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Written by [Smita Nair](#) | New Delhi |

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FINDING POOJA: A poster asking for information about the missing girl. **UPDATE |** The girl, who was missing for the past nine years, has been reunited with her family.

Even miracles have deadlines, rues assistant sub-inspector Rajendra Dhondu Bhosale. His ended at midnight last Saturday, when the 58-year-old ceased to be the officer on duty, in-charge of the missing bureau at Dadabhai Naoroji Nagar police station, [Mumbai](#). But even in the hours before he retired, he was still hoping for a clue — a detail he might have accidentally skipped, anything, “anything at all” — that would have led him to a little girl named Pooja Gaud.

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In the police records, she is a seven-year-old, who went missing on January 22, 2013. She was last seen near her school at 8.15 am. She was wearing a blue pinafore.

Between 2008 and 2015, 166 girls went missing in the area under Dadabhai Naoroji police station. Bhosale and his team tracked 165 of them down. Pooja is the missing piece of this jigsaw. And a regret, he says, that gnaws at him every waking hour.



Bhosale

For two years, he carried her photograph with him at all times — a 6X4 size frame, one original, and two copies for anyone who had a good lead, as well as a bunch of passport-size images for times he had to travel out of Mumbai. He says he will carry the images with him, till she is found.

“I know her eyes. If she appears in front of me today, I will know those eyes,” he says. “I have her face printed in my memory. She stalks me, it’s not the other way.”

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In 2011, when he was assigned the charge of the missing bureau at his station, the cases had piled up — 99 men were missing without a trace. But it was the children that bothered the police. Boys and girls who went missing from the marketplace or slums, who disappeared on their way to school or while playing outside their house. Bhosale’s priority was to ensure that every child came home. A father of two sons, he tracked down 171 of the 174 boys who went missing in the area between 2011 and 2015. The other three were traced earlier this year.

His colleagues say he became obsessed with the case. Initially, they thought it was the pressure of cracking a case. “Then we saw it. He had got emotionally attached to the file. He was done,” says his superior, Inspector Ajay Kshirsagar. “It was not a number anymore, [it was as if] he believed he was looking for his daughter.”

Pooja was last seen in her school uniform by her brother Rohit, then a 10-year-old. She was sitting on a perch on the road near their school, the Cama Road Municipal School in Andheri, refusing to listen. Their grandfather had given a Rs 10 note to Rohit and she wanted her daily “recess share” of Rs 5. Every day at 7.30 am, the two siblings would hold hands and walk to school from their grandparents’ home at Gilbert Hill — Rohit bursting with tales, and Pooja giggling along. That day was different, Pooja was being stubborn. As they neared the school, Rohit tried to pacify her and promised her her share during recess. But she wouldn’t budge. Already late for school by 15 minutes, and with the school gates just 10 steps ahead, Rohit asked her sister to join him at school, and rushed inside. Pooja never made it to school.

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In these two years, Bhosale has played this scene several times in his head, with various permutations, and with several conclusions. “But my gut says she is alive,” he quickly adds, not allowing anyone to have any “such” doubts.

He has visited the spot at the same hour she went missing, several times, just to record the regulars around the scene. Once, he says, he sat down on the road to see the world from her level. He has spent hours pondering how a child thinks, asking anyone who cares to listen: “What would you have done if you were refused a Rs 5 note?”

The case eventually moved to a special team, but everyone in the police station knew he was the man who continues to look for Pooja. “We are afraid he will have his breakfast and walk into the police station some day, just to check on her case. He has forgotten himself in these two years,” says constable Manoj Desai, 38.

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In a green diary — he calls it his personal “missing detection granth” — he has neatly noted down all the cases in blue and black ink. Once a person is found, that entry is struck off in red. There is probably no smear of red on the page which has Pooja’s case history. “I cannot show you that page. I am superstitious. I haven’t shown it to anyone,” he says.

It took Bhosale a while to grow into the role of the missing bureau head. In 2011, the bureau at the local police station — with a jurisdiction over 2 square kilometres and three lakh people — had one

assistant sub-inspector and three constables for all the cases. The team was disbanded and replaced with Bhosale and one constable. “We don’t ask questions in the police force. We just do as we are told. But I did tell my superior not to ask me the status of the missing cases for three months. I was new to this and I needed time,” says the 1978 police batch officer.

Three months went past in a blink. “Usko bhi bandobast duty, mereko bhi bandobast duty. Nau din Ganpati, nau din Dussehra, har shukravar ko badi namaaz, nahi toh koi jayanti. (He was out on patrol duty, I was put on that too. Then there came nine days of Ganpati festival, nine days of Dussehra, every Friday the big namaaz, every other day some festival.) At night, there were emergency combing operations. The one person missing in the missing bureau was me,” he said.

