



PRERANA PATRIKA

EDITION 02

Building stronger communities, echoing voices from the field




A round up of the **Udaan** project

September 2021- February, 2024



NEWSLETTER BRIEF

In 2023, we launched the first edition of our half-yearly newsletter, Prerana Patrika to share key highlights of our work, our collaborations with the stakeholders and the voices from the community. It is our attempt at building a community of individuals who could walk with us on this path of Protecting Rights, Creating Choices, and Restoring Dignity of children and their families. Our last edition focused on our new programs, Unnati and Aashiyana, and their focus on family strengthening, deinstitutionalization and gatekeeping (both at the community and system level).



NOTE FROM ASSISTANT DIRECTOR



The year 2020 unfolded as a challenging chapter for individuals worldwide, grappling with the far-reaching impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Within the communities we serve, children and families faced an exceptionally difficult time. Women engaged in the sex trade encountered financial hardships, while other families across our varied programs coped with job losses, prompting some to attempt a return to their home states and districts. In response to this chaos, Prerana initiated relief and rehabilitation efforts for the children and families associated with us. The outpouring of support from our well-wishers bolstered our ability to sustain these relief initiatives over the following months.

In 2021, the District Women and Child Development departments in two districts sought our assistance in conducting a needs assessment for children who had lost one or both parents to COVID-19. Recognizing the urgency of the situation, we deployed staff from existing programs to support local WCD offices. While we successfully completed the needs assessments, the enormity of the task became apparent, particularly during the second wave. Thousands of children in each district had lost a parent to COVID-19, and despite active government initiatives, the districts struggled to complete the necessary due diligence, hindering affected families' access to these crucial schemes and programs.

After extensive consultations with government officials, partner organizations, and funding agencies, Prerana launched Project Udaan with the generous support of the British Asian Trust. The overarching goal of Udaan was to reach children and families affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, provide direct financial assistance to address immediate needs, offer educational scholarships, and facilitate access to government schemes and programs. Over the past 2.5 years, we have successfully reached over 1000 children and families directly affected by COVID-19, intervening directly in about 290 cases and extending direct financial assistance to approximately 170 children and families.

As we approach the conclusion of this time-bound project, we present this newsletter as a testament to the impactful journey of Project Udaan. None of our achievements would have been possible without the unwavering support of our friends and well-wishers. We express our deepest gratitude to each one of you. As we look ahead, we remain dedicated to all the children Prerana could and couldn't protect.

*Ms. Kashina Kareem
Assistant Director, Prerana*

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unforeseen crisis that tested the strength of communities worldwide. It exposed the most marginalized communities to extreme vulnerabilities and emerged as a key child protection concern with many children being left orphaned or bereft of a parent. In the absence of primary caregivers, children were exposed to the risk of being exploited and harmed. Many families lost the only earning members which led to grave financial struggles and also contributed to school-dropouts. Due to the financial constraints, children were also at the risk of being deprived of their right to education and development.

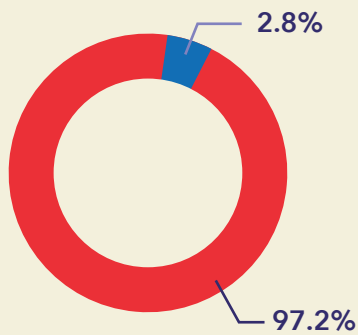
Given our experience of working with marginalized communities and children, we had actively collaborated with the District Task Force (DTF) in Mumbai Suburban and Raigad to conduct comprehensive needs assessments for children who lost one or both parents to COVID-19. At the time, we undertook this task with our existing human & financial resources. Consequently, we amplified our interventions by initiating a needs-based project providing financial and social assistance to those children and their immediate and extended families. Project Udaan was thus launched in September 2021, with the support of the British Asian Trust (BAT), carrying out interventions in 3 districts of Maharashtra - Mumbai City, Mumbai Suburban, and Raigad.

Under the project, we received referrals from the DTF, which is led by the District Magistrate. Throughout both the initial and subsequent waves of the pandemic, we remained actively engaged in offering support and aid to the individuals and families within our purview. Post referrals by the DTF, a needs assessment was conducted, and rehabilitation plans were put together including proposals for financial support and non-financial linkages. We also actively mobilized other civil society organizations to support children who had lost a parent to COVID and their families. Besides this, our teams engaged with the District Women and Child Development Office to organize family support group (FSG) meetings with surviving parents and caregivers where larger challenges around schemes & programs were addressed.



