



JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

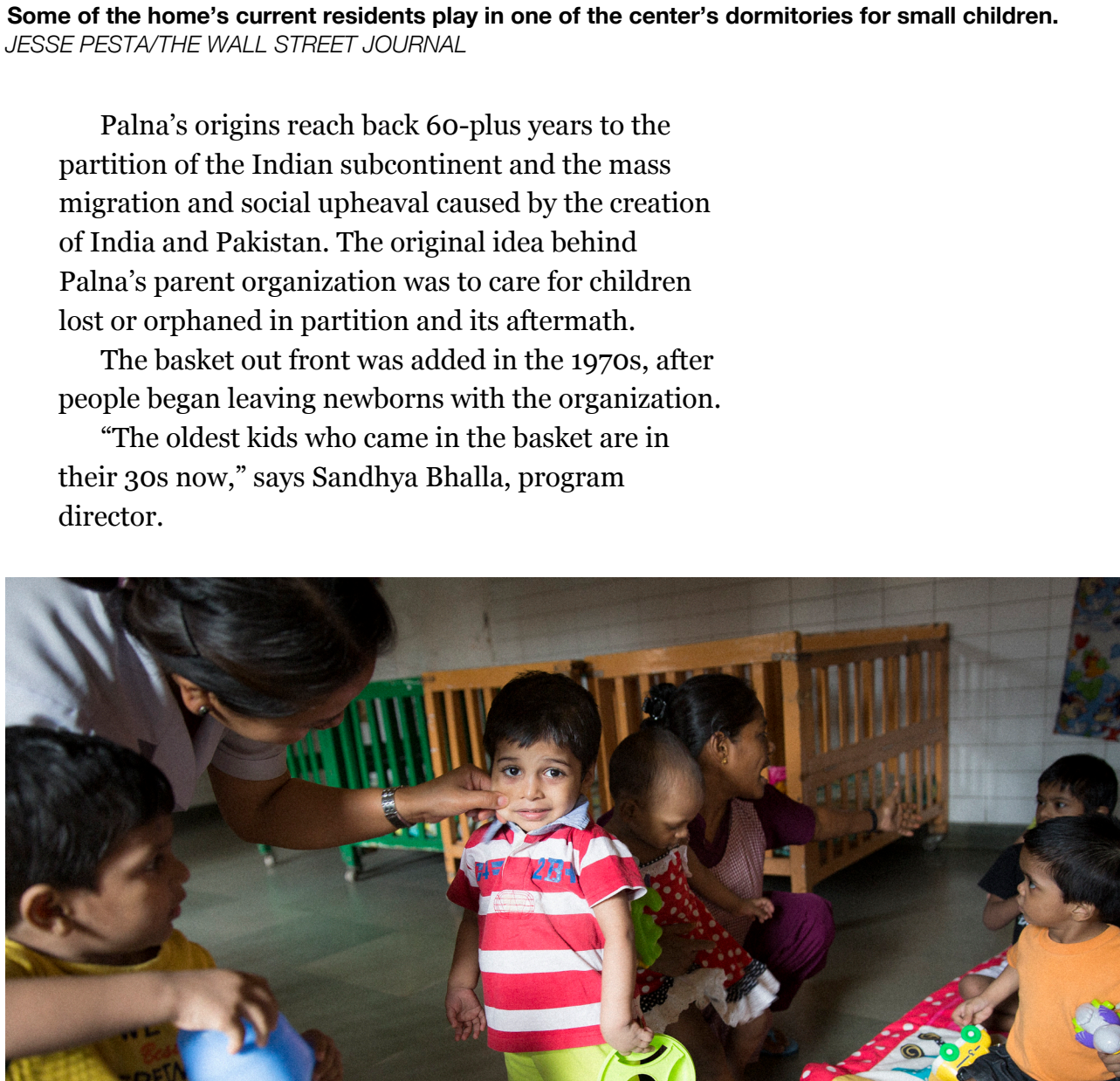
## In India's Capital, a Wicker Basket for Unwanted Babies

By **JESSE PESTA** | *The Wall Street Journal*  
Aug. 1, 2014

Nestled in a brick wall near the old quarter of India's capital city, New Delhi, a wicker basket sits on a wooden ledge.

The little basket has a big job. It's a place for people to abandon their unwanted babies.

The basket belongs to an organization called Palna—the Hindi word for "cradle"—a reference to the basket itself. Here's a look at what happens after a child and parent part ways here, on the street, in New Delhi.



