

A BRIGHT SOUL

In The Heart Of Darkness



THE STORY OF PRIYA MITRA:
SINGING HER WAY TO A DIGNIFIED LIFE

NOVEMBER 2018

Prerana's last 3 decades' endeavor to end intergenerational sex trafficking of children has repeatedly brought to the fore the supreme importance of formal education as a unique key to liberation and development while simultaneously providing protection, immunity and resilience against victimization in the sex trade. And all this despite a complex and institutionalized social, structural and economic arrangement. Lack of basic education can be clearly seen as linked with intergenerational victimization. We, at Prerana, have recognized the importance of education and given adequate emphasis on facilitating it. Besides our other interventions, we have been recognizing their talent and abilities and imparting life skills to them. Impediments galore, but so are the heart-warming stories of hope, grit and success.

This is the story of Priya Mitra (name changed), a child from the notorious red-light area of Falkland Road in Mumbai. Until the age of 7, Priya was spotted loitering on the streets, she had no access whatsoever to education. The story traces her and her mother Neelam's journey from the heart of darkness to a world where Priya now guards her rights, exercises choices and enjoys dignity. We share with you how our Education Support Program (ESP) helped Priya discover herself and her numerous talents. Her passion for singing has eventually opened up a new world for her.

THE OUTREACH EFFORT

In the scorching hot summer of 2012, the Outreach Team of Prerana spotted the 7-year-old scantily-clad Priya loitering around unattended in the dusty lanes of Falkland Road - one of the red-light areas of Mumbai.

Children, as such, are a particularly vulnerable lot in the red-light areas of Mumbai, as pimps scout for potential victims (free and captive recruits) in the vicinity. The Team tried to reach her mother Neelam and discussed Priya's safety and the potential dangers of leaving her unattended in the red-light area.

Priya's mother was a victim of commercial sexual exploitation and trafficking (VOCSET). When she was trafficked in 2012, she was held captive in a caged brothel in Pannalal Chawl at Falkland Road. Brothel-keepers detested any movement by social workers in the area. Despite the challenge, Prerana's OutReach Team constantly made efforts to get access to the brothels during the visits. Although language posed a barrier - Neelam only knew Bangla then - the Team discussed the issue of her child's safety.

Subsequently, she was informed about Prerana's Night Care Center (NCC) and the services offered there. After a few rounds of conversations with Prerana's staff and persuasion from a woman from the same brothel, Neelam enrolled her daughter Priya into the Falkland Road NCC in 2012. However, it took a while for Neelam to open up about herself.

UNDERSTANDING THE GRASSROOTS

It took over 3 months for Prerana's OutReach Team to develop a rapport with Neelam. Initially, she said that joining the sex trade was her own decision. Later when she felt that Priya was safe in Prerana and as the Team developed a rapport with her, Neelam got a sense of trust and comfort with the Team. Then she started sharing more about her life prior to getting trafficked into the sex trade. At the end of 3 months language remained no more a barrier as Neelam started understanding and interacting in Hindi.

Neelam hailed from West Bengal. She had the responsibility of four children — three daughters and one son. Her husband was an alcoholic. Their financial situation worsened after the untimely death of her husband. Her in-laws refused to support her and distanced themselves from her. Neelam was left to fend for herself and her children.

Looking at her plight, an acquaintance from her village promised to help her and offered to give her a job in Mumbai. Forced by her circumstances, Neelam agreed to it. In 2012 the acquaintance took advantage of her vulnerability and brought her to Mumbai on the pretext of getting her a job.



Neelam moved to the city with 7-year-old Priya, only to get sold to a brothel keeper at Pannalal brothel. She was alone in an unknown city and ignorant about what could happen to her. Her ordeal started when the brothel-keeper started torturing her to recover the money spent on buying her from the trafficker. She was routinely beaten up and left unfed. For the sake of her daughter, Neelam had to relent and get into the sex trade. She never got a speck of the money that she earned.

Neelam dreamt of a good education for her daughter Priya, but her misery seemed endless. One of her customers promised to bring her out of the brothel. He gradually built a trust with her and promised to shift her to another place. He, however, shifted her to another brothel in Patra Chawl in Falkland Road, where they stayed together.

There were other prostituted women too. While the gharwali (brothel-keeper) kept half of Neelam's money, the man took control of the rest of it. Neelam, too, came under his influence. The person turned into a pimp. Neelam managed to save some money for her daughter's education and her future. But the aadmi (fancyman) stole the money and fled.

EMPOWERING VOCSET* THROUGH MOTHERS' MEETING

After the *aadmi* conned her and fled, Neelam was disturbed and decided not to come under anyone's influence. She did not give up on her dreams of educating her daughter. "I will support her education as long as she wants to study. I will stay in Mumbai and give her the best education I can," she said.

