

Site Visit Trip - Prerana Centers

Education for the ones “Born into Brothels”

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Dates of Visit

30th May 2008 – Kamathipura and Falkland Road centers

14th June 2008 – Vashi Turbe centers

Visit to Prerana Center - Kamathipura

I called up Priti Patkar and requested for a schedule to visit Prerana center. She informed me that they were having a workshop going on with the kids. So I decided to go down there on Friday. Since Priti was not available, she asked me to contact her colleague, Sonali. Sonali gave me a call and provided me directions to get to the Prerana – Kamathipura center. Even after having lived in Mumbai(Bombay) for so many years, I had never ventured to Kamathipura area. I had passed this area a few times by bus, but never got down. So I was quite skeptic, and apprehensive.

I took a cab from Byculla station and asked him to take me to Shuklaji Lane and drop me near Kamathipura Municipal School. Now the first thing that I noticed while we were driving on Shuklaji Lane was that there were several lanes, numbered 1 to 14. The school was in 7th lane. I went inside and met one of Sonali's colleagues. Sonali was making her round visits around the brothels. I will dwell upon this topic later. When I started talking to Sonali's colleague, I understood that she was from another Prerana Center. She asked me to join in and see the workshop going on.

A 2-day drama workshop was being conducted for all the Prerana kids by Mr Sanjay from Kolhapur. I watched it for some time. It was fun to see the kids being asked to explore different parts. In one instance they were asked to depict emotions, one of them being terror and it was really touching to see the expression on their face. In another instance they were asked to depict a scene of someone being dead, or form the letter "Z", or re-enact the Gokulashtam "dahi-handi" (breaking the curd-pot). One thing you notice is the smiling faces of the students. You would not recognize their background, if you had seen them on the streets. They seemed to be thoroughly enjoying it.

In an adjacent room there were kids who were not participating in the workshop. Since this workshop was for kids over 10 years, the little ones in the adjacent rooms were playing carrom or occasionally taking a look at the workshop or just playing around. Sonali told me that kids below 1st grade were asked to wear uniforms within the shelter. So it was a big thing for the kids to get out of their uniform, since that meant that they too were big! (I met a little kid during our walks who was extremely proud about this promotion.)

After this, Sonali gave me a briefing on Prerana. Kamathipura derives its name after 'Kamathis', a group of workers from Andhra Pradesh who came over to the

city. Prerana was started in 1986. The prime goal has been education of kids in red-light areas. In addition, they have been at times involved in aiding the police in rescue or shifting kids to Observation Homes. She was of the view that the police have been extremely co-operative in the last few years, especially the current Inspector who is in-charge of Nagpada police-station. On the organization side, they are divided into three sections – (Night Care Centre) NCC, (Education Support programme) ESP and (Institutional Placement programme) IPP.

The NCC deals with the new kids and handles shelter for the kids during their initial days. As part of their process, they start off a file on each kid. The current count of kids has been 1479, i.e. since 1986 Prerana-Kamathipura has taken on 1479 kids (This figure is of Kamathipura NCC only). One Dr Bharat Rao a paediatrician has been visiting this center since 1989 on every Thursday and he has been their prime doctor. I had a look at a couple of files, and they store a photograph of the kid, their mother, the profile, and enrolment date along with doctor-visit notes. There is also a counseling facility available for the kids, if needed. A prime important thing is that the kids are not subjected to any HIV tests here. This is done so that the kid and the mother are not subjected to any different treatment. (However the Prerana workers are usually aware about the medical history of the mother, by sight or by symptoms.) A kid is only added to the Prerana night-shelter on consent of the mother. This is primarily done, since in the red-light area it has been noticed that the women at times keep changing their 'admis' (fancy men or regular customers). So to avoid any confusion or issues related to children, it is important that the mother agrees to send the child to the shelter facility. The mother is charged an optional fee of Rs. 25/-. Thus the mother realizes that this is a hostel for the kids while they conduct their nocturnal business, and also safe for the child. No child is denied admission even if the mother does not pay.

