

PRERANA'S SANMAAN PROJECT

THE DUSKY ROAD TO DIGNITY

MAY, 2018



In the year 1992, India had ratified to UN Convention of Child Rights, confirming to the fundamental rights of the children, where the child has the right to development, survival, protection and participation.

However, with a large number of children living unsheltered with no access to basic necessities of life, let alone education, we are miles away to stand true to our commitment.

While India strives to achieve Sustainable Development Goals by 2030, the first five SDGs - No Poverty, Zero Hunger, Good Health and Well-being, Quality Education, Clean Water and Sanitation - are all absent for the children we work with under the Sanmaan project.

Since Prerana's inception, our goal has been to provide Children in Need of Care and Protection (CNCP) with a safe environment to live, sustain and flourish. After years of working with the children from the red-light areas of Mumbai, Prerana initiated the project 'SANMAAN' (Dignity) in 2016, with a vision to aid the protection and development of the children found/rescued from beggary who are vulnerable to being victims of human trafficking.

Where all children must be able to access the basic amenities and realize their rights, these representatives of our future, struggle every day to access something that is meant to be theirs. Many who are unaware of their rights, accept the struggles as their fate, in order to survive.

On the face of it, the society passively discriminates against the children, wherein the responsibility to fight for the rights of this vulnerable section lies merely on the shoulders of civil society organizations.

To understand the situation of these children at the bottom rung of the pyramid, we would like to share one of the first cases that came to our Sanmaan team. The case of Meghna came to us in October 2016, at the onset of the project. It was a 'follow-up case', referred to us by the Child Welfare Committee (CWC).

Since 3-4 years, a new way of begging is being practiced - a child sells small items such as pens, balloons, etc. and begs under the pretext of selling. Meghna was a child rescued from such form of beggary.

A follow-up case is one where the child has already been restored to the parent and CWC as per Section 37(B) of the Juvenile Justice Act 2015 and Section 19 (17) of the Juvenile Justice State Model Rules 2018, can order an organization, Social Worker (Prerana) or case worker to check on her/his progress/ for a follow-up.

As a part of the initial process, our team was required to conduct a Social Investigation Report (SIR), also known as the Home Investigation Report (HIR) to get detailed information regarding Meghna's socio-economic background. The CWC shared the details of the case such as case information, family details, addresses, so we could have a basic information and understanding of the case to proceed.

Social Investigation Report is a study report, a document containing factual information, impressionistic data, analysis, conclusions, recommendations on the case at hand. A competent authority such as the CWC or the Juvenile Justice Board under Section (30) of the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015 can ask Child Protection Officer, District Child Protection Unit, Probation Officers or non-governmental organizations to conduct SIR and submit an SIR report.

An SIR is a very important document as it influences the trajectory of the case. It is used by the CWC or juvenile courts:

- To assess the immediate surroundings of the child.
- To decide if the child needs to be kept in CH/ OH for long term care and protection.
- For the Court's consideration if the parents/people claiming to be parents or guardians of the child file a petition in the appellate courts for custody.
- To determine a rehabilitation plan for the child/client.

Our first visit to Meghna's place left us in a state of shock. We failed to understand why the child was restored to the parent. Meghna, who was only 10 years of age at the time, was living on the streets with no shelter or any form of protection. When the family (Meghna and her mother) was asked how they protect themselves during the rains, they said they would generally take shelter under a constructed bridge in the area. Basic amenities that should be available to a child – shelter, safety and education were absent. This really hit us hard, more so did the thought that rights are equal for all children and there should NOT be any discrimination, irrespective of the socio-economic background.



Our team began the investigation. We learnt that Meghna's father had passed away 4 months ago (then) due to a critical illness and her mother was 9 months pregnant.

During such a difficult time, Meghna's maternal grandparents, who stayed nearby, looked after the family. The grandmother worked as a domestic help in a local house and earned 5000 rupees a month. She used to pay frequent visits to Meghna's roadside shelter to take care of her pregnant daughter. Prior to her pregnancy, Meghna's mother worked as a daily laborer. When asked about Meghna's father's family, we were told that he was an orphan, and both of Meghna's parents lived in Mumbai since birth.

Upon ensuring that the family felt comfortable speaking to us, we subtly asked about Meghna. Upon further enquiry, Meghna's mother denied that her daughter begged. As per the mother, Meghna was playing with her friends when she was "picked up" (rescued) by the police.

Despite her mother's denial, the team tried everything else to get to the bottom of this and learn the truth. A visit to Meghna's school shed some light on new facts regarding the case. Our team met the school teacher, who shared that Meghna had been irregular at school, especially after her father's death and would attend school just once in 15 days. The teacher further added that Meghna did sell pens and notebooks near signals. She also took care of the family and would do all the chores, she would inevitably sleep late causing her to attend school tired and sleepy or not at all.

The teacher also told us that Meghna was a high potential child with an immense grasping power. Even though she rarely attended the school, she was able to read paragraphs and recite poems. After the meeting at the school, our team was more determined to ensure that Meghna's education is not hindered. Immediately, the team went to meet the mother and initiated a dialogue about sending Meghna to school regularly. Of course, we knew that this was not going to be a cakewalk!

Educating and informing the caregivers/parents of where does the child's best interest lie is crucial, it is also an ongoing process. At every step the team not just follows up to ensure the child is safe and able to get an education, but also intervenes and attempts to counsel the guardians to take all the steps required for the development of the child.