Some of the home's current residents play in one of the center's dormitories for small children. **JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**

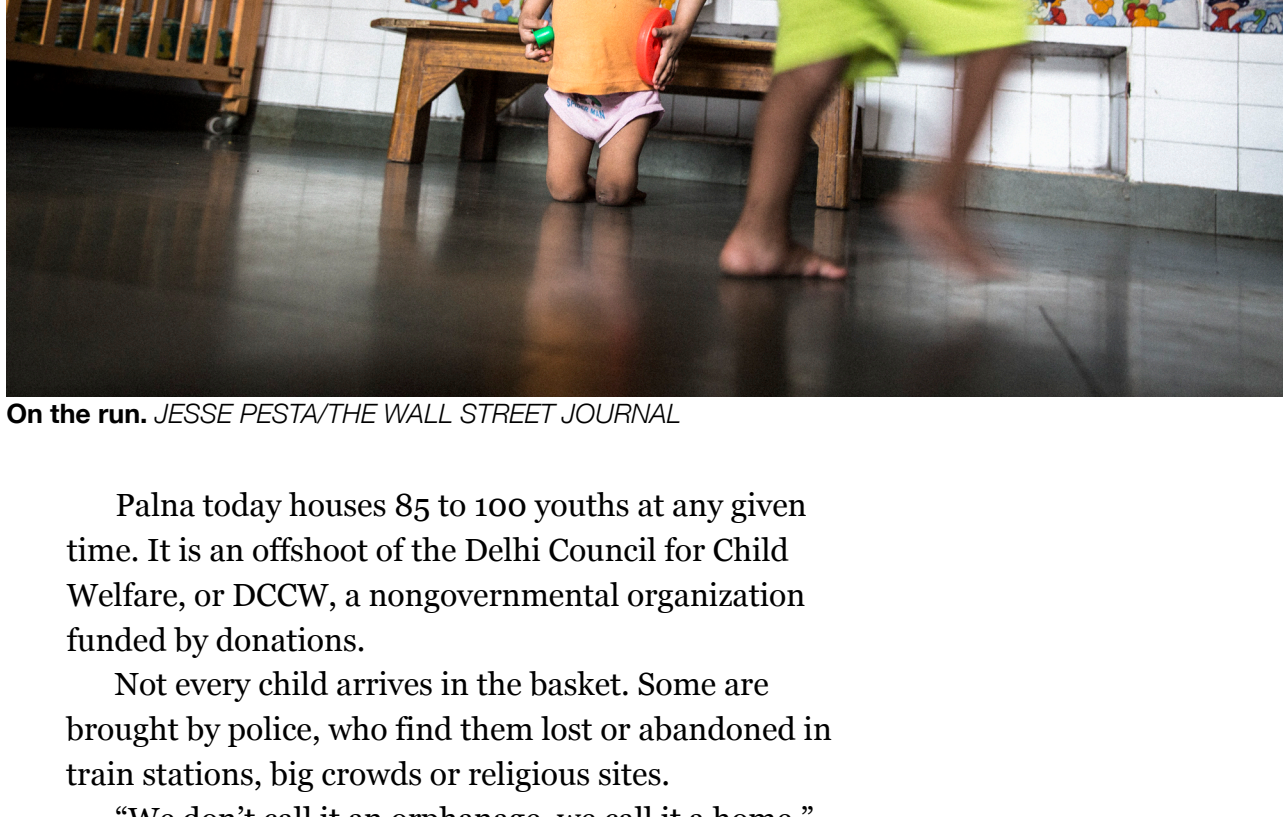
Palna's origins reach back 60-plus years to the partition of the Indian subcontinent and the mass migration and social upheaval caused by the creation of India and Pakistan. The original idea behind Palna's parent organization was to care for children lost or orphaned in partition and its aftermath.

The basket out front was added in the 1970s, after people began leaving newborns with the organization.

"The oldest kids who came in the basket are in their 30s now," says Sandhya Bhalla, program director.



A staff nurse stops by the playroom. **JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**



Moment of relative calm. **JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**



On the run. **JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**

Palna today houses 85 to 100 youths at any given time. It is an offshoot of the Delhi Council for Child Welfare, or DCCW, a nongovernmental organization funded by donations.

Not every child arrives in the basket. Some are brought by police, who find them lost or abandoned in train stations, big crowds or religious sites.

