
Site Visit Report: Prerana
Mumbai, Maharashtra

Project URL: <http://www.ashanet.org/projects/project-view.php?p=817>

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Itinerary:

The visit was planned so as to be present for Balak Utsav, an annual event where children from all Prerana centers come together for a cultural evening. I took an early morning train from Pune, and met up with Priti close to Dadar station. To make the commute to all the centers easy, she had booked a private taxi for us. The event was to be held in the evening, at the Kamathipura center which is Prerana's biggest center in the oldest red light district of Mumbai. I wanted to visit the Vashi Turbe (VT from now on, not Victoria Terminal!) center that Asha is currently funding (Asha funds VT and Falkland Road centers), because there was no prior site visit to that center. VT center is located in Navi Mumbai, near the red light district of Navi Mumbai, and is relatively more recent. There was a bus that was gathering kids from the various centers to take them to Balak Utsav, and we were trying to get to the Vashi Turbe center before the children left for the event. After visiting the VT center, we took a walk to the red light district area in VT and then to the bus that had already picked up the Naunihal and Prathishtha project girls from Prerana's Kharghar center. Our next halt was the temporary location of the Kharghar center, and the new construction site for the same. We also visited the boutique in which two of the Prathishtha center girls are employed, followed by a visit to the catering institute in which the current Prathishtha center vocational training was being held. In the end, we headed off to the Kamathipura center with a brief halt for lunch on the way. The cultural program in Kamathipura ended around 8:30pm. There was ample opportunity during our drives to have discussions with Priti.

Vashi Turbe center:

This center is located in the slum area close to the red light district and consists of two rooms, and small open space and a few toilets. Out of the two rooms, one was a kitchen and the other was used for classes for the educational support program. Both of them were converted into sleeping rooms in the night (for the night care center (NCC)). The entrance to the center and the external area has drainage issues and the hygiene level was low. They have been trying to persuade the local authorities and get this fixed for some time now. (For those who don't know, Prerana's kids come to the center after their regular school hours during the day. They come back, have an afternoon snack, dinner and also take part in the educational support program that Prerana conducts.)

I was welcomed and greeted by an enthusiastic crowd of children. Their smiling faces set the stage for the remainder of the visit. I had the opportunity to chat with and ask questions to the children. My first question was regarding their mother tongue, and it turned out that most of them spoke Hindi in spite of being located in Mumbai. The medium of instruction in their schools was

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Marathi and upon questioning them about coping up with education in a different language, the children demonstrated their Marathi skills to me. There were a few kids who were attending a Hindi medium school. I also asked them about their interactions with other kids in the public schools that they attend and the answer was mostly positive i.e., they did not face any discrimination (as I confirmed later, only certain teachers were informed about the background). Also, the interaction with the residents of the slum dwellers and the kids around the center was mostly positive. Interaction with the kids gave a very positive impression about what they were learning from their school and Prerana's educational support program. The kids were very bright and sharp in their replies.

As an aside, I learnt from Priti and Pravin a bit later that many sex workers actually have a Bengali background, as many come from across the border from Bangladesh, and that sex-trade itself is very prevalent in the north-eastern parts, mainly the border areas. In fact, some of the sex workers tend to travel back to Bengal during festival time, to meet their families, etc. This is something we had even spoke about in one of the conference calls earlier, especially how these untimely visits of mothers during festival time clashes with children's exams, and how Prerana tries to convince them to time their visits better or else offers to take responsibility of the children in their mothers' absence. The Bengali background also perhaps explains the fact that most children converse in Hindi as against Marathi, the language of the state.

I also met the project coordinators, and had the opportunity to chat with them about their involvement in Prerana and their background. This conversation was important in the context of problems Prerana is facing in terms of employee retention, due to harsh working conditions involved in working with Prerana, and the availability of more financially attractive jobs in the market for those trained in social work (MSW graduates, etc.). The main project coordinator responsible for VT center mostly stays in the center and takes care of things like cooking, maintaining the center, and also takes care of the children. As I found out she has been with Prerana for the last 6-7 years and has gone through the initial difficult phase of finding a place and setting up the (VT) center and convincing the sex workers about sending their kids to Prerana. It was interesting to learn that her initial reason for joining Prerana was partially motivated by financial reasons. She later on went on to do a course on paraprofessional training for social workers and got greatly involved and interested with Prerana, and appeared to be a very committed employee of Prerana, who I imagine would stay with them for a long time. I also learnt about other employees who had also gone through similar training after joining Prerana. This group of people seems to form an important component of Prerana's work force.

