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IN THE COMPANY OF COLORS

The story of a boy who fought domestic violence, faced the challenges of being a red-light area child, struggled to study, and managed to pass the 10th STD with flying colors. The story of Rohit (name changed), who found peace and harmony in the Company of Art.

“ When I was an infant, I lived with my mother, father and older brother. I remember being happy. During that time, to ensure our safety at night in the red-light district of Mumbai, our mother enrolled us in Prerana’s Night Care Center (NCC). I was two-and-a-half years old. Little did I know that this association was to change my life.

I had little idea what my mother used to do then. My father was a driver. I can say this with certainty as once while driving he accidentally hit someone, and fled to his village without letting us know. The police came for an enquiry, and took our mother into custody. I was only four.

Even though I was very small, I remember sitting outside the police station with my brother and crying for hours. We sat there for a long time without food or shelter. We just wanted our mother back.

A cop who knew my mother and believed that she was innocent recognized us. He took us inside the police station and gave us some biscuits to eat.

While in jail, my mother made arrangements for my brother and me to stay with one of the neighboring ladies. We followed our routine for a while – going to Prerana’s NCC at night, *Balwadi* in the mornings, and then home. One day, suddenly, my father returned to take us to the village. We were naïve and believed that he wanted to ensure we get an education. We left for Kolkata without informing anyone. Later, I learnt that in my absence, Prerana constantly tried finding ways to track and contact me.

In the village, initially all seemed nice. We were staying with father’s family. A few days passed, and we were put to work.

At five years old, I was asked to beg. My brother and I were taught what to say.

A year passed trying to live like this. Eventually, mother came to the village. She had been released from prison and had come to take us back with her. My brother chose to stay with my father, but I missed her and returned to Mumbai with her as a seven-year-old.

A few days passed since our return and my mother married another man. I was neither informed about him, nor introduced to him. I called him “Uncle”, not “Father”. I was old enough to understand the difference.

The Prerana team came to know of our arrival during an outreach visit. I was re-enrolled in the NCC and my old school. Initially, I used to be a backbencher, least interested in learning. I was aggressive and picked-up unnecessary fights.

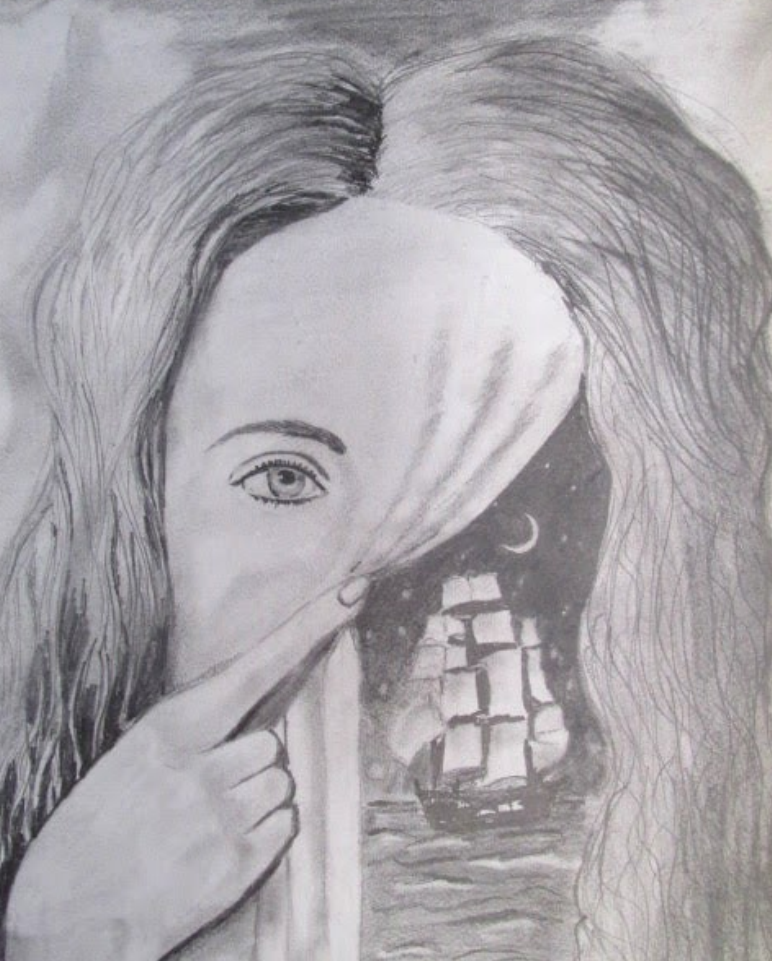
The fact that I was a Bengali enrolled in a Marathi medium school only made things harder. I was struggling to understand three languages – Bengali, Marathi and English. It took me almost a month just to learn the seven days of the week.

When “Uncle” learnt about my lack of interest in studies, he was furious. I also began bunking classes. Uncle’s methods to deal with the situation were brutal and ended in beatings. However, Prerana’s approach was different and new to me. Through their daily home visits, and surprise visits at school, a vigilant watch was kept at my attendance. They didn’t beat me, instead they tried to understand me. I was provided appropriate counseling which helped me understand the importance of education. This was life changing and cemented my willingness to learn. For the first time, I felt that there was someone who genuinely cared for me.

