes and spends the day with me. I cook for him and he leaves at night,” she says.
Later, Saroo’s adoptive mother, Sue Brierley, also travelled to India to visit Munshi. “The three of us hugged. That’s all. It felt very good for us to be together,” says Munshi.

The film, and her son’s fame, have altered her life to some extent. She used to rent her room; Brierley has spent 300,000 rupees (£3,600) to buy it for her. Her bank account used to have the grand balance of 900 rupees (£10). Brierley paid £600 into it a year ago. But otherwise her life remains the same – living alone, washing dishes in a few local homes for around 1,600 rupees (£20) a month. “Working is mazboori [compulsory] for me. I have to work to eat,” she says.

The tragedy of such a reunion is the language barrier. How can they express long-suppressed emotions and thoughts when Brierley has no Hindi and Munshi no English? “There is so much I want to say to him. My heart is bursting, but how do I do it? We just look at each other. He has another life and I accept that, I am happy for him,” she says.

The next day, when I call her again, Munshi refuses to speak. She tells a local reporter who is at her house that someone from the film team called a woman in the village to tell Munshi that she should refuse to speak to the media. She sounds angry. Before she shoos the reporter out, she says: “I will only speak when my son is here. My son is more important to me than money. The media are making a mockery of my life.” Interview by Amrit Dhillon