DATA HIGHLIGHTS FROM PROJECT UDAAN

Since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, a total of **31076** children from the State of Maharashtra have been affected due to COVID relevant deaths:



- Total no. of children who lost a parent to COVID-19: **30207 (97.2%)**
- Total no. of children orphaned due to COVID-19: **869 (2.8%)**

The total no. of children affected in the 3 districts where Prerana intervened through Project Udaan:

Mumbai Suburban	1024
Mumbai City	405
Raigad	717

No. of Cases referred to Prerana: **286** families (one family often consisted of over 1 child)

Mumbai Suburban	67
Mumbai City	101
Raigad	118

Observation:

From the referred families, **93%** of children lost their fathers aged between 31 and 50 due to COVID-19. From the families assessed, **67%** of families lost their sole earning members, leading to profound financial insecurity.

SCOPE OF INTERVENTIONS UNDER PROJECT UDAAN:

HEALTHCARE

- Emergency financial support to take care of health needs.
- Necessary financial support and linkages on a case-to-case basis: For example, a surviving parent was diagnosed with cancer and she was supported in getting subsidized treatment.
- Awareness about vaccination against COVID-19

EDUCATION

- Financial aid for school/college & tuition - through Prerana or partner organisations
- Assistance in enrolment and linkages to scholarships

JOBS

- Shortlisting job opportunities to apply
- Support in job readiness
- Extent financial aid for micro businesses
- Assistance in follow-up on jobs on compensatory grounds

COUNSELING SERVICES

- Referral to partner organisations for mental health support
- Support group meetings for parents

OTHER ASSISTANCE

- Emergency and short-term ration support
- Linkages to government schemes and support in follow-up
- Support in securing personal identity documents
- Creating awareness about pro-bono legal aid
- Assistance in follow-up on Provident Fund and Pension of the deceased family member



FINANCIAL SUPPORT & ASSISTANCE

A key observation at the time of needs assessment was that most of the children & their families lost their sole earners which left them in a financially disadvantaged position. As a result, the project's major contribution was towards extending direct financial assistance for education, nutrition and health needs of children and their families.

In a period of two years, we extended financial support to approximately 168 families

Throughout the two years, we also felicitated and honored children for their determination and efforts in completing their 10th and 12th std despite the challenges with losing a parent. A few families who didn't receive any or limited support through government schemes or were under immense distress and debts were also provided with additional lumpsum grants.

Guided by the idea of long-term impact, we also invested in creating fixed deposits of approximately 72 children

These were children whose family income had not stabilized or those who had very limited social support networks in the form of extended families. The deposits aimed to create a financial safety net for the children and were earmarked for the children's higher education which could be utilized after they turn 18.

Collaboration with the District of Women and Child Development Offices (DWCD)

Mumbai City: Since December 2021, Project Udaan collaborated with the DWCD Office, Mumbai City. Initially a social worker from the team was deployed there for 4 hours each week providing essential follow-up support to the DCPU team in the form of data entry, home visits and telephonic follow ups with children & families, follow up on the status of govt. schemes & programs, etc. focusing on cases involving children who have lost one or both parents to COVID-19.

Subsequently for over a year, Prerana had appointed a dedicated staff with the District Office to undertake these activities. Mumbai Suburban: Between 2022 and 2023, a full-time dedicated support staff was deployed in the Mumbai Suburban DWCD Office for over 10 months to assist the DCPU team in maintaining data and undertaking documentation of children and families affected by COVID-19. This staff was responsible for coordination on the Bal Sangopan and Bal Nyaya Nidhi Yojana with children & families, addressing gaps & also maintaining data & documentation for the same.

Through the staff deputed at both the district offices, we could reach out to over 1000 children and families affected by COVID19.

Family Support Group Meetings:

In an attempt to bring together the children and families from Mumbai City & Suburban and Raigad, the Family Support Group meetings were initiated. Between 2022-2023, the team conducted 06 FSGs in collaboration with DWCD with approximately 950 individuals participating in it. These gatherings served as a vital platform for families, government officials, and NGO representatives to discuss crucial programs and services announced for the rehabilitation of these families. Through these meetings, sessions and activities were conducted to help families cope with their emotional state. It also gave children and families an opportunity to voice their challenges and share their achievements, cultivate connections with each other and foster mutual support, thereby instilling a sense of community care.

