

A ride to redemption

Victims of prostitution, street gangs take awareness campaign to villages in India;

BY PAULA ARAB, CALGARY HERALD JULY 26, 2009

{For 30 days, Paula Arab lived with young victims of human trafficking in India. Twenty girls and 10 foreign volunteers were brought together on an awareness-raising campaign by odanadi seva trust. They cycled through poor villages, rich only in vulnerable children who are preyed upon by traffickers. It was a journey of self-exploration, marking an important step on the victims' path to recovery.

Running water is valuable in rural India, especially when it must be shared among victims of human exploitation. The girls--who have been prostituted or are children of prostitutes--are obsessed with cleanliness. "Shampoo, wash and rinse, three times, Sister. One hour," says S , who was prostituted by her father when she was a child.

Bathing time is non-negotiable on this gruelling Cycle "Jatha" (rally) to Stop Human Trafficking. Later, deeper issues emerge. Obsessive washing is just one symptom of a past of suffering; a past where these children were made to feel unclean or were told repeatedly: You are dirty.

Odanadi Seva Trust is an Indian non-governmental organization that raids brothels, rescues children from the slums, rehabilitates victims and works to eradicate exploitation. Its facility is located in Hootagally village, outside of the enchanting but chaotic city of Mysore. Incessant honking and congested streets are left behind as a dirt road leads volunteers to a modern facility towering above the village's mud huts. The fresh scent of wild jasmine and gardenia replaces Mysore's choking diesel fumes. Odanadi feels more like a spiritual retreat than an institution that houses an orphanage, schools and shelters.

Small children run to greet visitors, calling "Sister" to strangers. One nine-year-old has lived here since she was two-days-old and rescued from a dust-bin. She wants to play. It's hardly all fun and games, however, as laughter gives way to sobs from a nearby dorm. I look in and meet a newly arrived sex trade worker, who was among 12 women rescued a day earlier from a Mysore brothel. She's scared and traumatized, yet warmly reaches out to strangers. She hugs me goodbye and asks if I will return in the morning. How easy it would be to exploit someone so trusting and vulnerable.

Odanadi is abuzz about the raid. The victims were found crouched in a windowless room behind a restaurant's fake walls. For two weeks, they were held like animals. The four who came to Odanadi got off easy. The other eight, who were from Bangladesh, went to jail for entering India without proper visas.

I meet Sh , part of a group of mentally and physically challenged women forced to work as prostitutes. Sh has a woman's body but a child's mind. She was gang-raped on a train after her family rejected her for her disability and left her to fend for herself. We pretend today is Sh 's birthday, because she wants us to, and it makes her happy.

An estimated 2.5 million people are trafficked around the world each year.

Human trafficking experts say the perpetrators typically lure the poor with false promises of marriage, a

good job or even Bollywood stardom. They kidnap and control people through drugs, gang rapes and threats, breaking their will and forcing victims into prostitution. Other children are sold as slaves or sentenced to child begging rings, as depicted in the Oscar-winning movie *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Canada is not immune to the problem. According to the U. S. State Department's annual *Trafficking Persons report*: "Canada is a source, transit and destination country for men, women and children, trafficked for purposes of commercial sexual exploitation and forced labour." Unlike in the U. S., where those convicted of trafficking children under the age of 14 are punished by a minimum of 15 years behind bars, no such mandatory sentence exists in Canada.

Worldwide, the majority of those trafficked are 18 to 25, but the age is much younger in India. The United Nations Development Fund says child brides account for more than 60 per cent of India's prostitutes, and almost a quarter were forced into brothels as children under 16.

"The Indian government finally recognized child prostitution four or five years ago," says Sean Cleere, a British ex-pat living in Mysore and an Odanadi volunteer. "Before that, it didn't exist. No one cares about them. They're too low to be important, and people just want it swept away."

The cycle campaign targets Karnataka state, a lucrative source of children for traffickers. In 30 days, we travel 600 kilometres and visit more than 60 villages. The taboo of prostitution is so strong, our warnings are softened through song, dance, tree planting and a banner that says *Our Earth, Our People*. Odanadi founders Stanly Kizhakeparambil Varghese and Parashuram ML felt an earlier slogan, *Stop Traffic*, was too direct to be effective.

"We are planting ourselves in every village so that the children, the schools, the hospitals, will have fruit. And when they eat that fruit, they will remember the cycling visit," says Stanly. "This is how we will build awareness on human rights, and the exploitation of women and children in all its forms."