The team worked on the SIR report, post which we conducted Need Assessment. It was assessed that Meghna's mother would ensure her wellbeing, and hence institutionalization was not required. Sometimes, placing the child in a Child Care Institution isn't always an option, even the Juvenile Justice (Care and Protection of Children) Act, 2015, says so. We always try that the child stays with the mother as long there is absolutely no other option.

Later that month, the team found out that Meghna's mother had given birth to a baby boy. With this news, Meghna was involuntary promoted to the role of a caregiver. Once again, she had another reason to miss school. She had been taking care of her mother and her newborn brother.

During the team's next visit, we spoke to Meghna's mother hoping to get her to understand that Meghna was just a child and should not be burdened with adult responsibilities, most of all she should not be denied education. Her mother didn't seem to care and would argue that she needed Meghna to help with the care of the newborn. The team consistently tried to counsel the mother; this did bring a change that lasted just a few days, after which the cycle continued. We tried an alternative approach and interacted with Meghna's neighbors and grandparents for help, however all was futile.

In the initial phase, the mother shared with us that the child is irregular because she faces discrimination at school from her classmates. She is bullied for being unhygienic and inattentive.

Bullying is something that completely breaks the spirit of the child. So, our team immediately went to the school to discuss the matter with the school teacher and the Principal. They were very cooperative and ensured that such an incident will not occur again. Later, we asked Meghna to be a part of the conversation wherein the Principal assured her of taking action for her safety as well as offered her to use the school bathroom for cleaning up, of course while keeping her safety as the top-most priority. We conveyed this to the mother, yet, the irregular attendance continued.

Following 4-5 months of intervention, we approached the Child Protection Officer who was involved in Meghna's rescue. It is important to note here that when we approached her to help us with counseling the mother, she was extremely supportive and immediately agreed. Such coordination and united willingness to handle cases such as Meghna's is crucial to realize the best interest of the child. The CPO's involvement in the case, drove our efforts further. Meghna's mother began sending her to the school more often.

Simultaneously, we searched and discovered that there was only one organization in the area, running a shelter that provided non-formal education. However, it had the criteria that children only from certain schools could benefit from the services. We would like to mention here that, there is a need for more such Community Based Organizations that cater to children rescued from beggary and offer them Day-Care-Centers or Supplementary Education services.



After months of working with the mother and indulging in constant follow-ups to counsel, we observed the mother's perspective undergoing a gradual change. The consistent counseling on the importance of education, the impact therefore and Meghna's potential as described by her teachers, seemed to be working. Perhaps, the mother might also have seen our persistence and that we were there to offer long-term support, while not giving up on the family; trust building is the very foundation of social work.

Along with individual cases such as Meghna's, the organizations working with CNCP must also seek an overall perspective of the situation on the ground to affect change at a larger level. Recently, in a convergence meeting with the Child Welfare Committee, Prerana along with 6 other organizations namely Pratham, YUVA, Salam Balak Trust, Committed Communities Development Trust

(CCDT), Samtol and ChildLine India Foundation discussed the issue of low retention in school of the children rescued from beggary.

At that point, this group of 7 organizations, also part of a network called Coordination Committee for Vulnerable Children (CCVC) decided to approach the School Management Committee (a decentralized body consisting a few parents and teachers for Monitoring and Evaluation of the school).

In December 2017, all the CCVC organizations surveyed 18 schools across Mumbai, collected and tabulated data, which was submitted to the Education Committee at Mumbai Level, that is Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai, with the analysis, our outlook, challenges and how the existing gaps can be filled to ensure that children like Meghna don't end up being drop-outs.

IT TAKES A VILLAGE TO RAISE A CHILD

It is apt when we say “It takes a village to raise the child. During the Meghna case, we witnessed the power of collaboration at every step of the way. It was not only her family that team was working with, the team reached out to different stake holders for Meghna, be her family, teachers, CPO, CBOs and other NGOs. A person or a single organization cannot be accountable for the child. It is a group of people. Meghna was rescued because the CPO performed her duties, she was able to access her right to education because the implementers in the school knew their role, she was able to attend school 2/3 times a week because overtime her mother realized that her daughter’s life could be better if she is educated. And hopefully, Meghna will be able to attend the school regularly and not drop out if the CCVCs challenges and suggestions are considered.

The Sanmaan team has been working with Meghna and her family for almost two years now. It is 2018; Meghna is 12 years old and recently gave her 5th standard exam. She has started attending school 2 to 3 days a week. She does not sell items on the street anymore. Her mother works as a daily laborer for 15 days a month. While the mother works, either Meghna’s grandmother or her neighbors take care of her one-year old brother. It is a slow process, but change is visible.

In conclusion, it is important that the society tries to see these children who have been invisible to its eyes since a long time. We need to build strong support systems for children like Meghna.

While the Government declares to make Mumbai a safe city, are we as citizens thinking of Meghna and several other children such as hers? Have we thought of having day-care facilities for such children involved in beggary so they can access their rights to safety, security and education without being teased or ill-treated by strangers?

Meghna and many such children are high potential, have the strength to achieve something in life. If not paid attention to, they are likely to get trapped into the vicious cycle of illiteracy, child marriage and even susceptible to being trafficked. Our Sanmaan children constantly motivate us to toil for the rights of these invisible children. There is yet a long way to go, but Prerana will always ensure that a child’s right is protected, dignity restored and choices for her/him are created.



This is how children indulged in beggary live! Let's strive to provide them with a better life, one with opportunities and choices. To know more about the Sanmaan Project, write to deepali.prerana@gmail.com. To read more such stories and know about Prerana's work, visit fighttrafficking.org