Thereafter they are shifted to ESP once the focus is on their education. The child is a part of the ESP from the time it starts its pre school followed by formal school. Then the NCC file is passed on to the ESP group. To increase community participation and also to make the child more responsible, they encourage the parent to actively participate in the child's education. All support for education is free of cost. Only for older children if they want to go to special coaching classes or/and for college education or other vocational training the project coordinator assesses the mother's ability to contribute and anything from 10 % to 50 % is contributed by the mother and the remaining by Prerana. Then when the student clears each grade, the parent is refunded their 50% amount. Thus the kid is motivated to help his/her parent get back their money. This was also done, since

they had noticed that students seem to take more interest and responsibility if their parents money was involved, unlike if Prerana had put up the entire 100%. The school timing is usually 1-5:30. After this special classes are arranged for the Prerana kids from 5:30-8:30. One group is allowed to use the playground once each week during this three hour period to encourage outdoor activities. The classes may contain extra-curricular items like dancing or other activities too. This is followed by a 1 hour dinner and thereafter some old boys go back to the community while the rest sleep at the night shelter of Prerana. There were around 4 rooms for the kids. One of them is the sleeping ground for boys, the other for girls and a third for the little ones. There is a fourth room which is only open in cases where they allow 10th standard students to stay up late and study, or in cases of excess kids. Boys are not allowed to use the shelter after age of 15, while girls can continue life-long. So boys in 10th standard are allowed to use the fourth room 1 month prior to exams, if they want to study and sleep there. There is usually a night warden and 1 staff for around 10 students. Since the Kamathipura center has 95 students using the shelter, there is around 10 staff at night. The ESP staff takes turns in staying back for the night. The biggest challenge that the ESP staff faces is to get tutors to teach the students!

A typical life of a Prerana kid is as follows:

First group (Morning school kids):

Have some snack and leave for school by 7AM

Come back to have their breakfast during the break around 9AM

School ends at around 12:00 and they go back home. Some still come to the center and spend their afternoon here.

Second group (Afternoon school kids):

Others have breakfast around 8AM

Others go back home and get ready for school.

School between 12:30 to 5:30

Evening for both groups:

Evening classes or play from 5:30 – 8:30

Dinner 8:30 – 9:30

Sleeping time after 10PM

Prerana also works with boarding schools to get the kids transferred to boarding so that they get better teaching facilities and are also away from this environment. Now this is where the IPP group gets involved.

The IPP group participates with the mother and gets her consent to send the child to boarding so that he/she gets better opportunities. Some mothers agree,

while some don't. For those who don't, they continue in the night shelter facility. Mothers usually have to pay Rs. 500/- for the children, however this is flexible and Prerana helps out mothers who cannot raise this fund. However in cases of some shelter facilities that had no funds, Prerana actively raised funds for them and linked them with donors in order to mobilize resources for them. There are several boarding schools that provide a place for these kids. I saw a list of the places, and was happy to know about such facilities. Now since I had made my visit in May, this was the time when the boarding schools have vacation and the kids are back at home. During this time too they may use the night shelter facility. There are times when Prerana rescues a child from a situation of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking with the help of a police search operation or otherwise the child is as per law immediately placed in a state run Observation Home. Subsequently the child is placed in a shelter facility. Any possible vacancy for long term placement for such a child is often located by Prerana. .

There are around 40 staffs in this Prerana center. This Kamathipura center is the head-office of Prerana too. As Prerana works with women and children women staff is preferred over male staff. All of Prerana's staff at the center are women, except the dance instructor. an ex-resident of this area.. Prerana has two other NCC one in neighboring Falkland Road red light area and another in the Vashi-Turbhe red light area in Navi Mumbai (New Bombay).

After this, Sonali took me down the streets of Kamathipura. She and other staff make two such trips in a day down the streets searching for any possible kids. Their goal is to find any new kid, convince parents to place kids in the NCC , interact with the parents and encourage them to participate in meeting the teachers at school, advice them to put the kids in boarding etc. They were planning to organize a one day trip for the mothers so that this would increase the bonding with the women who have newly moved to the community. During our walk Sonali kept enquiring with the mothers on a potential date, and also on their preference for a day-trip or a 1-night trip. It was touching to hear one lady state her preference for Sunday, since the business was slow on that day and thus it would also not affect her earnings. Some of the other moms were non-committal.