Together with two of VT's coordinators and Priti, we walked to the red light area. It was approx. a 10-15 minute walk. It was afternoon time, and Priti informed it was the rest period for sex workers. As we walked through, Priti also pointed out that they had initially thought of setting up the VT center in a building (which was then unoccupied) within the red light area itself. But unfortunately, this was resisted by some of the pimps, and eventually the VT center had to be set up in the building where it is today. This is considered one of the big blows Prerana had faced in its initial days in the area. On the way back, we met one of the workers who would be involved in the drainage work (mentioned in the first paragraph). He seemed to be in very good terms with Priti and Pravin, and promised that he will talk to the person in charge to follow-up on the drainage work. This was just one instance amongst many others where it was clear that Priti, Pravin and Prerana in general had developed very good relations with various people and organizations, which allows them to function effectively.

Kharghar center (Prathishtha and Naunihal program residence): We visited the house in which Prathishtha and Naunihal girls are currently residing. This is a temporary arrangement

(rented house), and meant to allow the girls to attend schools in the area, as they would later be moving into the permanent residence building which is being currently built. The girls from this center, as mentioned in the itinerary, I had met already in the bus and had an opportunity to chat with few of the Prathishtha girls, who were currently undergoing vocational training at the catering school. I met the projects coordinator who stays in the house. She has done her Masters in social work from TISW, and was attracted to this project after meeting Priti and Pravin. This is a full residence center (as against a night care center), and the Naunihal girls have no other place to go. Prathishtha girls are more elder girls, who can get more easily pulled into the sex trade. They stay mainly for the purpose of undergoing vocational training, and generally stay for much shorter periods of time (as compared to Naunihal girls). The project coordinator showed me a chart with names of the current Prathishtha girls and told me the background of each of them. Some of them were rescued by the police (one of the instances showing how Prerana's works closely with the police through activities such as police training) and they all came from circumstances which were clearly showing their vulnerability for getting into the sex trade. This was a very well to do neighborhood and I asked if the neighbors knew about this center. Apparently, they don't know any of the details (background of girls, etc.) and are sometimes curious as to what's going on. The lower floor of this house had storing some number of sewing machines from the previous vocational training course in fashion design. I was told that once the professional training is over, the girls stay in group homes. Initially, Prerana assists them with their rent, and once they've earned enough money, they start taking care of themselves. This program is clearly bringing independence to a lot of these girls, who otherwise would be caught in extremely different circumstances.

We also visited the boutique (owned by one of the fashion designing teachers from this course), where two of the Prathishtha girls had been hired after completing their course. The girls seemed very happy with their job and seemed like part of the family. We visited the catering college which is currently holding the vocational course for Prathishtha. The initial idea was to get teachers from there, but they were very impressed with Prerana and offered that the girls could come and attend their college. This college is in this neighborhood and seemed to have students from all strata of the society. This experience must therefore be (in fact, is!) morale boosting to Prerana's girls, and puts them in a very competent position for future employment.

Our last halt in the Kharghar area was at the construction site for the new residence (see the photos accompanying the site visit report) for the Naunihal and Prathishtha girls. This is located in an affluent neighbourhood of Kharghar. The building construction seemed to be progressing quite well and we walked around the existent floors for which Priti told me about the planned layout and utilization. It is an extremely well thought plan. There is place not only for residence but also for setting up the fashion designing and catering/baking units. The idea is to develop a client class (especially for baking/catering) already within the neighbourhood. The textile unit could be associated to some company. In addition, the lower floor is designed such that a big area could be rented out for hosting some functions and events. If everything works according to the plan, this new Kharghar center would operate towards making Prerana a self-sustaining agency. This would be an important mile stone for Prerana. Recently Prerana was able to acquire a big grant from the company 'Goldman Sachs' towards the construction of this building. An Asha volunteer working in Goldman Sachs was instrumental in bringing Prerana to their attention. Based on its strong credentials, Prerana stood out amongst many other proposals. This was a good instance of a partnership between Asha and Prerana for attracting funds. No one from Goldman Sachs had visited the construction site as yet and Priti found it very important that I (having acted as a link between Prerana and the Asha volunteer from Goldman Sachs) take a look at it and witnesses the progress.

Kamathipura center (Balak Utsav): This was our final destination for the day. This center is located in the ground floor of a public school building, right near the Kamathipura red light area. As we entered, the central quadrangle of the school was abuzz with activity and the stage was set for performances (the cultural program) by the children. The audience consisted mainly of mothers of children from various Prerana's centers. That the mothers had created the time to make themselves available for this annual event showed how established Prerana was and the strong bonding that Prerana had created with them over the years. Apart from the mothers, the audience also consisted of folks from similar organizations that Prerana regularly interacts with, some from the police, and other guests like me. I also got to meet Aparna, who was one of the project coordinators at the Kamathipura center, a long term employee and can be rightfully called one of the "pillars" of Prerana. This was also an excellent opportunity for me to meet the entire workforce of Prerana, all in one place, and see their interactions. It was evident that they were all very involved and shared responsibilities together with Priti and Pravin.