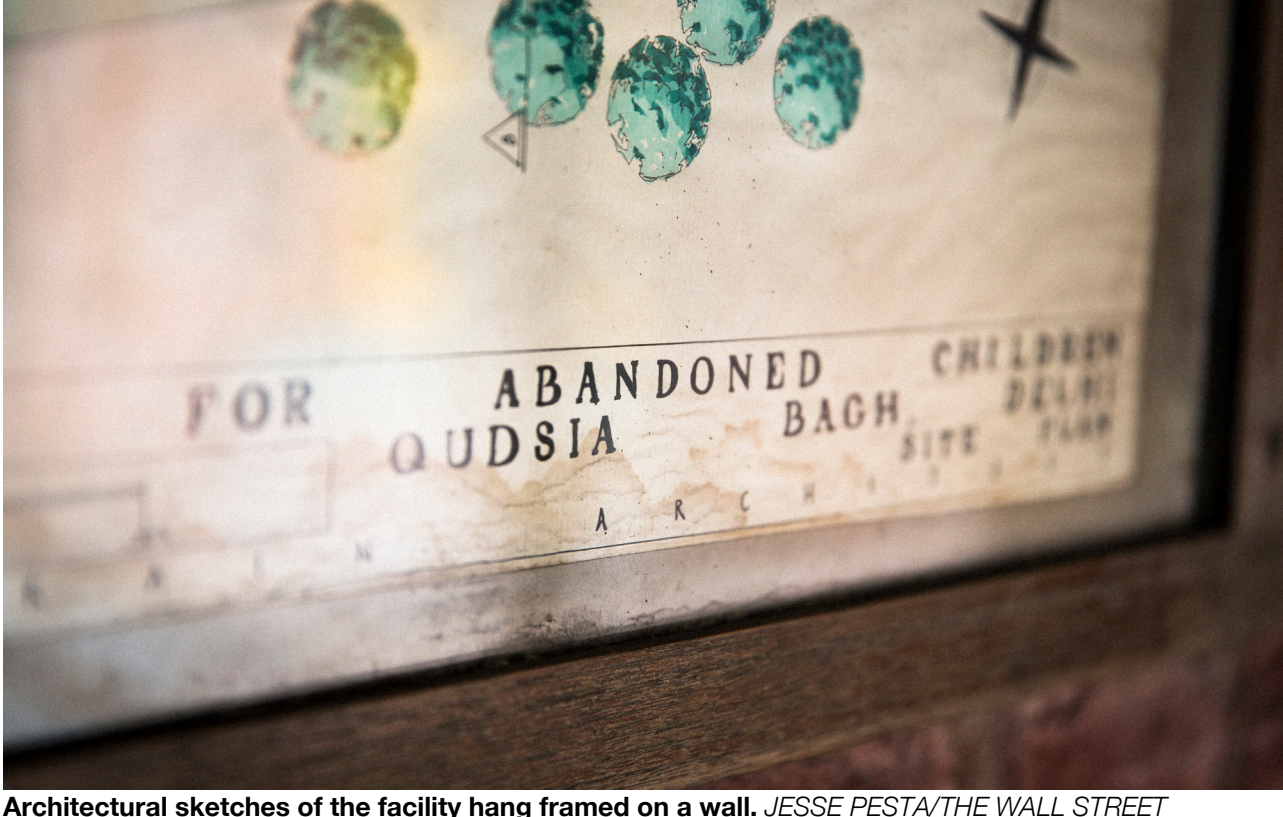
"We don't call it an orphanage, we call it a home," says Loraine Campos, a longtime employee. That's because some of the children brought in by police "could have parents," she says. "We don't know."



In a classroom, younger children study the alphabet. **JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**

The group tries to reunite families like these. That has gotten easier over the years, Ms. Campos says. "The world is becoming smaller."

But it remains tricky in uniquely Indian ways. In one recent case, police brought in a 7-year-old who was lost, but who spoke a dialect that no one could understand.



Older students work on division problems in a classroom next door. **JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**

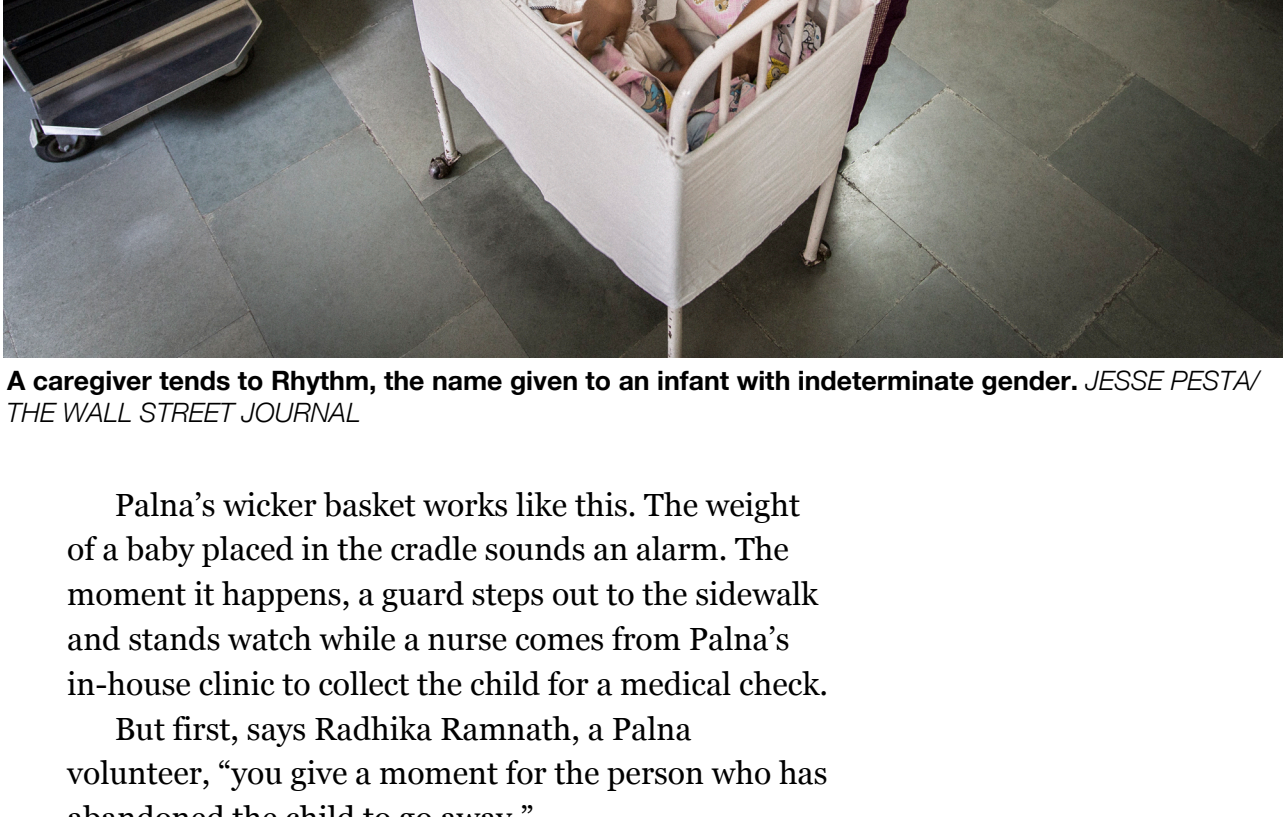
Over a few months, the boy learned Hindi and provided enough clues to eventually identify his village. Then, Ms. Campos says, "We googled it." The boy has since been reunited with his family in the Indian state of Assam, near Bhutan.

