

DREAMS BEYOND THE DARKNESS



TALES OF YOUNG DREAMERS FROM
PRERANA'S NIGHT CARE CENTERS



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From Prerana's Night Care Centers

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Prerana

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INTRODUCTION

When you picture a red-light area, you might envision shady alleys, bright neon lights, scantily clad women, and lots of men moving through the dark, but you don't imagine a child there, right? No one does. And yet: it's a reality that exists—prostituted women also get pregnant, give birth, and rear children, some by choice, most by compulsion.

In the red-light areas, brothels are also the homes of most of the prostituted women. Around five to six women share a small dingy room with poor ventilation and scarce lighting. They have no space to call their own; their 'space' is just a bed, beneath which some women store their utensils and few possessions. Men arrive in a continuous stream, through the evening and into the small hours to buy sex. There is no safe corner. There is barely a corner at all.

When men swarm the brothels through the night buying sex, **where does a child go?**

For a long time, the answer was: nowhere.

Older children ran loose in the lanes, **absorbed into the trade** by proximity — sent to fetch cigarettes, liquor, condoms for the men their mothers were forced to entertain. The younger ones were drugged and shoved under the bed, left unconscious in the dark so as not to disturb anyone.

Without intervention, the path was predictable: girls groomed toward soliciting, boys toward pimping or running contraband. The trade reproduced itself through the children of those it had already consumed.

Priti Patkar and Pravin Patkar saw this. In 1986, they co-founded Prerana and opened **world's first Night Creche** for the children of prostituted women in Kamathipura — a room, a shelter, an answer to the question. At night, while their mothers solicited, children could sleep safely inside the NCC. In the morning, they returned home. During the day, they went to school.

Simple, and radical.

For over four decades, with the support of partners, donors, and people working on the ground, the NCC has provided shelter, nutrition, healthcare, and educational support to the children of women in the sex trade.

More than that, it has given them an experience most children take for granted: the experience of being somewhere they are safe to exist.

This book is a collection of their stories — children who grew up in the red-light areas of Kamathipura and Falkland Road and found their way to a life beyond their circumstances.

Their names have been changed. Their stories are fiercely real. Their challenges, surreal.

Read on.

CHAPTER 1: FINDING HER VOICE

(ALICE'S JOURNEY)

Alice's journey with us began when she was just three years old. Freshly enrolled in the *Balwadi* pre-school program, she walked into the Night Care Center painfully shy. Small and quiet, she seemed to want to disappear into the background, finding her voice only when she was lost in a drawing or quietly humming a tune to herself.



The caseworker who first met Alice didn't push. She sat nearby. She let Alice draw. Over weeks, then months, a trust was built — not through declarations but through consistency: the same faces, the same unhurried presence, the same absence of judgment. Alice eventually spoke. Then she laughed. Then, slowly, she became someone who could ask for what she needed.

The world outside the NCC was not a world built for children. Alice's mother lived and solicited on Falkland Road, in a room shared with five other women, where the night brought a procession of men and the morning brought exhaustion. Alice's two older sisters had been married off young. Her brother had gone back to the village. Alice was the only one who got to stay in school.



We covered her school fees through primary, and later through high school, and even tuition support from 8th through 12th grade, recognizing her need for the same. Alice's mother came to the monthly mothers' meetings, a space Prerana had built for the women of the red-light area—healthcare information, financial literacy, parenting support, an acknowledgment that they too deserved to be informed and respected.

She became a regular. She became fierce about her daughter's future in a way that her own past had never allowed her to be fierce about herself.

As the years passed, the shy girl faded, replaced by a young woman who didn't just attend activities—she led them.

As an active member of the NCC's children's council—the *Ekta* Group, she learned to voice concerns directly to management, honing her skills in advocacy and representation. She also started participating in life skills sessions like communication, online safety, and stress management.

In one of her residential summer camps, Alice wasn't the quiet girl in the corner anymore. She was the one organizing her group, reading the room, keeping morale up when things got hard. Her team won the most points of the season.

Walking Toward The Future

Alice cleared her 12th grade at Junior College and did not rest.

That summer, while most of her classmates wound down, Alice found part-time work and saved. Every rupee she could put aside went toward her own college fees – a practical act, but also a declaration: I am investing in myself. She sat with her caseworker and said what she wanted out loud.

"I want to be a Social Worker. Like the ones at Prerana."

It wasn't a vague dream. It was a specific, considered desire to return what had been given to her – not out of obligation, but out of something that looked like love for the work. Her caseworker helped her navigate the online admissions process of different institutions, a maze that defeats many first-generation applicants. Her mother sat beside her.

In June 2025, Alice was enrolled in the Bachelor of Social Work program at the University of Mumbai.