I got to meet and speak with some of the children. They were very welcoming to the guests and quite a few of them were coming forward by themselves to talk to me, as against me having to go and ask them questions. In fact, a 10th grade student I talked to, was rather fluent in English, and spoke very well too. Another one talked to me about his future plans to do a B.Ed, come back to Prerana, and teach there.

I was part of the general audience till the point when Priti announced that I ("Nayana didi") had come from far away to see the kids and invited me to be part of the main stage, along with other chief guests for the occasion. I learnt that one of the chief guests was a girl from Leo club (something similar to Lions' club), who had been involved with Prerana for quite some time, and had helped take out the girls for picnics, etc. The ceremony began with the traditional lamp lighting by all the four guests, including myself.

During the balak utsav I got the chance to meet and talk with Pravin Patkar, Priti's husband and one of Prerana's founding members. We talked quite a bit, and I asked him a lot of questions. Pravin mentioned that given the nature of the work, they're consciously trying to involve women employees more in the day to day activities of Prerana, as compared to men, and that he himself had gotten increasingly less involved with the daily running of Prerana itself. He is rather trying to channel his time and energy on other issues such as networking with other organizations, other activism related to anti-trafficking, and research, etc.

Another thing that I saw was Prerana's involvement with the police, and the relationships they shared. There were people from the police in the audience, and in fact one of them, who had been associated with Prerana for a really long time, was called on stage and honored. Also, the police had arranged for a guard to be stationed at the event, just to prevent any untoward incident. Much to their fear, something like that happened. I was told that some pimp was trying to come and take away a girl while the program was still in progress. But the police dealt with him and got back the girl. Apparently, these types of incidents happen very regularly, and the need for guards is rather important. In the light of all this, and given the nature of work itself, the relationships with the police plays a very important role in Prerana's work. This good relation is something which wasn't simply there, but Prerana had to work towards it from the early days, and is one of the big achievements of Prerana.

I also got to meet a few children who had graduated from Prerana, and are now working. All of them spoke very well and were very respectful. They spoke highly of Prerana. I was told that the first thing Prerana's "graduates" try to do is to take their mother out of the sex trade. I also asked Priti and Pravin if any of these children, despite all the counseling Prerana provides, try to return

to sex trade. The reply was that initially (during Prerana's early days) there were a few cases like that, but not anymore. They all end up taking some other good work. This was something very encouraging to hear and a clear sign of Prerana's achievement.

The award ceremony itself was very touching. I was asked to give away a few awards, and since this was the first time I was doing so, I felt really honored to be part of such dedicated kids. There were many awards that concentrated on both academic and extracurricular stuff. Some awards were based on students getting high percentages in their respective schools. It was evident that many Prerana's kids did very well at school, some getting around 85 % marks. Also, on an average, the children at Naunihal did better than other NCC kids. The mothers were not left out – the ceremony included awards for the ideal mother, most supporting mother, and so on.

The cultural program was highly professional, and all the performances, especially the choreography were very impressive. It mainly consisted of dances and songs, performed by children from various centers. Apparently, few years back, some well-known choreographer had gotten really involved with Prerana and imparted dance training to the kids. Prerana believes that these are ways in which they could try to relieve the pressure and stress from the children, and therefore gives a lot of importance to such activities.

Miscellaneous notes:

1. I learnt about the story of a woman who was once a sex worker, and became very impressed by Prerana, and is now working with Prerana full time. It was really heartening to learn that she succeeded in choosing this path.
2. I also got to meet a former sex worker, who is now currently married to a volunteer at Prerana. It was quite a revelation to me that these things happen in real lives, and not just in the movies! ☺
3. I saw the kitchen, toilets, office room, etc., during my visit. All of them were found to be in order. Like mentioned earlier, this is much bigger center than VT, and is Prerana's oldest center as well.
4. I asked if the mothers had the general freedom to move around wherever they wanted to. The reply was that in most cases, it was like that. They were trusted that they would eventually come back, and hence were not under any constraint to move around. There are however a few cases where they're kept locked up, but this is very rare. In fact, like mentioned earlier, some of them even traveled to visit their families during festival time.

Overall, Balak Utsav was a very good opportunity to get a feel for Prerana's overall impact, and its relations with mothers, children, employees, various similar organizations, and the police. On a personal note, it was a very memorable visit for me. It was like witnessing a living story of how with dedication, hard work and compassion, it is possible to overcome even the most difficult of circumstances and sow the seeds of hope, happiness and justice.