Since there are 14 lanes, each staff takes a different lane. They choose on side in the morning and the other side during evening usually. There are also lanes and areas within each lane where they do not go. This is mostly since the area is not safe or they have been told by the people there to not enter that area. Sonali reminded me that the key is patience. It has taken them several years to gain the

confidence in these streets, and they are confident of making strides into new regions too. In normal case, Prerana has a harmonious relation with the community unless the rights of a women or a child is affected. While walking by we would run into some kids from Prerana and Sonali would ask them to go and join the workshop. She said that this was a daily morning affair before the school starts, since they had to walk around collecting the kids. This shows that there is a constant need for the staff to encourage the kids to go to school, and not much voluntary participation. This primarily happens with newly inducted children. This could be due to the lack of guidance from parents, lack of interest in schools and most importantly the factor that kids know that they can get away without attending school. But it was good to see that most people in the lanes knew Sonali, and the kids would show a lot of respect to her. One of the mothers we met said she could not afford the Rs. 500/- for boarding, and Sonali agreed to discuss this with her.

A little bit on the brothels themselves, since this is my first time down here. Most of these places are small shabby structures. When you take a look in, you see a small living room, that just enough space with a bed or cot on it. Then there may be a wash and kitchen area. These are the people living in luxury, while there are several people on the street too and I think they manage to conduct business in the stairs area or other parts. Now some brothels have an upper section, i.e. in a 10 ft x 10 ft room, there will be an upper section with another bed and enough space. The guys or husbands are mostly the pimps, or the people who are handling the kids and doing kitchen work. I believe they also spend a lot on their drinking, if the girls give them money to spend. I did not see any women being abused, but that may be since I was there in the afternoon. A hot May summer afternoon in Mumbai is not a time when people would want to venture out.

Once we returned to the Prerana center, I saw that the kids were enacting a play based on a theme given to them by Mr. Sanjay. Since they were divided into 6-7 groups of 6-7 kids each, the same play was re-enacted in 7 different forms. After this the workshop concluded with a formal speech from Mr. Sanjay. This was followed by a vote of thanks from the kids and then several kids commented on the workshop. Though most commented on the good part and the fun part, it was good to see some elder kids commenting on higher expectations they had from the workshop. They gave some of their feedback and things they wished to be included in it in future. Since this was the first time they were conducting this drama workshop, I am sure these comments will be useful for future.

After this it was lunch time. I joined them for lunch and had the food there. I could see the apprehension with which they asked whether I would want to join, since I believe most people prefer to not eat and drink around here. It was a simple food, with some vegetable pulao and 2 jilebis with pickle on the side. I had my lunch and then walked around taking a look at the kitchen, the restroom (toilet) area. Then I took a few pictures of the kids and the staff having their food. Some kids were quite anxious to get their pictures taken. I talked to a couple of kids, about their aspirations and school. The school has Marathi, Hindi, Telugu medium. Most of the Prerana kids go to Marathi medium schools. Even the medium of instruction amongst kids and staff, kids and the drama-instructor were Marathi. The kids told me clearly that they did not have much confidence in speaking English since it was just a subject. It is similar to what I felt with Marathi, being in English medium and having Marathi only as a subject. I believe this is one area Prerana will have to work on, if they want to get the kids to take advantage of the call-center boom, shopping culture boom etc.

As you walk around the Prerana corridors, some things you notice:

Notice boards – has chart of kids who have their birthdays during the current month; has paintings from kids; has instructions to kids/staff on which areas to play in and which to avoid etc.

Dreams- A board with a list of kids and their dreams scribbled on it.

Walls – Most walls in each room have some paintings, could be alphabets or flowers or some simple math numbers etc.

Kitchen – There is one maid during daytime and two for nighttime. They cook and clean up.

ESP Administration room – This is where most staff sit

NCC room – This is the backup room for the 10th standard boys

Once lunch was over, the kids were out enjoying their vacation while some decided to get ready to take a nap and some others were getting ready for the party in the evening. Prerana shelters have two parties a year – one during Christmas and another during summer holidays. So the boarding students are also able to participate in these parties.

We decided to leave, since Sonali had promised to take me to Falkland Road center too. As we were leaving, some of the kids asked me if I still had their picture and if they could have a solo snap. I had taken some. Some asked me if I would come back, and I said I would.

Visit to Prerana Center – Falkland Road

After Kamathipura, Sonali took me to the second center of Prerana – Falkland Road. A little bit of this region. This place was called the Playhouse, since during the times of the British it was a sex-trade center and there was and still exists many shady theaters. Locally I realized that if you say “playhouse” no one recognizes it, but you need to say it with a local dialect of “peelay-house”. I never knew that this area was a red-light area. However in recent years it seems that this place has overtook Kamathipura to be the main flesh-trade center. It is surprising considering the fact that both places are at almost a 20-30 minute walking range.