How does a 7-year-old boy from Assam get lost in Delhi? Palna officials aren't sure. One possibility, they say, is that he was being sent off to work somewhere—child labor is a problem in India—and then became separated from his minders.

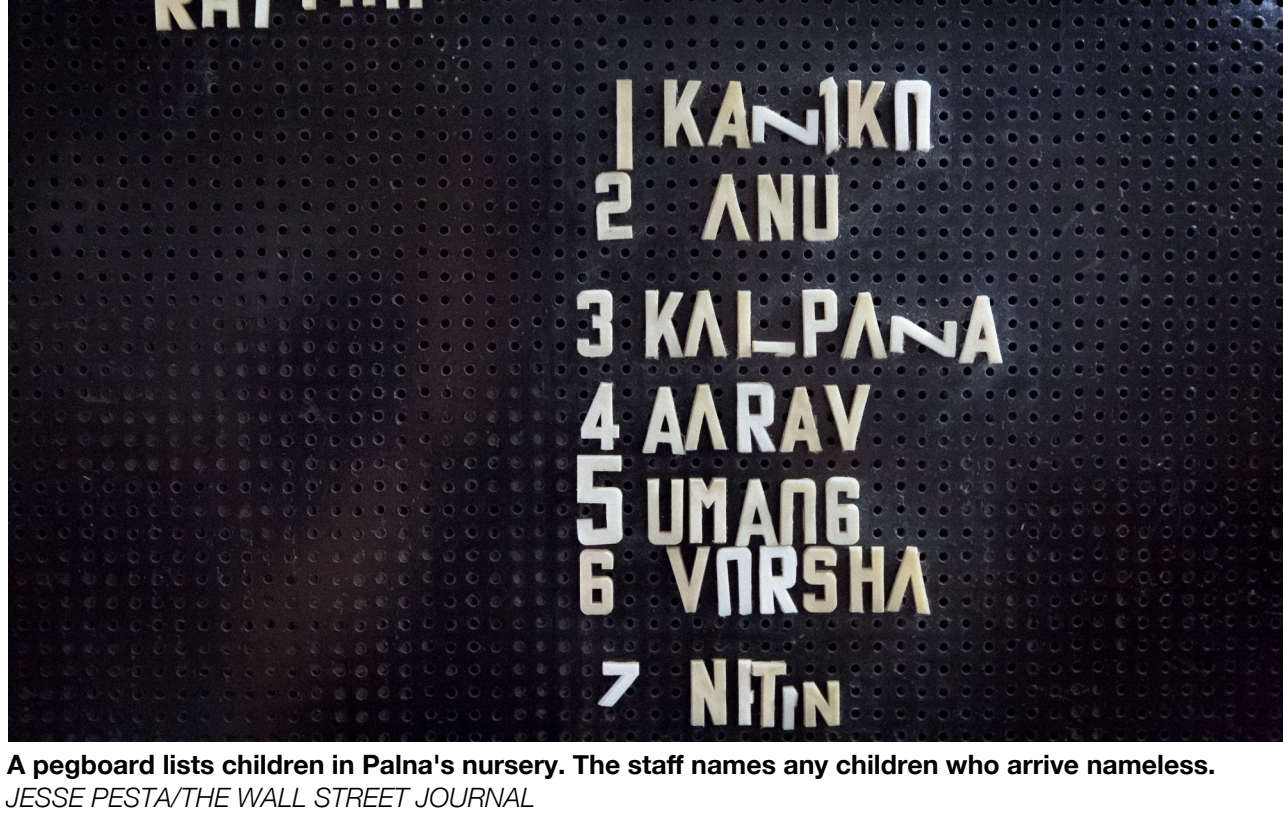
Years ago, and pre-Google, luck sometimes played a bigger role in reunions. Palna staff recall an incident in the mid-1990s when Miss Universe visited the home and was photographed holding a lost child. When a newspaper published the photo, someone recognized the child.



