

MY FIRST GLIMPSE OF

LIVES WITHIN BROTHELS

FALKLAND ROAD RED-LIGHT AREA



BY
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“ June 15, 2018, is now forever etched in my memory. That was the day when I joined Prerana, an organization that works to end inter-generational trafficking for commercial sexual exploitation and other related issues in the red-light areas of Mumbai.

For a person like me, just out of cushy corporate jobs in swanky offices of Mumbai, Prerana revealed a new reality about the city — right on Day One. On my first day, I had an array of experiences — some beautiful while some shocking. But there was one experience that moved me, and that was the visit to brothels in Falkland Road area. Visiting red-light areas is a necessary part of Prerana’s orientation program to understand the community we work for.

Our orientation visit began with the Falkland Road red-light area. I set foot into a world entirely unknown to me, something that I had just heard of, seen in movies and news, and overheard in hush-hush conversations in our “civilized” society.

But then, the reality struck.

As I walked into the lane with my team, I clearly noticed “gharwallis” or “managers” sitting on the doorsteps of their houses — which serve as brothels — to deal with customers. Wherever I glanced, I saw prostituted women decked up, resplendent in sarees or even in glittering T-shirts and jeans, looking bizarrely attractive with loaded make-up. Each moment fell short to absorb the surrounding, as there were innumerable things to notice, a volley of questions, curiosities, and a bit of a fear and anxiety at the same time. Gradually, we entered into Kolsa Gali, which houses several brothels in its buildings.

One won't easily realise that these buildings, which appear lower-middle class from outside, actually hide behind them many dark and shocking realities.

Crossing past Kolsa Gali’s dingy lane — good enough for only one person to pass — we took a staircase to one of the brothels. As we scouted through the dark doorway with our cell-phone lights, we hit the first door — that of Meena’s (name changed).

With her welcoming smile, she promptly showed us her room. It clearly reflected the strong trust that they have on Prerana’s outreach staff. I peeped inside and stared at the 12X7 sq ft room with four beds in it. There could be as many as eight women inhabiting them. I learnt that it’s not a room or a house these prostituted women live in, but they pay for a bed — a mere bunk bed — to serve customers on the top, whilst their children sleep underneath. Often, the space beneath the bed serves as a kitchenette too. Meena’s room had four such beds, each occupied by different women in the sex trade. She held the first bed. It took me a while for the feeling to sink in and come to terms with the reality. These women pay Rs 250-300 per day for the bed, and they attend four to five customers on a “good day”.

As the peculiar overpowering stench gave me little space to breathe, I was told that the entire floor has one common toilet. There were more such cooped-up rooms as dark as the dingy doorway, lit by a flickering bulb. The daylight could never make a passage here. Amenities such as water are a luxury as these brothels get water for two hours in the morning from 4am to 6am. Within the already crunched-up space, Meena stores water in every possible vessel for her daily use. What pained me the most was how these women manage during menstruation? There is lack of water, no sanitation, and no decent place to rest. The heat in these literal ghettos is unforgiving.

I could no longer stand the wrenching sight and walked down the stairs. I noticed kids play unattended on the filth of the floor. To my shock, I was told that the stairs were actually the renovated ones while the earlier wooden ones had all the human excreta flow down. I rushed out, breathed easy and noticed brothels invading the entire Falkland Road. One may find women in sex trade often on roads or in shanties if they cannot afford a bed in brothels. Their kids loiter around, which is when the outreach workers of Prerana come to their rescue. Falkland Road is dotted with B-grade cinema halls, which also serve as a perfect den for customers.

Truly, words fall short to describe that experience. I feel there is so much to observe, learn, know, explore, research, understand, think, and write about these women and children. They are tormented mentally, psychologically, and physically till they relent, and forcefully get into the trade.

“ I left Falkland Road, but with a guilt. Aren’t we people — we civilized society — somewhere responsible too? Why would a victim of commercial sexual exploitation go back to these ghettos if she is placed with dignity in our society?