Towards the end of the third month, he made a list of missing people, with all the details summarised on sheets of paper. With the help of beat marshalls, he started visiting the spots and tracking the progress. “Most had returned or were at a friend’s place, but the cases were getting cleared. Many were tracked through cellphone tower locations, others found through plain policing.” A son returned home after 14 months and the mother had forgotten to update the police, but Bhosale didn’t.

Fellow police personnel marvelled at the way he worked, with “just a Rs 1,500 [Nokia 1100](#) handset” and “he doesn’t even know about WhatsApp”. “If you tell him someone is missing, then the rest of us know that he will find that person. We just wait to see in how many days. He is aggressive and sincere and he also never repeats a mistake,” says police naik Ajay More.

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In 2008, the records showed 47 minor boys, 25 girls and 45 women had gone missing in Bhosale’s area. “I just started walking. Going to people, collecting inputs, talking to shopkeepers, cobblers, paan-shop owners, housewives, midwives, social workers, mobile shop vendors and — my favourite —bakery attendants. The bakery guy sees people from all strata of society. From a poor man to a rich guy and people from every religion, everyone in Mumbai loves a pao,” he says. His best sources, he says, are cobblers across Andheri.

In one case, he was about to give up on a missing boy when he finally asked a saloon owner. “One look at the photo and he said, ‘Apni item ke ghar pe hoga. Phone main uska photo tha’. (‘He must be at his girlfriend’s house. His phone was full of her photos.’) We found him at the exact place,” he says.

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Having worked the streets and numerous cases, some patterns are familiar to him. “In 70 per cent cases of girls who go missing in slum areas, the elopement MO (modus operandi) is similar. They tell their mothers they are going to the public loo. Later, the water bucket is found outside the loo, the girl missing,” he says.

In the police station, when a woman comes in crying, Bhosale often goes and just sits next to her. “Even today I tell the new boys in the station that when a woman comes crying, offer her a bench to sit and cry. Procedure comes later. Don’t yell at her and tell her it’s a police station. She knows she has not walked into a garden. She has lost her child, a husband or someone dear,” he says.

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Mostly, he has found that young boys leave home and jump on a train to travel to a far-off place. Many run away after being scolded by their parents but are usually found at a close friend’s home

or employed as child labour when money runs out. Every other case he has tracked fits the book, but not Pooja.

At Andheri, people have seen a “policeman” in plain clothes often come to meet Santosh Gaud, a 38-year-old who sells boiled peanuts near a cinema hall. “I have often wondered if he (Bhosale) will ever recover. His face turns grim when he sees Pooja’s posters on walls. He visits us at home every fortnight and stops at my cart every 10 days to enquire about us, about Pooja. He always asks for any small thing I might have remembered, any new enemy I recalled. In a way, he is also trying to help us get closure, but now even he is haunted,” says Daud. “My daily income is Rs 300 and it is overwhelming when a police officer shows concern for people like us, our miseries, our daughters. It’s beyond words.”

Together, both men have pasted Pooja’s posters across the city, Daud on bogies of outstation trains, Bhosale on skywalks, outside malls and on slum walls. They have visited every children’s home in the state to look for Pooja. Earlier last year, another case got solved through Pooja’s files and a four-year-old girl was rescued.

“Someone called on my number from Ratangad, Rajasthan, asking for ransom, but it turned out to be a prank call. That day, we both went silent,” says Daud.

The photograph of Pooja in the posters is the only one the family has of her. It was taken a day before she went missing. “She was talkative and happy that day and I had to scold her to make her stand still at the studio. That is why she seems so stiff in the photograph. My daughter loves to laugh and dance. I miss her every day,” says Daud, tearfully.

He says Bhosale and he have wept together on their way back from another futile search. “On my off days too, sometimes I have left home and wandered, looking for her. When I see a beggar, I stop him and ask. I wait at traffic signals. I stop my autorickshaw every time I see a crowd. If I hear a drumbeat, I will either walk back or tell the autorickshaw to take a U-turn to see if any girl is dancing near it. She loved to dance to drums,” he says.

At home, Bhosale’s family knows his drill. Two prayers are offered for Pooja, in the morning before breakfast and one before he hits the bed. One night he dreamt of her, and stayed awake the whole night. Many times he has stopped to wipe the dust off the posters that he has stuck in the area.

In the last two years, Bhosale has turned up at the creeks of Mumbai every time a body has washed up, and checked each unclaimed body in the city jurisdiction.