Architectural sketches of the facility hang framed on a wall. **JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**



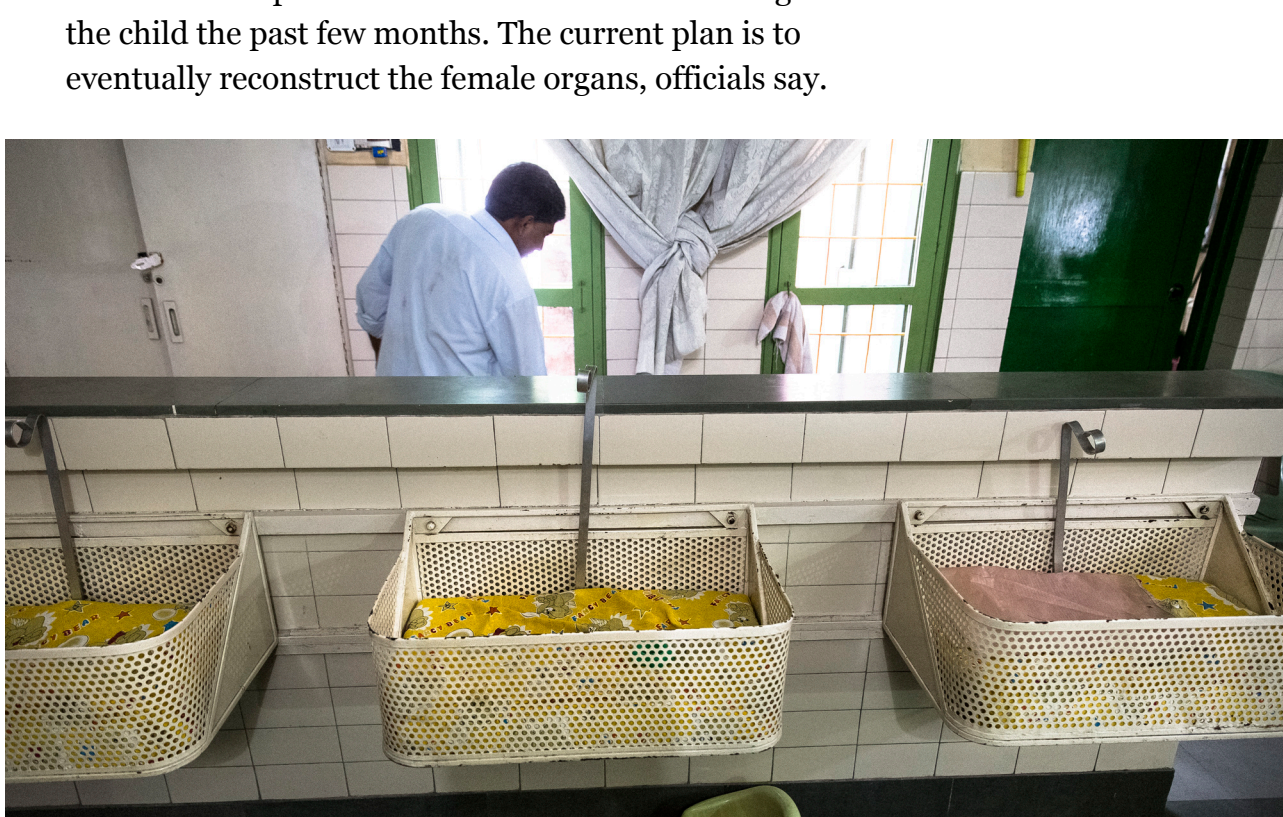
Inside the ward for children with disabilities. **JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**



A caregiver tends to Rhythm, the name given to an infant with indeterminate gender. **JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**

Palna's wicker basket works like this. The weight of a baby placed in the cradle sends out the alarm. The moment it happens, a guard steps out to the sidewalk and stands watch while a nurse comes from Palna's in-house clinic to collect the child for a medical check.

But first, says Radhika Ramnath, a Palna volunteer, "you give a moment for the person who has abandoned the child to go away."