Following the first FSG, WhatsApp groups were formed for parents in Mumbai Suburban, Mumbai City, and Raigad, with government officials and UDAAN team members from Prerana. These groups served to raise awareness, share scheme updates, address queries, and foster mutual support among families.

Non-Financial rehabilitative Support

While the financial assistance extended by Udaan covered various aspects including food, healthcare, education, job training, and small business grants the non-financial assistance included connecting families and children with government schemes (e.g., BSY, BNN, SGN, Covid-19 Ex-Gratia) and partner organizations (e.g., Arpan, Life Wins Foundation, Our Children, Pranik Healing Foundation, Sanjeevani Trust, Sewa International, Yuva Parivartan) for counseling, educational sponsorships, vocational training, and job support. The team raised awareness, organized partner meetings, collaborated with relevant organizations, and conducted regular follow-ups to ensure families benefit from these services.

Collaborations & Partnerships:

In order to ensure that families were able to effectively access required support systems, Project Udaan collaborated with other civil society organizations like Our Children, Masoom, Yuva Parivartan, Life Wins Foundation, Vipla Foundation, Arpan, Sanjeevani Trust etc. The support was essentially for job assistance, vocational training, medical support, counseling, and educational sponsorship.

As a result of this collaborative effort, an additional educational support was extended to approximately 34 children across all 03 districts

Over the years, we conducted two networking meeting with all partner organisations to foster further collaborations and partnerships.







Family Support Group Meetings



STORIES FROM THE FIELD

CASE STUDY #1

A mother and son's resilient journey of healing after the COVID-19 pandemic changed their lives

Shiva (6) and his mother Purva's (30) world was turned upside down due to COVID-19. Shiva's father, Satish, the sole earner in their family, succumbed to COVID-19 in May 2020, leaving them in profound distress. The DWCD Mumbai City were the first ones to take cognizance of the situation and the family was linked to Prerana. Shiva currently lives with his mother and ailing paternal grandparents in a one-room house owned by his grandparents.

When the social worker from Prerana visited the family first, Purva shared the challenges they faced during the pandemic. She was inconsolable when she shared, "I distinctly remember how this place we live in was marked as a red zone as many tested COVID-19 positive and it was all chaotic. We could frequently hear the ambulance sirens wailing. When Satish's health deteriorated, we had to walk him to the main road, the area was barricaded, and it was not easy to find any transport to take him to the hospital. Satish's diagnosis and treatment was delayed by 8 days as we were asked to go back home by the police who were stationed there for crowd management.