She teaches first graders now, as a volunteer. She helps run summer camps. With her legal documents in order and her sights set on a Master's degree from TISS, Alice is no longer just a beneficiary of social work—she is the future of it.





THE SOCIAL WORK LENS

For Those Who Walk Alongside (Social Work Practitioners)

To transition a child from the trauma of a red-light area to a university campus requires more than kindness—it requires deliberate, evidence-based casework. Here are the core social work methodologies that guided Alice's transformation:

- **Radical Acceptance & Non-Judgmental Attitude:** In her early years, Alice's extreme shyness was met with empathetic understanding and active listening. By creating an environment free of labels or pressure, caseworkers established the foundational trust Alice needed to express herself at her own pace.
- **The Principle of Individualization:** Rather than applying a blanket strategy, the Education Support Programme specifically targeted Alice's changing needs—providing foundational Balwadi care early on, and shifting to intensive tuition sponsorships when high school pressures mounted.
- **Working with the Support System:** Recognizing Alice's mother as a critical stakeholder was vital. By engaging her through monthly mothers' meetings and validating her grit, caseworkers fortified the home front. This disrupted the systemic cycle that had previously led to the early marriages of Alice's older siblings.
- **Fostering Self-Determination:** When Alice decided she wanted to become a social worker, caseworkers used guided decision-making to keep her at the center of her own life choices, honoring her intrinsic motivation to give back.
- **Professional Boundaries & Consistency:** Over a multi-year relationship, strict confidentiality and reliable professional boundaries provided Alice with a stable, safe blueprint for human relationships—one she now mirrors as a future social worker.

CHAPTER 2: THE BECOMING OF AN ARTIST (SAMIR'S JOURNEY)



Samir came to the Night Care Center as a toddler, in 2012, too young to remember anything. His first memories are from the Night Care Center itself. He was a quiet child, but he was passionate about art, which used to put the spark in him. After *Balwadi*, he continued his schooling from a Marathi-

-medium school nearby. Now fourteen, in tenth grade, he's known by his teachers for a kind of discipline that doesn't announce itself, a curiosity about how things work, and hands that can draw almost anything he looks at twice.

He lives with his mother, Parveen, in a single terrace room on Falkland Road. The arithmetic of their life is unforgiving – she earns five to six thousand rupees a month; the room and its utilities cost nine. The gap between those numbers is where most of their worry lives.

And yet inside that room, something extraordinary happened that the ledgers don't capture: Samir taught his mother to write her name. It is a small thing to describe and an enormous thing to have done. Her son, not yet a teenager, sat with her and taught her the letters. The first time she signed her own name instead of pressing her thumb to the page, something shifted in how she carried herself.

She started showing up differently – not just at home, but at Prerana's mothers' meetings, where she became one of the most consistent voices in the room: parenting workshops, health camps, anything that meant showing up for herself the way her son had shown up for her.

At school, Samir doesn't just pass through his subjects – he takes them apart. Geometry and science especially. He'll recreate an experiment from a Prerana session in his own classroom days later, just to show his friends what he saw. But ask anyone who knows him and they'll mention the drawing first.

He uses it as a way of leading, not just expressing. He runs puppet shows for younger children, leads storytelling sessions, helps his teachers design the charts that hang on classroom walls. As part of the Culture Committee within Prerana's Education Support Programme, he's developed a real pull toward Indian-themed art – visiting an office on a field trip that, for him, wasn't an outing so much as a glimpse of a world he intends to enter and change.

None of this happened in spite of the practical gaps in his life – it happened alongside dedicated social workers closing them. Daily lunches, so he could sit through a full school day without the distraction of hunger. A bank account, an Aadhaar card, the bona fide certificates that schools demand and that families like his often struggle to produce. Uniforms, notebooks, tuition support timed to the exact moment the academic pressure of board exams began to mount. And alongside all of it, room to simply be fourteen: martial arts, financial literacy sessions, art-therapy sessions and many other things which let him explore the world around him.

A Young Artist with A Plan

This summer, Samir is preparing for his Elementary Grade Drawing Exam with the quiet intensity of someone who already knows what comes next. He wants to study at Sir J. J. School of Art. After that, he wants to work as a Graphic Designer – not choosing between tradition and the future, but building something at the meeting point of both: classical Indian art and the AI tools just beginning to reshape what design even means.

He talks about it the way other fourteen-year-olds talk about things they've only half-considered. Except he's considered it fully.

Samir is still, technically, a boy from a terrace room on Falkland Road. But that description has stopped being the whole truth, or even the most important part of it. Ask him what he's doing this weekend, and he might tell you about a sketch he's working on. Ask him where he sees himself in ten years, and he'll tell you – specifically, confidently – about a studio, a portfolio, a place at JJ.