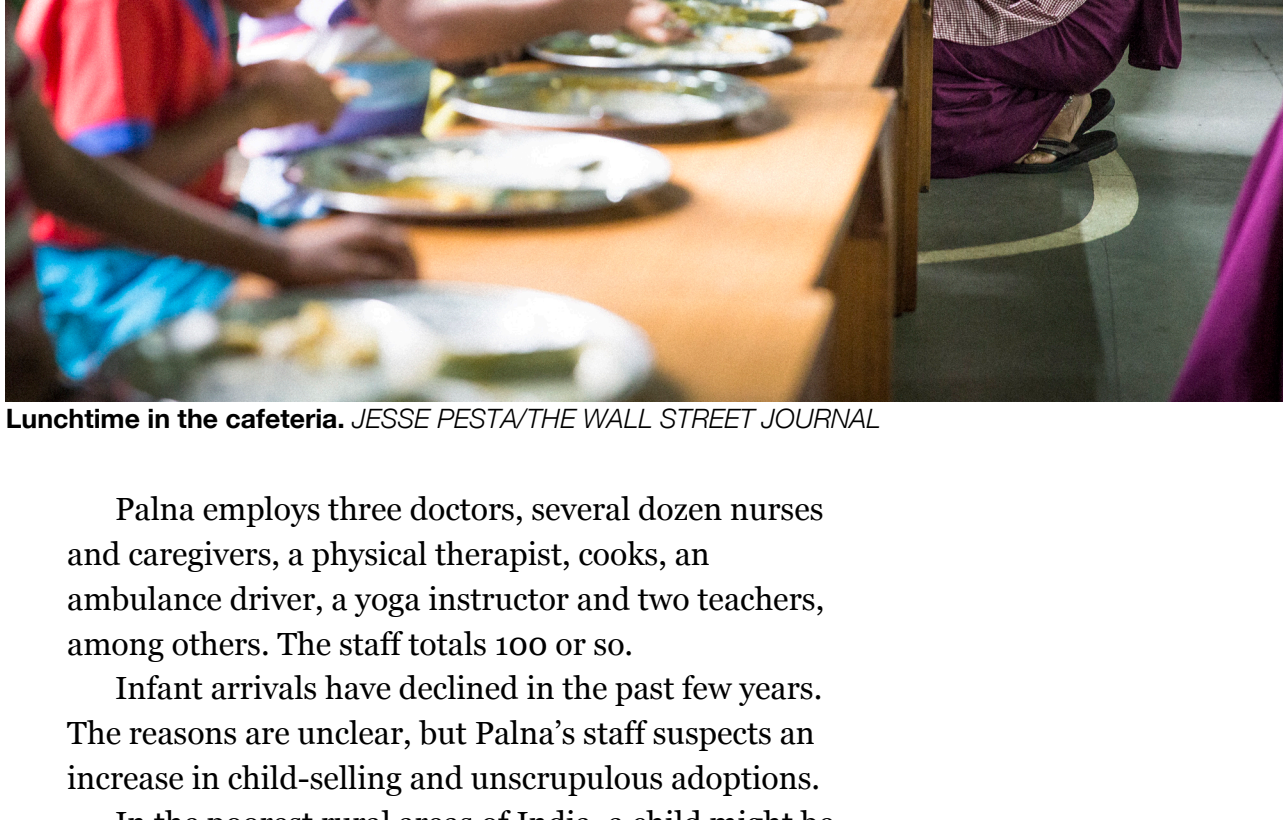
A pegboard lists children in Palna's nursery. The staff names any children who arrive nameless. **JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**

Many infants left in the basket have mental or physical disabilities. And the majority of new arrivals overall at Palna, some 70% or so, are girls. That number is shifting, though. "It used to be 90%," says Ms. Ramnath.

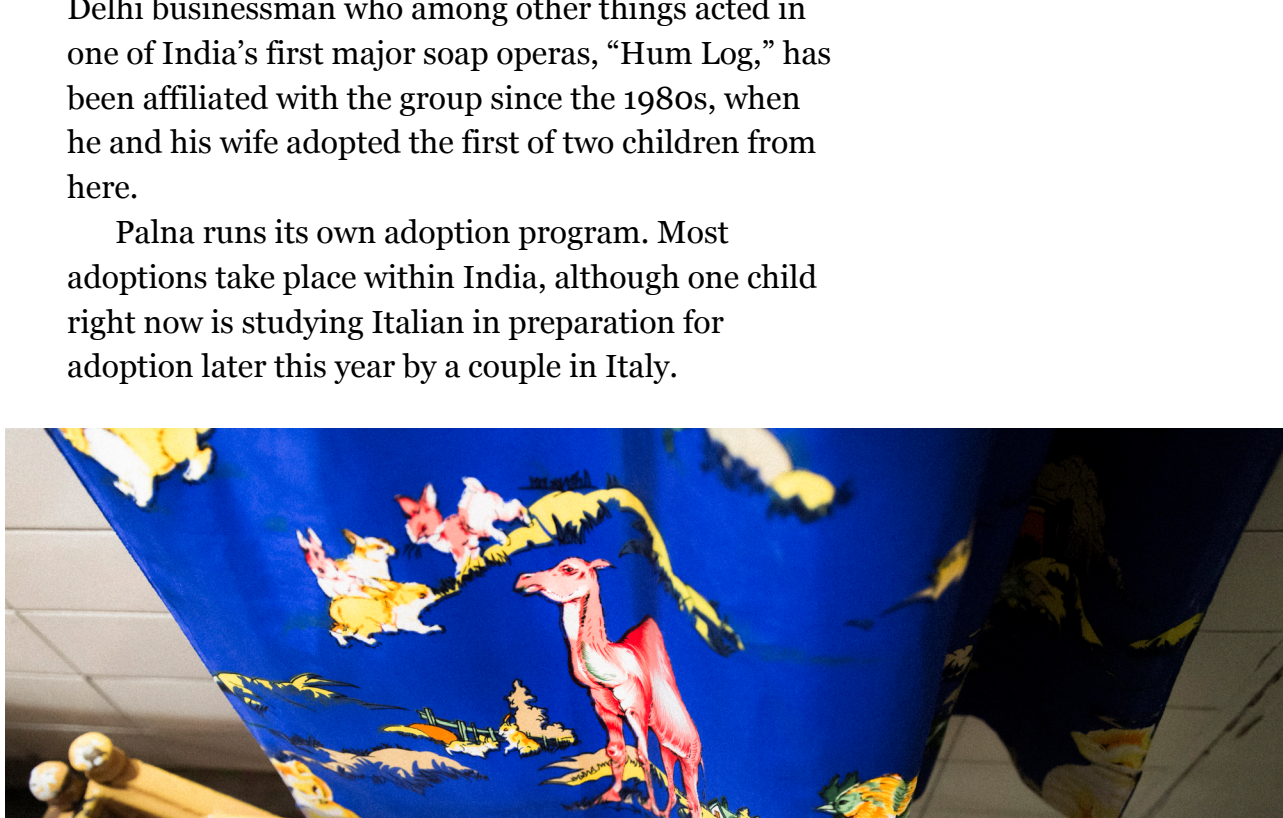
About two months ago, late at night, an extraordinary newborn arrived by basket. Upon examination, it was found that the baby's gender couldn't be determined. Physically, the child looks neither male nor female.

