

Urban Scrawl

Village by village

Fri Jun 5 2009

(Paula Arab is one of 10 volunteers chosen from around the world (the only Canadian), who are escorting 20 survivors of human trafficking in India on a 30-day bicycle trip, to 60 villages.)

The Odanadi children have beautiful voices. We stop in every village, where they gather in a circle and start to sing. Soon, the villagers come around to see what is happening. It is girl power at its best.

When two older Odanadi teenagers begin speaking and talking about the purpose of the cycle, the women of the village come closer, as the men stay in the background. Later, we distribute pamphlets, discussing the issues of domestic violence, poverty and human suffering.

The women are most interested in the number for a distress line recently established by Odanadi. Some 30 calls have already come in following our visits to the villages. The campaign slogan, Our Earth Our People, is meant to send a dual message: protect the environment, and protect your children.

We plant fruit trees wherever we go, so that the village will have food to eat. We ask them to nurture the life of this tree, and to remember it is a metaphor for their children. They must protect each other from predators and remember life is precious.

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Brothel raid in Mysore

Sun May 24 2009

(Paula Arab is one of 10 volunteers chosen from around the world (the only Canadian), who are escorting 20 survivors of human trafficking in India on a 30-day bicycle trip, to 60 villages.)

Mysore is an enchanting city, and one that welcomes its visitors with the fresh scent of jasmine and gardenia. I was met on the road by women selling garlands of flowers, as is the Mysore tradition. It was a lovely contrast to what I would find later that afternoon, upon visiting Odanadi for the first time.

I went on a tour of the facility; a peaceful retreat on several acres of land, just outside the city, and met a number of the girls. Yes, girls. I was surprised by their young age and seemingly sweet innocence. They referred to me as "Sister" and carefully practised pronouncing my name. They took me by the hand. Then I went upstairs to where the older women sleep in several dorms, where three clearly distraught sex-trade workers huddled on a bed. They had been rescued the day before, in a carefully executed operation, coordinated with the police, Odanadi and other social agencies. A dozen women were kept captive in two small, cramped dungeons, entered by a tiny window that was boarded shut.

Sean and Sarah, my flatmates, participated in the tail end of the raid, and took pictures. (see Sarah's story and photos below)

Two days ago, on a humid afternoon in Mysore, Odanadi rescued 12 female sex workers from two windowless dungeons, no bigger than toilet cubicles. They had been kept crouching in the dark for more 14 days, hidden behind false walls in the back of two roadside restaurants on the Bangalore to Mysore highway. I want to describe to you what I saw there so you can understand a bit more about what Odanadi is fighting against – and the reasons why your support is so crucial.

By the time we arrived late on Monday the raid was over; secret trapdoors had been smashed open and the girls released: seven from one hiding place and five from another. Two police vans were already there. Khaki-clad officers stood shouting into mobile phones and questioning the crowd of restaurant employees milling in the dusty forecourt.

The place didn't look anything like a brothel to me: no red lights and seedy boudoirs, just two nondescript restaurants sitting on either side of the highway, with the usual corrugated iron rooves and cheap plastic garden furniture. These are the kind of places you stop for a lukewarm Coke on the way to Bangalore – not the kind that place you'd imagine to be the centre of an illegal sex trafficking ring.

We were there just in time to see the 12 girls, mainly from Bangaladesh and Calcutta, filing out from the

restaurant, squinting in the daylight and clutching grubby shawls to their faces. Some of them were crying. Others just peered blankly through the back window of the police Jeep, looking at us with a mixture shock and shame.

Somewhere during the mayhem of the girls leaving, Odanadi founders Stanly and Parashu ushered us through the maze of filthy bedrooms, corridors and kitchens at the back of the first restaurant. We came to a disused room with a small trapdoor set into the wall at knee-height. Outside a tangle of clothes lay amongst dirty plates, high-heeled shoes and discarded condom boxes. We had just enough time to stick our heads into the dank 6 x 4 foot hole. It stank of human bodies, piss and old food. Dark stains splashed up one wall and the odd, sad item of clothing lying abandoned on the floor. There wouldn't have even been enough room for more than one of them to lie down and sleep.

We left the first restaurant and had just enough time to run over the road to see where the other five girls were being kept, before the police noticed we were gone. Up a squalid, urine-stained staircase and along a corridor of empty, unmade bedrooms, we arrived at the last room to find a bright blue trapdoor positioned under a shelf. Inside was a dirty squat toilet in a cubicle barely big enough for two people to stand up in – and yet it had been home to five grown women for more than two weeks. It was like something out of a horror film.

Just as we ran back down the stairs, we saw a man who had been sleeping in one of the bedrooms dragged outside and thrown into a police Jeep. The owners of the restaurants were nowhere to be seen.

Since then we have found out that most the girls travelled to Mysore willingly, under the instructions of a pimp or 'agent'. They had been secretly working as prostitutes at the restaurant to earn some fast cash. One of them had been thrown out by her husband for having a miscarriage; another girl's husband had sold her into prostitution himself. Many more of them had families to feed – families who believed them to be working as domestic servants and nannies. They had come from Bombay, Calcutta and Bangladesh with the promise of a generous monthly 'salary'. They saw between five and eight customers per-day who would take them out to a hotel for an hour and then bring them back. In reality the girls received no money from the restaurant owners, but were given a small budget to adorn themselves with new clothes, cheap imitation gold and brightly coloured nail polish.

As the situation stands, the five Indian girls have had counselling and are being transferred to another rehabilitation centre in Bangalore. Odanadi is still working for the release of eight Bangladeshi girls from jail, where they are currently being held by

police for not having passports or the relevant immigration documents.

So far there aren't any happy endings or quick solutions for these girls, but just being allowed a glimpse of what they went through was enough to remind me just how important the work that Odanadi does is.

For those of you who would like to make a contribution to the 30-day Odanadi bike ride, these are the kinds of women your money is directly going to help. Without your support Odanadi would not be able to carry out investigations, raids, fight court cases against traffickers and pimps, or take care of the women and children whose lives have been destroyed by them. -- Sarah

The women were in extreme trauma, brainwashed by their pimps, and their story hasn't come out. Odanadi socialworkers have been interviewing them, but their stories keep changing, which is quite common. They're terrified of their pimps. In many cases, their families don't even know they're sex trade workers, and believe they are in the city with good, government jobs. One of the women was so upset, and said she just wanted to go home. As soon as we asked her how she was doing, she burst into tears. Crying, I later learned, is extremely uncommon in Indian culture.

I saw the girl again, later that day. She had calmed down, and was drinking a cup of tea in the courtyard, with the others. She hugged me goodbye, and asked: "Tomorrow, you coming Sister?"

The girls are so warm and loving. They just want affection in return.

Tomorrow, we start the cycle. I will try to blog, but I believe Internet access will be sporadic.

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