We got to Prerana-Falkand and found most of the kids from the earlier workshop here. Since the Kamathipura drama workshop was for all the Prerana kids, it was quite natural. The kids were busy decorating the place for the party in the evening. Each center had its own party. One key thing was that this center did not have girls. The girls were all staffed at the Kamathipura center. The building was an old structure, and had several NGOs operating out of it. Prerana had two floors in the bottom and one at the next level. They mentioned that they kept shifting the kids at times to sleep in different rooms, since there would be disturbances from the windows due to the proximity to the road. This center has 66 kids. I took a quick walk around the facility. I also understood the organizational structure of Prerana is the same here as in Kamathipura.

The faculty showed me the kitchen, the sleeping area and also showed me the storage units that were donated by Asha. The rooms were pretty much the same style, with paintings on the walls, notice-boards etc. I could not go into much detail whether they followed the same format of NCC, ESP, IPP here too, nor could I go through any file. However I learnt that the faculty themselves were going to take a 3 day trip to Goa, an annual ritual which lets them get off from this. I think they said that some people would stay back to take care of the kids, but I need to re-check on this.

We decided to make a trip to the brothels, since the faculty wanted to check on how many women would be interested in the day-trip. However while we were waiting for the faculty to come along, I remember a cute little girl (around 4-5 yrs old) walking in. She was a Prerana resident, and was dressed up in a nice little dress for the party. Her smile will stay in my mind for a long time, since she reminded me about any normal little one I would see on the streets or even my niece.

During our walks I noticed that this area was worse. The steps were so dangerous, structures were so fragile. However the inside was pretty much the same. I could also see some women all dressed up and already out in the streets, ready for business.

After this, I bid good-bye to the Prerana folks and said that I would also visit the Vashi center at a later date, and probably come down again.

Visit to Prerana Center – Vashi-Turbhe

After several calls and several re-scheduling I was able to connect with Kalpana and decide on a day to visit the Turbhe center. We met at the Turbhe railway station. No one who has lived in Mumbai would know the existence of this red light area. This is an area that caters to the highway drivers and people who are on the road. It is quite close to the highway. The area is just a few minutes away from the railway station too.

Kalpana and I walked down to the Prerana center here. It is a nice building, thanks to L&T. They have reconstructed quite a bit of it, and are also in the process of building a play-area for kids in the back of the building. The center has 4 rooms in total. 2 of them used are for office purposes during the day, and for sleeping at night. The other 2 have classes for the kids. One of them has a main section where the teacher conducts the evening classes for school-going kids and a section for the doctor's visit. The other one is more for toddlers and infants, and has a kitchen next to it. All of them have good electricity and look really good. The one thing missing was the traditional Prerana painting on the walls. I believe it will happen as soon as the work is done.

First Kalpana explained to me a little background about the work. Most of it is the same as the other centers. The main difference is that this area has a lot of minors involved in the trade. So there are lots of restrictions too. The minors are controlled by the brothel-keeper, the "gharwali". So it requires even her permission to get the kid enrolled into Prerana. Because of this the number of kids is a little less. There are only around 40 kids here, 22 of them going to school and 18 infants/toddlers. Also this center was setup in 2001, and hence has not been in existence for a long time. Having visited the other centers I now do understand the need for the community to trust Prerana employees. The main person in-charge of the center, Madhuri, acts as the counselor too since she has a degree in MSW. The senior-most person of the center, Manjula, is the most useful when it comes down to knowing the community. In addition there are three staff members who are the night-staff. During the daytime they act as the cooks or helpers in various activities. In addition they also make the evening rounds to gather the kids and bring them to the shelter. These three people live around this area. In addition, they have one teacher who also lives close by who comes in the morning for the pre school and in the evening for the older children

The structure is essentially the same – NCC, ESP and IPP. Plus they too maintain the same filing structure for each kid. The kids follow the same routine.

After this, we decided to take a walk around the community since it was evening. This was when they would make the walks around to gather the kids and bring them down. I went with Manjula, Kalpana and Madhuri. However Kalpana decided to turn back shortly, since she realized that there was a certain person in the community who would be offended by her presence as she had recently accompanied the police for property recovery of a minor girl rescued from one of the brothels here, , since there was a police raid the previous evening.

