



Photos, courtesy Alexandra Marshall

As cyclists tour around the poor Karnataka region, they are encouraged to meet as many villagers as possible, to take advantage of India's value of sharing and to experience the cultures of each village. "Instead of going faster on your bikes, look for new people to talk to," says Odanadi Seva Trust co-founder Stanly Kizhakeparambil Varghese.

RIDE: Girls have 'great will'

FROM BI

Worldwide, the majority of those trafficked are 18 to 25, but the age is much younger in India. The United Nations Development Fund says child brides account for more than 60 per cent of India's prostitutes, and almost a quarter were forced into brothels as children under 16.

"The Indian government finally recognized child prostitution four or five years ago," says Sean Cleere, a British ex-pat living in Mysore and an Odanadi volunteer. "Before that, it didn't exist. No one cares about them. They're too low to be important, and people just want it swept away."

The cycle campaign targets Karnataka state, a lucrative source of children for traffickers. In 30 days, we travel 600 kilometres and visit more than 60 villages. The taboo of prostitution is so strong, our warnings are softened through song, dance, tree planting and a banner that says Our Earth, Our People. Odanadi founders Stanly Kizhakeparambil Varghese and Parashuram ML felt an earlier slogan, Stop Traffic, was too direct to be effective.

"We are planting ourselves in every village so that the children, the schools, the hospitals, will have fruit. And when they eat that fruit, they will remember the cycling visit," says Stanly. "This is how we will build awareness on human rights, and the exploitation of women and children in all its forms."

In each community, we form a circle and sing. The Odanadi girls use their beautiful voices to draw out the villagers. Then they make presentations and hand out brochures about Odanadi. Villagers seem most interested in the number for the distress line.

The 20 Odanadi girls on the cycle trip have much to fear as they are reintroduced to society. But they can't live in a protective bubble forever. It's hoped the trip, by building physical strength, will lead to spiritual and emotional growth, and the confidence to move on.

"The girls who are with us have come from different types of exploitive situations," says Parashuram. "They've undergone severe suffering and pain."

Jahnavi M. Balraj, who has lived at Odanadi for eight months, has made tremendous progress. The 21-year-old is the team leader of my group, so I quickly



A young Indian woman on the Odanadi Seva Trust ride pastes a sticker depicting the evils of human trafficking on the back of a motorcycle cabin in Mysore.

discover the depth of her trust issues. I also witness a small but pivotal transformation. Her moods swing drastically, from the highs of singing and dancing Jay Ho — the song popularized by Slumdog Millionaire — to clamping up and running out of the room during a trust-building exercise involving being blindfolded. Her attitude is joyful unless it is brooding and sullen. But Jahnavi is a survivor. She's never cycled before and is quick to burst into tears. But like the rest of the girls, she refuses to quit, no matter how many times she falls off her bike or gets wet and cold from the monsoon rains.

Jahnavi was tricked into prostitution by a so-called family friend. After her father died of cancer, the family struggled financially. Her mother wanted her to marry a 48-year-old man. Instead, Jahnavi, at 15, ran away with the "friend" who said she could help. The "friend" stole Jahnavi's jewelry and enticed her to a Mumbai brothel, where she was forced to work in the sex trade for four years before being rescued.

The childlike enthusiasm she displays for life is astounding. At the end of a long day of cycling, Jahnavi points in awe to the "colourful sky" and surrounding beauty the rest of us are too exhausted to see.

"I have a great will to keep going," she says. Jahnavi's sensitive nature becomes her strength, allowing her to listen carefully and take to heart what people teach her. She learns how to meditate. Before, she couldn't sit still without being haunted by visions of her past. A Buddhist monk connects with during a stay at a Tibetan refugee camp suggests she focus on the sorrow of others, and think about how fortunate she is by comparison. She returns from a morning of meditation flying high. "It was mind-blowing,"



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she says, in her charming American English. "I received untold happiness and relaxation through this meditation."

Jahnavi is rebuilding a relationship with her mother, whom she blames for what happened to her in Mumbai. She is well on her way to finishing college and hopes to go to study social work at university.