The Mothers' Meeting, under the Education Support Program (ESP), is held once in 2 months to serve as a platform to share information and facilitate discussion on various matters that concern the mothers with regard to their children's schooling. It covers issues like school routine, disciplining, mothers' interaction with the schools, issues of adjustment with the schools, effective parenting, information on activities conducted under the ESP and their objectives, budgeting, finance management, investment, personal documentation, information on the availability of scholarships and counselling on building a healthy relationship with the children.

At the Mothers' Meeting in Prerana, she learnt many life skills like maintaining her accounts and finances, budgeting, saving, investing in insurance schemes, obtaining and using Aadhar card, PAN card & ration card. At such meetings Prerana discusses these topics, empowering the women to not come under their *aadmi's* influence.

A year down the line, Neelam had picked up Hindi well. She carried out her daily interactions swiftly and was beginning to get grip over her financials and her daughter's education.



LEARNING THROUGH EDUCATION SUPPORT PROGRAMME

After being enrolled into Prerana's NCC in 2012, attempts were made to enroll Priya in a formal school. As it was the middle of the academic year, she could not be enrolled. Looking at the child's eagerness to learn, she was encouraged to attend Prerana's study classes in the evening under the ESP.



Prerana's Education Support Program (ESP)

The ESP was prompted as a result of one of Prerana's priorities for intervention namely 'ending intergenerational trafficking'. The ESP was born out of the organization's commitment to the children's Right to Education. Among various objectives, it primarily aims to instilling among the children and their mothers from the red-light areas the importance of formal education. It contributes to the holistic development and education of the children and youth by conducting life skills education, career sessions, stress and time management sessions and other recreational and educational activities.

Priya enthusiastically participated in the activities such as Little Stars, puppet show, dance sessions and other recreational & educational activities under the ESP. The child got highly interested in puppetry which was used as a medium to raise awareness on issues such as health, cleanliness, gender equality and behavior modification.

Little Star

The Little Star is a collective body created within Prerana membered by children between 6 and 11 years of age. Since the Ekta Group is a body exclusively for children of 12 years and above, the Little Star was created with a purpose of providing a democratic platform for the younger children to voice their opinions, ask questions and/or give suggestions.

In one puppet show, Priya learnt about child sexual abuse, safe, unsafe and confusing touch, and personal safety. She also learnt about self-defence during the life skill activities and through discussions based on newspaper articles. External volunteers, who came to teach children self-defence, were also helpful. Gradually, Priya started to disseminate her knowledge and educate her friends about self-defence. She taught them the techniques to raise an alarm and how to strike back when attacked. At a young age, she displayed a sharp presence of mind. She was fully aware of how to use the skills she was learning in the ESP into her daily life.



GROWING UP IN THE RED-LIGHT AREAS

By the time, Priya was 8 years of age she grew inquisitive about activities in the red-light area. As soliciting happened during the day time too, she was curious to know why women stood by the roadside and why they “painted” (make-up) themselves? What, in the end, did they do?

Neelam said she felt embarrassed and did not want her daughter to be exposed to or be influenced by the sex trade.

When Neelam felt the safety of the child in NCC, she also felt the need to enroll Priya in the Day Care Center (DCC) facility. In 2013, Priya was enrolled in Prerana’s DCC.

A MOTHER’S DREAM: FORMAL EDUCATION

In 2013, when the new academic year started, Priya was enrolled into a formal school, in Standard I, at Khetwadi Municipal School. Neelam’s dream was realized.

Priya picked up things fast. She became an active student, was punctual, completed the given homework and was attentive in her classes. In 2014, when she was in Standard II, seeing Priya’s interest in studies, her class teachers advised Prerana’s Team to enroll her in the classes run by Indian Association for Promotion of Adoption & Child Welfare (IAPA), called Asmita classes. The classes were meant to supplement her classroom learnings. Priya’s mother, the school authorities and Prerana consulted the child and she showed interest in taking up the classes. Priya was taught reading, writing and English speaking apart from other educational activities.

Asmita classes were held from 9 am to 12 pm. Since Priya had to attend the afternoon session in school, she was admitted to the classes in 2014. The same year, recognizing Priya’s potentialities, IAPA offered a monthly scholarship to her. They approached Neelam, who consulted Prerana’s Team. The Team explained to her the terms of the scholarship and the reasons it was being offered to Priya. It was a proud moment for the mother who readily accepted it.

The Team advised Neelam to regularly visit the school and Asmita classes to get updates and feedback on her daughter. She was asked to timely collect the scholarship, follow up and give her own inputs during the visits. Neelam made regular visits and supported Priya’s achievements.