In each community, we form a circle and sing. The Odanadi girls use their beautiful voices to draw out the villagers. Then they make presentations and hand out brochures about Odanadi. Villagers seem most interested in the number for the distress line.

The 20 Odanadi girls on the cycle trip have much to fear as they are reintroduced to society. But they can't live in a protective bubble forever. It's hoped the trip, by building physical strength, will lead to spiritual and emotional growth, and the confidence to move on.

"The girls who are with us have come from different types of exploitive situations," says Parashuram. "They've undergone severe suffering and pain."

J , who has lived at Odanadi for eight months, has made tremendous progress. The 21-year-old is the team leader of my group, so I quickly discover the depth of her trust issues. I also witness a small but pivotal transformation. Her moods swing drastically, from the highs of singing and dancing *Jay Ho* --the song popularized by *Slumdog Millionaire*--to clamming up and running out of the room during a trust-building exercise involving being blindfolded. Her attitude is joyful unless it is brooding and sullen. But J is a survivor. She's never cycled before and is quick to burst into tears. But like the rest of the girls, she refuses to quit, no matter how many times she falls off her bike or gets wet and cold from the monsoon rains.

J was tricked into prostitution by a so-called family friend. After her father died of cancer, the

family struggled financially. Her mother wanted her to marry a 48-year-old man. Instead, Jahnvi, at 15, ran away with the "friend" who said she could help. The "friend" stole Jahnvi's jewelry and enticed her to a Mumbai brothel, where she was forced to work in the sex trade for four years before being rescued.

The childlike enthusiasm she displays for life is astounding. At the end of a long day of cycling, Jahnvi points in awe to the "colourful sky" and surrounding beauty the rest of us are too exhausted to see.

"I have a great will to keep going," she says. Jahnvi's sensitive nature becomes her strength, allowing her to listen carefully and take to heart what people teach her. She learns how to meditate. Before, she couldn't sit still without being haunted by visions of her past. A Buddhist monk Jahnvi connects with during a stay at a Tibetan refugee camp suggests she focus on the sorrow of others, and think about how fortunate she is by comparison. She returns from a morning of meditation flying high. "It was mind-blowing," she says, in her charming American English. "I received untold happiness and relaxation through this meditation."

Jahnvi is rebuilding a relationship with her mother, whom she blames for what happened to her in Mumbai. She is well on her way to finishing college and hopes to to study social work at university.

Most Odanadi members want to become social workers because of the influence of Stanly, 39, and Parashuram, 41. Social work is a special calling in India. The culture doesn't support it, and people would rather deny the existence of social problems altogether. Further, prostitution carries a stigma so great no one wants to work for Odanadi, not even in an administrative position. The burden falls on Stanly and Parashuram, former journalists who became social activists after meeting a prostitute years ago on assignment. Their daily routine includes executing raids, advocating for better laws, educating village elders, counselling victims and implementing prevention programs.

But even friends of the organization fear it's doomed because of the many obstacles. Stanly and Parashuram are gentle but firm in their commitment to women's rights and social justice. "This path we've chosen hasn't been easy," says Stanly. "Death threats, corruption, police brutality and violence have become a part of our everyday lives."

He recalls one particularly bad brothel raid, in 1996. They went to Bangalore with the father of a young girl who had been trapped there by traffickers. The father had dropped off his daughter several weeks earlier on the promise of factory work, but discovered the building was really an illegal transit centre and brothel.

"Girls would spend a month there being 'groomed' and drugged by the trafficking ring, before being shipped off to the Middle East for prostitution," said Stanly.

Upon their arrival in Bangalore, the father went hysterical, ripping blankets off sleeping girls, searching for his daughter in the dark and squalid room. He found her, just as the power went out. When it came back on they were surrounded by police who had been paid off by the brothel owner. As the officers were discussing what to do with them, Stanly bluffed and said the media and chief of police had been called and were on their way.

"That night, the

brothel owners were arrested and the children taken to safety. It is one I will never forget. My mouth

told the police officer 'I am not afraid of death,' but my heart was saying something else."

The incessant clacking of clothes being cleaned against stone is a constant reminder that the girls are survivors. They know more about teamwork than the volunteers. Each night, one girl washes her group's clothes, another sets up the bed mats and the rest relax until it's their turn.

