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CITY & OBSERVER

BREAKING NEWS AT CALGARYHERALD.COM/CITY

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SUNDAY, JULY 26, 2009



FOR 30 DAYS, PAULA ARAB LIVED WITH YOUNG VICTIMS OF HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN INDIA. TWENTY GIRLS AND 10 FOREIGN VOLUNTEERS WERE BROUGHT TOGETHER ON AN AWARENESS-RAISING CAMPAIGN BY ODANADI SEVA TRUST. THEY CYCLED THROUGH POOR VILLAGES, RICH ONLY IN VULNERABLE CHILDREN WHO ARE PREYED UPON BY TRAFFICKERS. IT WAS A JOURNEY OF SELF-EXPLORATION, MARKING AN IMPORTANT STEP ON THE VICTIMS' PATH TO RECOVERY.



Photos, courtesy Alexandra Marshall
Victims of human trafficking themselves, Mohana and Jahnavi are part of a cycling group aiming to alert others to the dangers of exploitation.

A RIDE TO REDEMPTION

Victims of prostitution, street gangs take awareness campaign to villages in India

PAULA ARAB
 CALGARY HERALD

Running water is valuable in rural India, especially when it must be shared among victims of human exploitation. The girls — who have been prostituted or are children of prostitutes — are obsessed with cleanliness. “Shampoo, wash and rinse, three times, Sister. One hour,” says Sindu Raju, who was prostituted by her father when she was a child. Bathing time is non-negotiable on this gruelling Cycle “Jatha” (rally) to Stop Human Trafficking. Later, deeper issues emerge. Obsessive washing is just one symptom of a past of suffering; a past where these children were made to feel unclean or were told repeatedly: You are dirty.

Odanadi Seva Trust is an Indian non-governmental organization that raids brothels, rescues children from the slums, rehabilitates victims and works to eradicate exploitation. Its facility is located in Hootagally village, outside of the enchanting but chaotic city of Mysore. Incessant honking and congested streets are left behind as a dirt road leads volunteers to a modern facility towering above the village's mud huts. The fresh scent of wild jasmine and gardenia replaces Mysore's choking diesel fumes. Odanadi feels more like a spiritual retreat than an institution that houses an orphanage, schools and shelters.

Small children run to greet visitors, calling “Sister” to strangers. One nine-year-old has lived here since she was two-days-old and rescued from a dustbin. She wants to play. It's hardly all fun and games, however, as laughter gives way to sobs from a nearby dorm. I look in and meet a newly arrived sex trade worker, who was among 12 women rescued a day earlier from a Mysore brothel. She's scared and traumatized, yet warmly reaches out to strangers. She hugs

me goodbye and asks if I will return in the morning. How easy it would be to exploit someone so trusting and vulnerable.

Odanadi is abuzz about the raid. The victims were found crouched in a windowless room behind a restaurant's fake walls. For two weeks, they were held like animals. The four who came to Odanadi got off easy. The other eight, who were from Bangladesh, went to jail for entering India without proper visas.

I meet Shanti, part of a group of mentally and physically challenged women forced to work as prostitutes. Shanti has a woman's body but a child's mind. She was gang-raped on a train after her family rejected her for her disability and left her to fend for herself. We pretend today is Shanti's birthday, because she wants us to, and it makes her happy.

An estimated 2.5 million people are trafficked around the world each year.

Human trafficking experts say the perpetrators typically lure the poor with false promises of marriage, a good job or even Bollywood stardom. They kidnap and control people through drugs, gang rapes and threats, breaking their will and forcing victims into prostitution. Other children are sold as slaves or sentenced to child begging rings, as depicted in the Oscar-winning movie *Slumdog Millionaire*.

Canada is not immune to the problem. According to the U.S. State Department's annual Trafficking Persons report: “Canada is a source, transit and destination country for men, women and children, trafficked for purposes of commercial sexual exploitation and forced labour.” Unlike in the U.S., where those convicted of trafficking children under the age of 14 are punished by a minimum of 15 years behind bars, no such mandatory sentence exists in Canada.

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Odanadi Seva Trust, an Indian group that rescues women and girls who have been exploited and trafficked, rides through poor villages to raise awareness of human trafficking.

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