"We've never seen a case like this," says Ms. Bhalla, the program director.

A team of specialist doctors has been examining the child the past few months. The current plan is to eventually reconstruct the female organs, officials say.



Steel bassinets line the nursery. **JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**



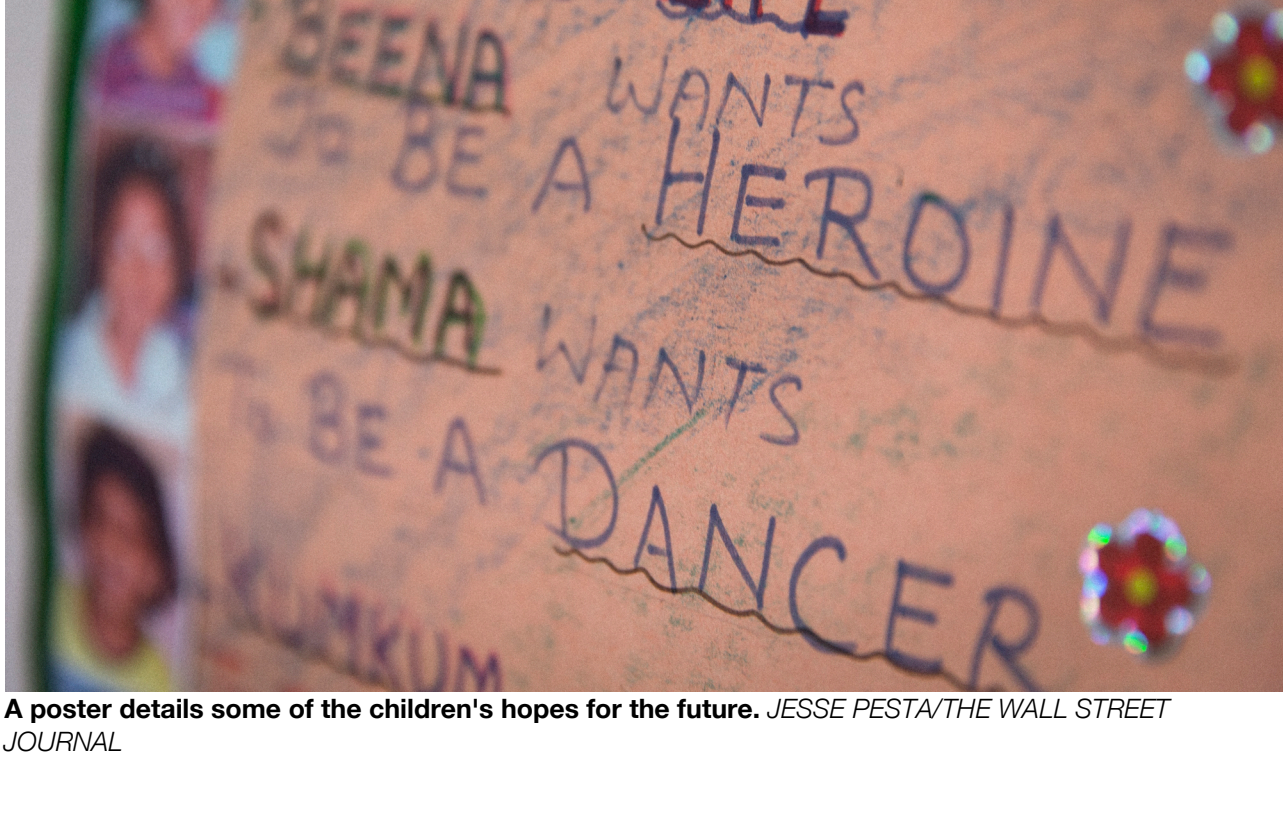
Lunchtime in the cafeteria. **JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**

Palna employs three doctors, several dozen nurses and caregivers, a physical therapist, cooks, an ambulance driver, a yoga instructor and two teachers, among others. The staff totals 100 or so.