We met a lady who had just been released by the cops, after the previous night's raid. We also met a few mothers who agreed to send their kids to the shelter. Some kids went to the shelter themselves. Some who had older siblings were being taken along by the elder one. However for a few, especially the little ones, the staff had to collect them and take them to the center. I was really shocked to see the number of minors involved in the trade here. Some of them would probably be in the age group of 14-16. The cops here were not quite co-operative it seems. So this makes things difficult for Prerana here. One lady insisted on having us over for tea. One of the "gharwalis" gave a little kid (around 1.5 yrs old) to us and told them to take her. Her name was Pinky. She walked back with us, and would always make it a point to hold our hands and walk on with her squeaky shoes. I surely would not forget that walk with her. We had some other older kids also come along with us. I also met an 8th standard kid. He is the only one from this center who has made it so far in education, and they are hoping he will continue on. We got back to the center around 6PM, and the kids were all in their classes very soon.

I also realized that it was far too dangerous even for the Prerana staff members to walk around this area at night, especially due to lack of light. If the lights are gone, it is quite difficult for the staff to control the kids. So a suggestion would be for Asha to discuss with Prerana on setting up a generator. I believe this will help the organization in the long run. This may also be needed for other Prerana centers, but this one will need it more since it exists in a no-mans land. Another point is the rescue of minors. I do know that Prerana will be doing as much as possible. But since Prerana also believes in kids and education, essentially a minor is also a kid. There is a need for Prerana to work along with the local council and get this sorted out, especially with Prerana's clout in these circles.

I took a walk around the facility. In the kitchen I had an egg, since the staff was preparing it for the evening snack for the kids. The kitchen looks really neat and well organized. One thing that has struck me in all my visits is the cleanliness of

the Prerana centers. It is really well maintained. I then went to visit the toddlers in the adjacent section. One staff member was playing with the kids with nursery rhymes and toddler games. As soon as I sat down, my favorite Pinky came running to me, and was in my lap within seconds. She refused to get down, and kept playing on by climbing in and out of my lap. Then gradually the others also came around me. In total there were around 10 toddlers. Once I took my camera out, there was total chaos. Each one wanted their picture and most importantly wanted to see it too. After more than a dozen snaps and playing around with them, I moved on to the next room. However I heard one of the little one wailing out loud. It was her first day in the shelter, and she wanted to go back to her mother. Even though I took her picture she was least interested and continued crying. The staff told me that it is a better practice to let them cry on their own, since then it would gradually end soon. In the second room, the evening classes were going on. The teacher was teaching them and subsequently asking questions. I met the 8th standard kid here again. There were few in 3rd, 4th, 5th and 6th standard too. In total there were around 14 kids. It was funny to see them struggle over some simple questions...but I am sure that I would fail the “Are you smarter than the 5th grader test”

After this I went to the main area and listened to more stories of this area and also of other Prerana centers...some of them good and some of them very touching. Kalpana mentioned that she works in Kharghar area where Prerana has an orphanage and a residential vocational-skills training center. I promised her that I would visit this area some time too, even if it is not in this visit.

I asked the local staff if they had any requirements, and they said there were none. The most difficult part for them is to find staff members, since not many people want to be associated with this work and also in this remote area. No one complained about any financial needs or of any other.

I did not wait for the kids to be tucked back in, since that would be pretty late. So Kalpana and I bid goodbye and moved out of this area. As we walked out Pinky too gave a big “bye bye” shout along with others, and I would not forget those faces too soon.

Summary

As per me, the main issues that Prerana faces are:

- Staff members
- need tutors for teaching the kids. Their education level is pretty low
- need some solar lamps or some generators for electricity backup
- kids should have bunker beds or good mattresses to sleep on. They sleep on a mat “ chatai” currently.

I am sure Asha or others can help out Prerana in the latter three, and Prerana will themselves have to work on point 1 to find apt resources. If money is the factor to find good social workers, then donors could help out on Point-1 too. However this is a good project and it should not be affected due to funds, since Prerana has been able to gain the trust of the local community.

On a final note, I liked the facilities that Prerana has provided in all centers and do totally appreciate all the efforts that they make to improve the life of these kids. I also agree with their efforts in trying to involve the mothers. The one part that Prerana has stayed away from would be – trying to find alternative employment to the mothers. They talked about some of their kids being employed in various places, but I think at some point to reduce the sex-trade they will have to step in and try to address the mothers themselves. This will go a lot in improving the condition of the kids.