Most Odanadi members want to become social workers because of the influence of Stanly, 39, and Parashuram, 41. Social work is a special calling in India. The culture doesn't support it, and people would rather deny the existence of social problems altogether. Further, prostitution carries a stigma so great no one wants to work for Odanadi,

He recalls one particularly bad brothel raid, in 1996. They went to Bangalore with the father of a young girl who had been trapped there by traffickers. The father had dropped off his daughter several weeks earlier on the promise of factory work, but discovered the building was really an illegal transit centre and brothel.

"Girls would spend a month there being 'groomed' and drugged by the trafficking ring, before being shipped off to the Middle East for prostitution," said Stanly.

Upon their arrival in Bangalore, the father went hysterical, ripping blankets off sleeping girls, searching for his daughter in the dark and squalid room. He found her, just as the power went out. When it came back on they were surrounded by police who had been paid off by the brothel owner. As the officers were discussing what to do with them, Stanly bluffed and said the media and chief of police had been called and were on their way.

"That night, the brothel owners were arrested and the children taken to safety. It is one I will never forget. My mouth told the police officer 'I am not afraid of death,' but my heart was saying something else."

The incessant clacking of clothes being cleaned against stone is a constant reminder that the girls are survivors. They know more about teamwork than the volunteers. Each night, one girl washes her group's clothes, another sets up the bed mats and the rest relax until it's their turn.

One morning, my roommate, Sindu Raju, a 20-year-old beauty the other volunteers call "Diva," shares a secret. She opens her shoebox, and shows me her treasures — shampoo products, fair skin cream, glittering hair clips and makeup. We talk lipstick, and laugh like true sisters. It is the start of a friendship that leads her to agree to finally tell her story.

"It is time," she says, sounding almost relieved, as if she can be unburdened of her past simply by telling it to the world.

Sindu's mother died when she was five. She ended up on the streets at eight, after her father's new wife refused to accept her. By the time Stanly and Parashuram found her at a railway station, Sindu was deep into prostitution. She came to Odanadi briefly, but later returned to her family, believing things would be

different. "Unfortunately, she was forced to marry a very old man," says Stanly. "She realized she had been wrong to leave us."

Sindu ran away and called Stanly and Parashuram, bringing her younger step-sister Maya with her. "The father was after money," says Stanly. "It was an exploitive situation and Maya was prone to be trafficked. Sindu was totally traumatized."

Sindu still struggles emotionally, lacks self-confidence and is unsure of her future. She wants to do something meaningful and believes she will be either a social worker or a reporter. "There are many girls like me, who don't have shelter, who don't have anything. For them I want to help."

When asked to describe herself, she doesn't seem to understand the question. "How do you see yourself? Pretty? Smart?"

"Clean," she says, hearing back to the obsessive washing. "I know I'm very clean, nothing else."

When asked how she feels seeing Maya grow up into a happy 15-year-old with aspirations of becoming a doctor, she says, "I'm not doing for Maya, she's doing for me." After a silence she continues, wringing her hands, "Sometimes I think I have spoiled my sister's life."

Sindu vows she will never marry again. But when I say goodbye at the end of the trip, I am left with hope that she is beginning to believe she deserves love. Sindu makes me promise to return someday, for her wedding.

The cyclists are encouraged to meet as many villagers as possible, to take advantage of India's value of sharing and to experience the cultures of each village.

"Instead of going faster on your bikes, look for new people to talk to," Stanly urges. "We raised one boy, we made him a lawyer and spent lots of money to educate him. He got married and we discovered he ill-treated his wife. It happens. You can't change people. Change has to come from within."

The girls are advised to strive for personal growth on the trip. They're told Buddha, Jesus Christ and many saints and learned people discovered wisdom through such arduous journeys, making pilgrimages from one village to another as they are doing today.

The smell of curry and fresh bread baking on a wood fire wafts across the Odanadi courtyard from a smaller building, shaded by leafy palm trees and hibiscus shrubs. This is the kitchen, and a welcoming pot of steaming rice sits on the floor. I'm here to say goodbye to these people and this place, where so many come to find peace.

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Stanly



Parashuram