One morning, my roommate, S , a 20-year-old beauty the other volunteers call "Diva," shares a secret. She opens her shoebox, and shows me her treasures-- shampoo products, fair skin cream, glittering hair clips and makeup. We talk lipstick, and laugh like true sisters. It is the start of a friendship that leads her to agree to finally tell her story.

"It is time," she says, sounding almost relieved, as if she can be unburdened of her past simply by telling it to the world.

S 's mother died when she was five. She ended up on the streets at eight, after her father's new wife refused to accept her. By the time Stanly and Parashuram found her at a railway station, S was deep into prostitution. She came to Odanadi briefly, but later returned to her family, believing things would be different. "Unfortunately, she was forced to marry a very old man," says Stanly. "She realized she had been wrong to leave us."

S ran away and called Stanly and Parashuram, bringing her younger stepsister M with her. "The father was after money," says Stanly. "It was an exploitive situation and M was prone to be trafficked. S was totally traumatized."

S still struggles emotionally, lacks self-confidence and is unsure of her future. She wants to do something meaningful and believes she will be either a social worker or a reporter. "There are many girls like me, who don't have shelter, who don't have anything. For them I want to help."

When asked to describe herself, she doesn't seem to understand the question. "How do you see yourself? Pretty? Smart?"

"Clean," she says, hearkening back to the obsessive washing. "I know I'm very clean, nothing else."

When asked how she feels seeing Maya grow up into a happy 15-year-old with aspirations of becoming a doctor, she says, "I'm not doing for M , she's doing for me." After a silence she continues, wringing her hands, "Sometimes I think I have spoiled my sister's life."

S vows she will never marry again. But when I say goodbye at the end of the trip, I am left with hope that she is beginning to believe she deserves love. S makes me promise to return someday, for her wedding.

The cyclists are encouraged to meet as many villagers as possible, to take advantage of India's value of sharing and to experience the cultures of each village.

"Instead of going faster on your bikes, look for new people to talk to," Stanly urges. "We raised one boy, we made him a lawyer and spent lots of money to educate him. He got married and we discovered he ill-treated his wife. It happens. You can't change people. Change has to come from within."

The girls are advised to strive for personal growth on the trip. They're told Buddha, Jesus Christ and many saints and learned people discovered wisdom through such arduous journeys, making pilgrimages

from one village to another as they are doing today.

The smell of curry and fresh bread baking on a wood fire wafts across the Odanadi courtyard from a smaller building, shaded by leafy palm trees and hibiscus shrubs. This is the kitchen, and a welcoming pot of steaming rice sits on the floor. I'm here to say goodbye to these people and this place, where so many come to find peace.

Odanadi offers medical treatment, counselling, education, vocational training and alternative therapies such as traditional Indian dance, theatre, singing, music, karate, yoga and art classes.

The program is widely recognized as a success, even as it evolves by trial and error. Over 18 years, Odanadi has rescued more than 1,800 people, exposed 54 trafficking networks and brought more than 135 traffickers to justice.

Still, the road to recovery and reintegration is a long one. Cab driver Selvie Kunjegowda has flourished since she left Odanadi. The former child bride was prostituted by her much older husband, but remarried for love in April. She's been promoted by her employer, the Public Health Research Institute, and now drives pregnant women from the villages to their medical appointments.

But for every success story, there is failure. Last year, one girl doused herself in gasoline and set herself ablaze after being rejected when she returned to her village. Odanadi believed she was ready to be reintegrated, but clearly she wasn't, nor was the village ready to accept her back.

Shortly after the bike trip ended, S and a few other girls got caught planning to leave in the middle of the night. Stanly and Parashuram tried to convince them to stay, but S refused. They don't know where she is or what she is doing.

I try to be grateful for what was achieved. "For 30 days, we cycled with survivors of the deepest hurts from Mumbai brothels and abusive homes," trip co-ordinator Christina Lagdameo writes in an update to volunteers. "They mixed with the communities that rejected them and reasserted their place in the world. As we made our way across rural India, each of you helped build bridges to self-esteem, confidence and fearlessness. I hope you saw that in them before you left, because we see it in their eyes and hearts now."

The trip initiated an important chapter in their healing, but where they go from here is for them to decide.

I remember the night the girls failed to return from washing their clothes, and see it as a symbol of a promising future for these young women. The teenagers had not gotten themselves into trouble, as feared. J and the others were splashing about at the lake, any trace of suffering long washed away. In that moment, they seemed to have found peace. They seemed happy. Their laughter still resonates in my heart.

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