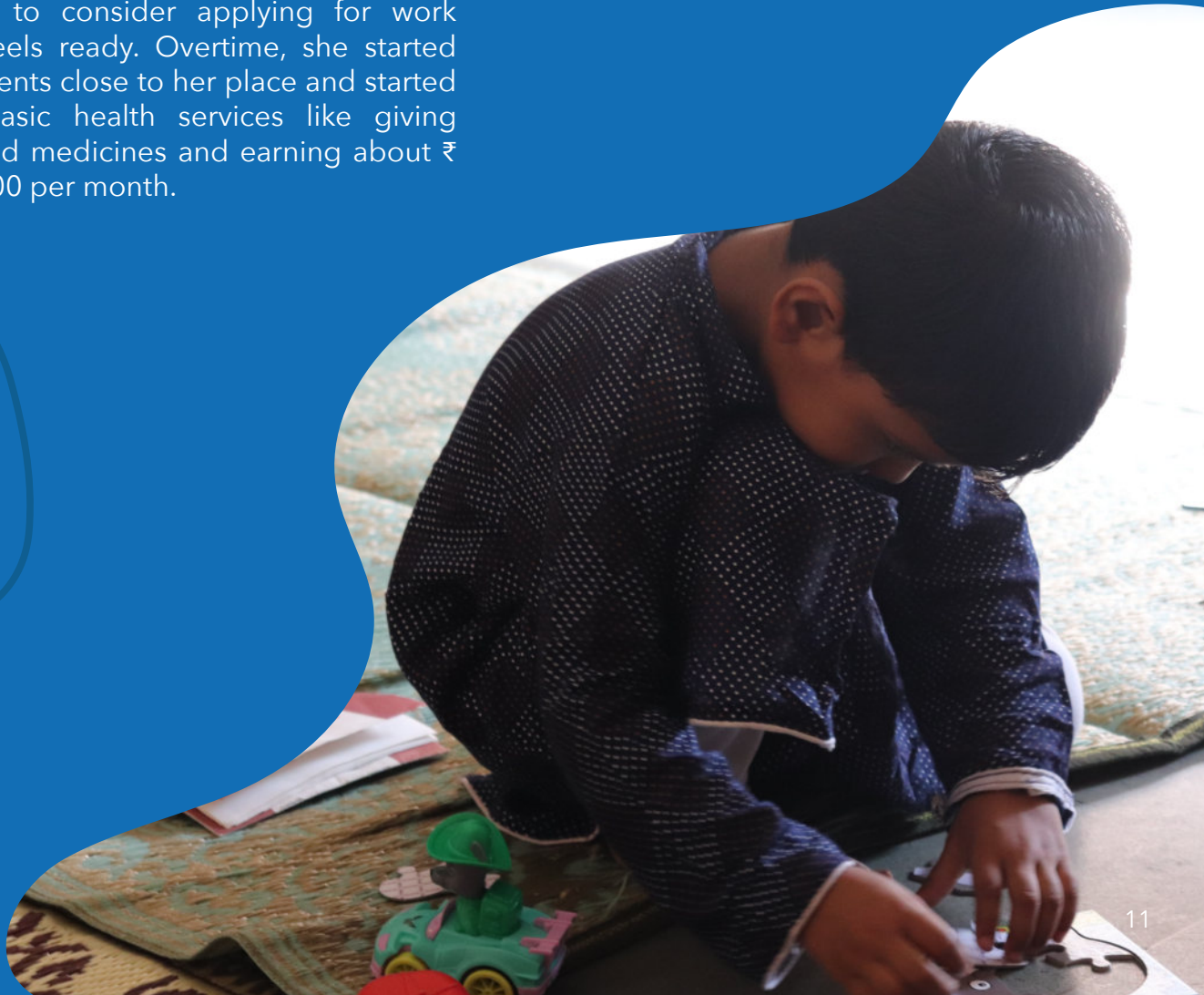
Later, when he was being taken to the hospital, he breathed his last on the way, and later the tests confirmed he was COVID-19 positive." She shared that they live in the same place and are reminded of this on a daily basis and that they miss him. After Satish's death, Purva started using their savings until the lockdown was eased. A few months later, Purva found a tenant for the one-room house that Satish and Purva had purchased taking a personal loan. She started getting a rent of INR 6500 per month and used it for household expenses. She negotiated for more time for repayment of the pending loan as with the rent she used to get, she was barely able to manage her household and meet medical expenses for her bed-ridden father-in-law. Purva recounted those months after losing Satish, her family was trying hard to get back on their feet. During this time in February 2022, Shiva was diagnosed with Pediatric Alopecia that causes hair to fall out in small patches on the scalp. One of the causes stated for his condition was the shock from the stressful experience of losing his father. Purva shared that Shiva's medicine dosage was quite strong and often he felt drowsy, hence she accompanied him on the school bus to drop him off and pick him up.

She shared that a month later in March 2022, Shiva had suffered an epilepsy seizure in the school bus. Thankfully, Purva was with him when this incident took place. Owing to his condition, Purva sought medical and educational support for Shiva. She also mentioned that she was unaware of the Bal Sangopan Yojana status. Thus, our team actively followed up with the DWCD office and shared relevant information on additional documentation sought by the DCWD with Purva. Following the needs assessment, we extended immediate medical support for three months and supported the family by extending sponsorship for his pending tuition and school fees. Considering Purva's limited social support systems, we also extended an additional lumpsum grant. Purva shared that the financial support gave her a much-needed sigh of relief.

During our visits, Purva shared that she had completed her ANM nursing course and that she worked in a pathology lab before her marriage and discontinued it thereafter. The family was linked to Jeevan Jyot Foundation and Sanjeevani Trust which provides free/subsidized medicines and also runs diagnostic/pathology centers. Purva was encouraged to consider applying for work when she feels ready. Overtime, she started attending clients close to her place and started providing basic health services like giving injections and medicines and earning about ₹ 5000 to ₹7000 per month.

The family was also actively participating in Family Support Group meetings held in Mumbai City and Purva shared that she and her child have found a community of caring organizations and individuals who understood their pain and shared their journey.

During one such FSG meeting, Shiva's eyes lit up as he actively participated in a drawing activity organized for the children. His art brought a smile to his mother's face. During one of the home visits, Shiva showed his drawings and artwork to our social worker and shared that he would draw this in the next FSG meeting and show it to other children there. Their journey may have been fraught with challenges, but with DWCD, partner organizations, FSG attendees, and our collective efforts, brave Shiva and Purva are finding hope and strength to move forward. We're inspired by their resilience.