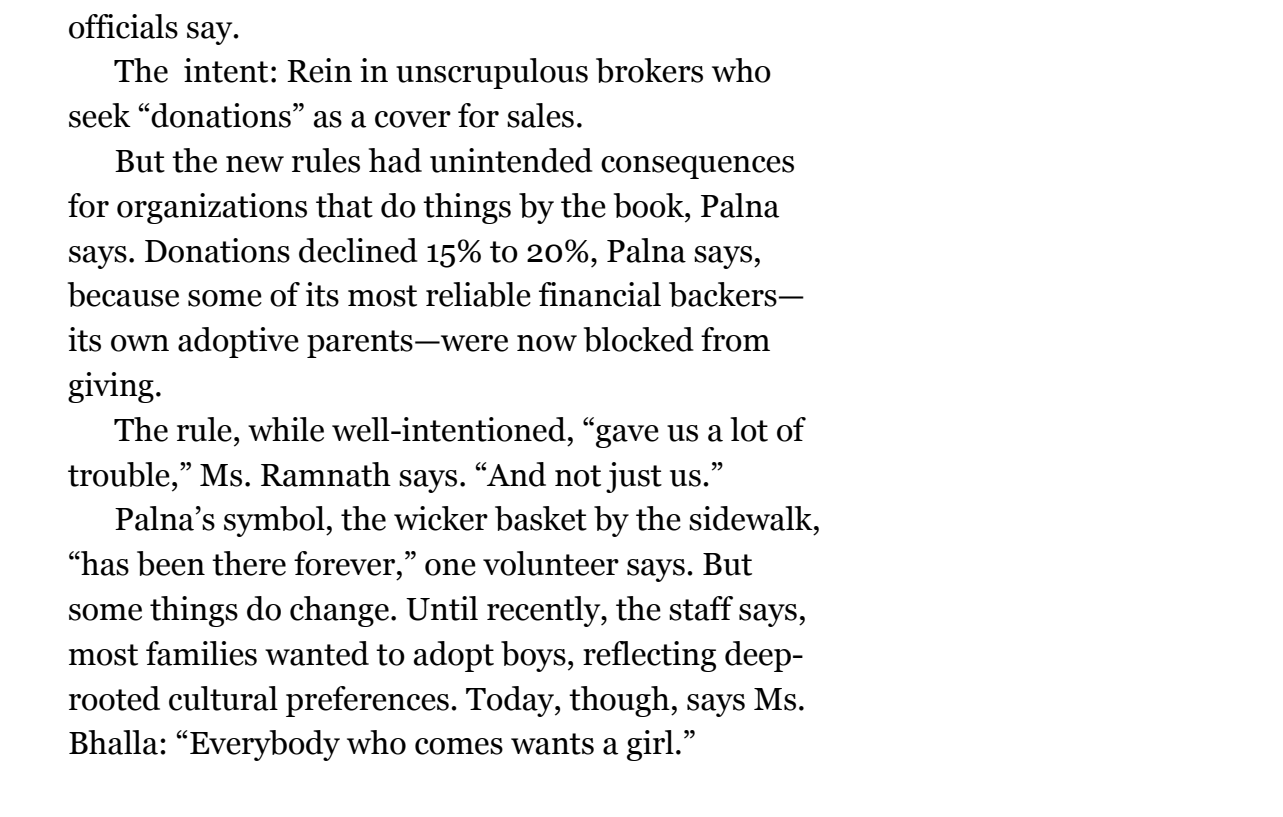
Infant arrivals have declined in the past few years. The reasons are unclear, but Palna's staff suspects an increase in child-selling and unscrupulous adoptions.

In the poorest rural areas of India, a child might be sold for as little as "50 rupees, 100 rupees, 500 rupees," or roughly \$1 to \$10, says Pradeep Kuckreja of DCCW's executive committee. Mr. Kuckreja, a New Delhi businessman who among other things acted in one of India's first major soap operas, "Hum Log," has been affiliated with the group since the 1980s, when he and his wife adopted the first of two children from here.

Palna runs its own adoption program. Most adoptions take place within India, although one child right now is studying Italian in preparation for adoption later this year by a couple in Italy.



Naptime in the nursery. **JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**



A poster details some of the children's hopes for the future. **JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**

Fundraising is getting trickier, Palna officials say, because of new Indian regulations to fight child-selling. A 2012 rule restricts adoptive parents from donating to their own child's orphanage, Palna officials say.

The intent: Rein in unscrupulous brokers who seek "donations" as a cover for sales.

But the new rules had unintended consequences for organizations that do things by the book, Palna says. Donations declined 15% to 20%, Palna says, because some of its most reliable financial backers—its own adoptive parents—were now blocked from giving.

The rule, while well-intentioned, "gave us a lot of trouble," Ms. Ramnath says. "And not just us."

Palna's symbol, the wicker basket by the sidewalk, "has been there forever," one volunteer says. But some things do change. Until recently, the staff says, most families wanted to adopt boys, reflecting deep-rooted cultural preferences. Today, though, says Ms. Bhalla: "Everybody who comes wants a girl."



The wicker basket, on Yamuna Road in New Delhi. **JESSE PESTA/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**