Parenting responsibilities aren't easy for mothers in the red-light areas. Here, for a mother her child is her family and vice-versa. Often, long absence of mothers, as happens in the sex trade, becomes an impediment in their active involvement in holistic development of their child. A child in the red-light area goes through a transient relationship and acceptance of one's mother doesn't come easy. This is where Prerana intervenes. Apart from the regular visits to a child's educational institutions, Prerana's Team also encourages mothers to get involved in the overall development of their children, a step in effective parenting.

MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONSHIP

Two years later in 2014, Priya, then 9 years old, wanted her mother to be in the shadows. She did not want Neelam to visit the school or the classes, or be seen around her friends. She started speaking with her mother rudely.

She started to question why her mother dressed and decked-up differently from the mothers of the other students in her school. While her friends' mothers dressed in *salwars* and *churidars*, Neelam came clad in a nightgown and dupatta, heavy jewellery and loaded lipstick. During an individual session with Prerana's social worker, Priya said that she wanted her mother to dress "decently" while coming to school just as her friends' mothers did.



The Team counseled her not to denigrate her mother for her appearance, but to appreciate the efforts she was taking for her betterment. She was reminded of the intensity with which her mother loved and cared for her, the responsibilities she took to get actively involved in Priya's well-being. It helped Priya introspect her behavior. The Team also discussed and shared Priya's concern with Neelam, which she understood.

Communication seems to be a simple act. Effective communication is a major tool of intervention in solving larger issues. A deeper communication and counseling with Priya helped her to bridge the gap that was quietly taking shape in her relationship with her mother. As children grow up, an open communication and sometimes mediation are key to building a mutual respect.

NURTURING LEADERSHIP SKILL

In 2017, as Priya turned 11, she also became a member of Ekta Group - the children's collective. Typically, children can join Ekta on completing 12 years of age. But seeing Priya's sharpness, ability, maturity and leadership skills she was made a part of the collective after she turned 11.

What is Ekta Group?

All children above the age of 12, under the ESP, participate in the Ekta group meetings. These meetings are based on the principle of equal participation and democracy. They provide a platform for discussion on different issues, so as to involve the adolescent and youth in the functioning of the ESP.



SINGING HER WAY TO A BRIGHT FUTURE



Six years on, in 2018, Priya is a lively Standard VI student. Neelam's dream of giving exposure, education, self-awareness and self-defence to her daughter is coming true. One thing that makes Neelam extremely proud is Priya's singing prowess. Priya's journey to the world of signing started in 2013, when a voluntary organization SongBound approached Prerana to train the children in singing. A discussion was held with the children and Priya readily jumped into it. Priya attended the sessions regularly. She participated in *antakshari* (a song game), sang English songs to pick up the language and learnt meaning of difficult English words through these songs.

Since 2013, Priya became a regular to the sessions by SongBound, without missing a single singing class. In 2018, she became one of the eight children who were selected for the Yuva Arts Project – a cross-culture event in Canada.

Priya is also fond of the younger lot at Prerana's Falkland Road centre, and actively volunteers there. She is also the class monitor and devotes time in helping her classmates when they face any difficulty. She still gets the scholarship from IAPA. As Asmita classes are shut down, Priya attends Prerana's morning study classes. "I enjoy reading English and science," says the 12-year-old, who is always open to learning. Besides her academic prowess, she actively participates in various ESP programs.

PRIYA: A RAY OF HOPE



It has been over six years that Neelam was trafficked and pushed into the sex trade. "My daughter says '*Mummy, mai kuch banakar hi gaon wapas jaoongi* (Mummy, I will achieve something in life and then only will go back to the ancestral village)," said Neelam.

All these years, Neelam hasn't let anyone know back home that she was forced into the sex trade. If somebody asks, she says she is a domestic worker. With the meagre money she earns, she also helps in her mother's treatment. Neelam says that for all these years, she has neither gone home nor has Priya seen her siblings. Of the three children, which Neelam says she has back at her village, her eldest daughter is married, while a son and a daughter are studying back at the ancestral village, all unaware of the ordeals of Neelam and Priya's plight in Mumbai.

Every child deserves education and a safe shelter regardless of where they come from. Prerana Team's sustained efforts and follow-up with Neelam and Priya is now helping them fulfil their dream of education for a dignified life. This is the story of Priya as she sings her way to a world out of the unbearable, harsh and indescribable realities of life in the red-light areas.

HER SUCCESS STORY

2012: Neelam duped into moving to Mumbai with 7-year-old Priya along

2012: Prerana's OutReach Team spots Priya, contacts mother

2012: Priya enrolled into NCC

2013: Priya admitted in a formal school

2013: Priya enrolled into DCC

2013: Priya joins SongBound

2014: Priya joins Asmita classes

2017: Priya made part of Ekta Group

2018: Priya in Std. VI