He has, in the most literal sense, a blueprint. And for the first time in his family's history, he's the one holding the pen.





THE SOCIAL WORK LENS

For Those Who Walk Alongside (Social Work Practitioners)

Moving a child from a place of systemic vulnerability to dream for the gates of a premier institution like the Sir J. J. School of Art requires a deep understanding of human development and structural support. Here are the social work methodologies that guided Samir's decade-long transformation:

- **Continuity of Care:** Entering the Night Care Center as a toddler and receiving support up to age 14 allowed caseworkers to provide a stable, predictable environment. This sustained presence meant that as Samir's developmental needs shifted from basic safety to intense 10th-grade academic prep, the organizational safety net adapted with him.
- **The Family-Centered Approach:** When Samir's mother suffered from a chronic illness that drained the family's resources, the caseworker didn't just focus on Samir's school attendance. By navigating the public healthcare system (BMC hospital referral) and accompanying Parveen to treatment, the caseworker supported the caregiver. Stabilizing the mother directly preserved the stability of the child.
- **The Strengths-Based Approach:** Prerana's caseworkers identified Samir's natural affinity for geometry, science, and art, and deliberately supported those talents by involving him in art projects such as making charts and other craft for classrooms and events. Nurturing these strengths transformed his self-image from a bystander to an active creator and leader.
- **Holistic Structural Security & Inclusion:** Caseworkers provided daily lunches to eliminate food insecurity and financial anxiety, along with securing foundational identity documentation, social security links, and bank accounts. This formal inclusion bridges the gap between marginalized existence and mainstream societal integration.

CHAPTER 3: A LEADER IN THE MAKING (ISHAN'S JOURNEY)

Ishan was born in 2009. He's in tenth grade now at a Marathi-medium school, living in Nagpada with his mother, Kajal, and his two younger brothers—and he carries himself with a kind of seriousness you don't often see in a fourteen-year-old. It shows up in his report card too—having recently passed a prestigious scholarship exam,



Ishan entered the 10th standard with an A+ grade. He talks about his future not as a wish, but as something closer to a plan already in motion.

He balances NCC — the National Cadet Corps — alongside his coursework, which is its own kind of discipline. English and math are his subjects, the ones he says give him "the logic" he'll need later.

His discipline is not confined to textbooks. At a residential leadership camp in Khopoli in 2025, he stood out immediately. He led his group, and they finished near the top of the season. He credits much of this poise to Prerana's Life Skills Education sessions, which he attends with absolute regularity.

At the center of all of it is his mother.

Kajal is a single parent. She works in the Kamathipura area to cover rent and utilities that run to nine thousand rupees a month – a number that already leaves little room to breathe. Recently, she had to undergo a major surgery. Three months of bed rest followed. Three months in which the family's only income simply stopped.

Ishan became, in a quiet way, the adult of the house during that stretch. He became his mother's primary caregiver. He managed the household chores, cooked, administered her medications and pushed her to rest when she wanted to push through.

Displaying a level of foresight rare for someone his age, Ishan even began gently advising his mother on how they could systematically save money for his upcoming higher education once she recovered, refusing to let a temporary crisis derail their long-term survival plan.

The Safety Net

Prerana has been part of Ishan's life since fifth grade, and the shape of that support has changed as he has. From eighth grade onward, the Sponsorship Committee approved private tuition to keep pace with an increasingly demanding curriculum – uniforms, textbooks, every scholastic basic covered, so that what little bandwidth Ishan had could go toward studying, not scraping together supplies.

After a career guidance session, he sat down with a counselor and built himself a daily study timetable – not assigned to him, but built with him.

He's had glimpses of a wider world along the way too – performing in a dance program for Balak Utsav, visiting the corporate offices in field exposure visits. Small expeditions, but for a boy from Nagpada, each one is a data point: proof that the world extends past his immediate neighborhood.

The IPS Dream

Ishan's ambition has a name and a uniform: he wants to become an IPS Officer. Not someday, in the abstract – he's already begun collecting preparatory books for the UPSC exam, years before he'll sit for it, and he's talked about taking a part-time job in college to fund his own materials.

Like any good officer, his curiosity has also widened past the police service itself, toward the systems of governance behind it – an early, genuine interest in politics, in how decisions about people like him actually get made.

Ishan doesn't wait for opportunities. He prepares for them, methodically, the way he prepares for an exam. With his legal paperwork entirely in order and his tenth-grade boards fast approaching, Ishan is transitioning seamlessly from a brilliant student into a future leader of civil society.

Ask him what he wants, and he won't hesitate. He's already decided.