At home, the years from 1st to 4th Std. were very difficult. There were a variety of punishments that I was eligible for, according to “Uncle”- mainly standing in a difficult positions for several minutes. This left my legs and thighs in unbearable pain. Of course, hitting with a stick is the oldest punishment in the book.

Not all punishments were because of my poor results. I realized this when my grades improved drastically in 4th and 5th, but the beating continued. He made sure the wounds were invisible and no one would know. But, that was to change.





Prerana placed me in one of the finest children's home. For the first few months, they visited me twice a month to ensure I was doing okay. I loved it there as I knew a few boys from Prerana who were also placed there.

I was enrolled in the municipal school nearby. I became known for my drawing and represented my school in all India level competition held by the Government of India. While I wasn't among the top 3 winners, I received a consolation prize. The next day, I saw my name written on the school board as an achiever. I was so happy.

For higher secondary, I had to move to another school. I was responsible and a keen learner. I loved that teachers trusted me with important school tasks. Prerana's soft skills sessions had trained me well.

After 9th, as the Children's Home was under renovation, we moved to another building. I was transferred to a nearby school. At a crucial academic year of 10th, I struggled to accustom myself to a new Home and new friends at school. As the school was private, it was difficult to catch-up to children from stable homes, with families and nurturing environment.

These challenges pushed me to work hard. I learnt effective time-management. Without any form of supplementary education, I became the driver of my studies, followed the time-table and accomplished daily study tasks. All my efforts paid off. I secured 75% in my 10th Std.

I am currently in 11th Std. I haven't seen my mother in years; we talk sometimes. I am learning to channel my angst into healthy habits through Martial Arts and my art work.

Everybody has a dream; mine is to be a painter. I feel a strong connection to art. For me, art is therapeutic. It has been my outlet in tough times. I am pursuing Arts right now. Later, I want to get into Sir JJ School of Applied Art.

Now that I look back, Prerana helped me take the first few steps in the right direction. My journey has been a result of those steps. Even today, they visit me every month. It still matters to them if I am okay. Well, I am almost there...

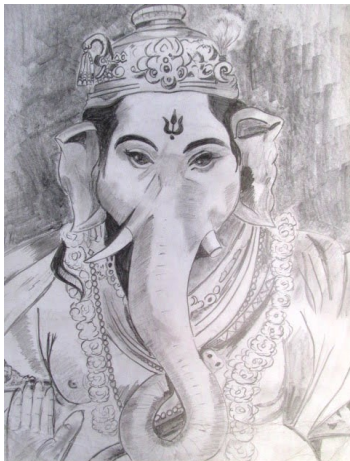
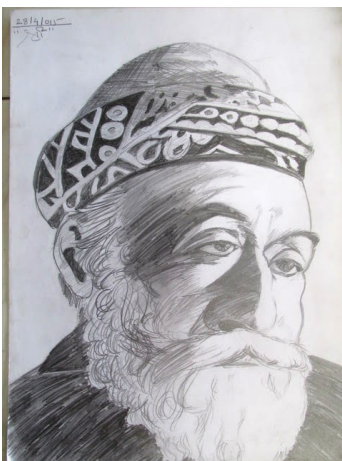
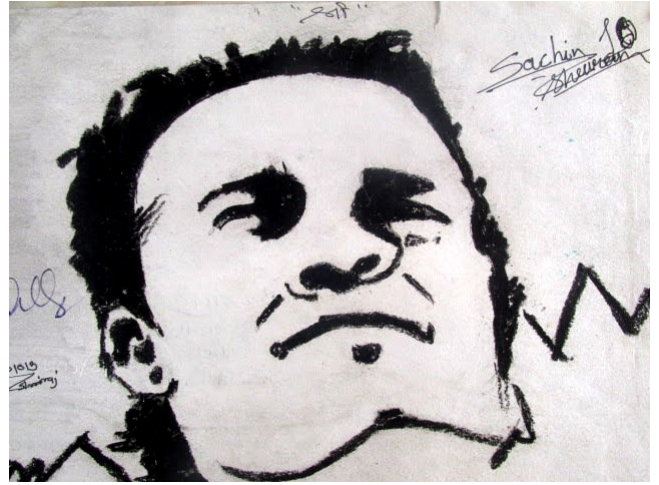
One incident in particular completely shook me. Once, my "Uncle" asked me to strip, and hit me with a cane until my back and butt had red marks. He thought I was involved in some mischief with my friends, but I was not. My mother too believed "Uncle". On several occasions he yelled at or hit her; so I don't blame her for being a silent spectator.

That evening when I went to NCC with my marks. I confided in my other family. At once, the Prerana team approached "Uncle" and mother and warned them if I was abused in any manner again, they would go to the Police. It worked. That day, I was sure, I was not alone.

Although, getting out of that one-room jail was not easy. In our room with a bed and a TV, I was prohibited to use both. The happiest hours of my day were when "Uncle" was out for work.

One day, I learnt "Uncle" was planning to take me to his village for work. I ran and came to the one place I felt safe, Prerana. I expressed my desire to study further and stay at a safe Children's Home. The team prepared me to give a statement in front of the police and the Child Welfare Committee (CWC). It was difficult as my mother was present too. This broke her heart.

All the sketches/paintings in this article are created by Rohit.



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