ANUSHA'S HEARTFELT SPEECH AT OUR FAMILY-SUPPORT GROUP MEETING

"I lost my father to COVID-19 in June 2020. He was the only earning member. It has been 3 years and a very difficult and painful experience for my family while we were navigating through the challenging times. A common hope that every parent has is that their children grow up, receive a good education, and succeed. My father too had this dream for me.

In this unforgettable month, I got my 10th std results (2022-2023) and I passed. He may not be physically present to witness this milestone, but I remember the love and encouragement he gave me during his time with me. I will continue to work hard to honor his memory, achieve the goals he envisioned for me and make him and my mother proud. I want to complete my education and support my family.

The Mahila Bal Vikas office in Mumbai Upnagar was the first to take cognizance of our situation and we were linked to Prerana. The day Prerana Social Workers visited us, our house was getting demolished as it was going for slum redevelopment and we were facing issues over its ownership. I distinctly remember my mother first sought support for the education of my brother and me and kept it above our other needs; she feared our education might get disrupted. My mother has been a great source of support and encouragement to us. To sustain the family, she took up pico-fall work and sought our maternal uncle's support, despite the hesitation since he also has his own family to look after. With Prerana and its partner organization Pranic Healing Foundation our school and tuition fees were paid in full. We are grateful for this association and timely support as it has reduced some burden from my mother's shoulders."

Ms. Anusha, 16 years old
(name changed to protect identity)



CASE STUDY #2

Navigating Single Parenthood and Redefining Gendered Roles

Shashank* (40, name changed*) faced an unforeseen tragedy when he lost his wife Shalini* (32) to COVID-19 in July 2020. At the time, their daughter was 7, and their son was 5 months old. Shashank shared his journey as he navigated the complexities of single-handedly caring for his children. He described this journey as that of intensity and full of challenges. He shared feeling overwhelmed by the enormity of his situation and that the drastic shift from a shared caregiving role to an individual one has reshaped his life and perspective.

He shared that in their previous dynamics, Shalini took on the role of managing children, home, and work. Meanwhile, Shashank primarily focused on being the family's earning member. However, in Shalini's absence, Shashank has had to step into a more comprehensive caregiving role, embracing tasks he had less experience with before. Shashank sought support from his extended family, particularly his older sister and mother.

Their assistance eased the transition, allowing Shashank to handle the multifaceted roles more effectively. During the follow ups, Shashank often shared that at his daughter's school meetings, he witnesses predominantly mothers attending these meetings, and he finds himself experiencing awkwardness. Shashank's journey prompted him to reflect on the underlying implications of gendered roles in our society. He recognizes the importance of shared responsibilities between parents and believes that by equitably sharing caregiving, household, and work responsibilities, couples can foster mutual respect, empathy, and a comprehensive understanding of each other's roles. Shashank expressed that since November 2021, Prerana has been an instrumental partner in his journey.





Beyond extending financial support for his children's education, following up on the government schemes and services the family can avail of, and linking him to the Arpan for grief counseling support, Prerana has proved to be a much-needed pillar of strength in his life. According to him, this support has alleviated a significant burden from his shoulders, enabling him to spend more time with his children, preventing him from working overtime, focusing on nurturing his children, and rebuilding their lives in the wake of their mother's absence. Of all the families Prerana has worked with, there are 9 families in which the mother tragically lost her life due to COVID-19 and the fathers with support from extended families have been carrying out caregiving responsibilities.

EXTRAORDINARY ACTS OF COMPASSION BY SOME EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

Amidst the turmoil caused by COVID-19, what emerged was a profound transformation in the relationships among the key stakeholders of education: the school management, the parents, and, most importantly, the children. While working with some of these stakeholders, we bore witness to some extraordinary acts of compassion by educational institutions. These institutions, in a display of unwavering humanity, had taken the remarkable step of partially or fully waiving the educational fees for these vulnerable children. These educational institutions not only recognized the significance of education but also embraced their moral duty to protect and uphold the right to education for these children, even in the face of adversity. In addition to waiving the educational fees for the children affected by the pandemic, some educational institutions went above and beyond and took proactive initiatives to seek out donors who are willing to step forward and shoulder the burden of these children's pending school fees. A few of the children and families referred to Prerana's project Udaan benefited from these acts of kindness!



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