THE SOCIAL WORK LENS

For Those Who Walk Alongside (Social Work Practitioners)

Cultivating a leader from a child in an environment plagued by systemic exploitation and sudden economic shocks requires an intentional, strategic effort. Here are the core social work methodologies that guided Ishan's transformation:

- **Individualization and Acceptance:** Caseworkers recognized Ishan's unique intellectual capacity and maturity: they customized his track—shifting focus from basic remedial support to advanced scholarship prep, corporate exposure, and leadership camps.
- **Guided Self-Determination & Strategic Foresight:** Social work honors the client's right to choose their own path. The caseworker did not dismiss Ishan's dreams as a far-fetched adolescent wishes or steer him toward easier, short-term employment. Instead, they practiced guided self-determination—validating his ambition while clinically anchoring it to real-world steps, like helping him budget for exam materials and balance a part-time work-study roadmap.
- **Crisis-Responsive Casework & Caregiver Stabilization:** When a family's sole earner faces major surgery and a total loss of income, the immediate psychological fallout on a child can cause severe academic regression or forced child labor. The caseworker shifted rapidly into a crisis-intervention modality—utilizing intensive home visits to provide emotional containment, mapping out resource distribution, and validating Ishan's caregiving role without letting him drop out of school.
- **Collaborative Goal Setting:** To transition a teenager from passive beneficiary to active stakeholder, the intervention relied heavily on setting his goals with his active participation: like structuring his tenth-grade study timetable.

CHAPTER 4: LEADING BEFORE THE BADGE (AFREEN'S JOURNEY)



Afreen is fifteen, and already the kind of person other people organize themselves around.

She's entering tenth grade at an English-medium school in the Falkland Road area, where she has just been appointed Head Girl — a title her teachers say suits her exactly,

because she has been leading her peers unofficially for years. Her grade is A+. Her manner is direct. Her teachers describe her as clever and confident in the same breath, the way you describe someone who doesn't require much convincing that she belongs.

She lives in Kolsa Galli with her mother, Saroj, and her younger brother, Asif. The household runs largely on Afreen's attention — she cooks, manages the chores, and every evening, once her own studying is done, she sits with Asif and goes through his homework. She doesn't treat it as a burden. She treats it as a responsibility she's chosen.

She also comes to the Prerana center regularly, not just to access support but to engage with it. Stress management sessions ahead of her board year. Adolescent education. Career guidance. Health sessions. She doesn't treat these as

obligations either — she turns up because she finds them useful, which is the mark of a young person who has started to understand the relationship between investment and outcome.

This past summer, she completed a basic computer course, fitting it into a schedule that already included private tuition, household duties, and her brother's homework. She mentioned it almost in passing when asked how she'd spent her vacation.

The Foundation of Grit

Afreen's success is built on the foundation of her mother Saroj's resilience. A victim of commercial sexual exploitation, she has spent the last several years trying to build a different kind of life. With a micro-grant from Prerana's Economic Rehabilitation Project, she has started a small business selling clothes within the community — an act of extraordinary will for a woman who is simultaneously paying twelve thousand rupees a month for a single room and carrying the weight of everything that came before.

She wants her children's lives to look nothing like what hers was forced to be.

We helped her build the administrative infrastructure that makes a different future possible — a Ration Card, Bank Account at the Post Office and the Central Bank. These are not small things. Official documents are what allow a family to be legible to the systems that dispense housing, healthcare, credit. Without them, survival is a series of daily negotiations with institutions that can afford not to see you.

The Vision for Tomorrow

Afreen's ambitions are clear, noble, and deeply informed by the world she sees outside her front door. Driven by an innate sense of justice, she aspires to become a Police Officer. She does not wish to escape her community; she wants to protect it. Afreen wants to step into a position of structural authority so she can make the streets safer for the women and children who still live in the shadows of the district.

In reality, Afreen is already practicing the very traits she will need in the police force. By gracefully balancing her responsibilities as school Head Girl, acting as an educational mentor to her younger brother, and serving as a steady pillar for her mother, she has already transitioned from a child receiving support to a leader providing it.

She is already, in every way that counts, protecting the people around her.





THE SOCIAL WORK LENS

For Those Who Walk Alongside (Social Work Practitioners)

Transforming a child's systemic vulnerability into mainstream institutional leadership requires a delicate blend of economic, educational, and psycho-social interventions. Here are the social work methodologies that were used:

- **Empowerment-Oriented Casework & Leadership Reframing:** Caseworkers recognized Afreen's natural cognitive and social strengths, actively encouraging her to take on high-visibility leadership roles. This deliberate focus helped reshape her identity, ensuring she viewed herself not as a victim of her environment, but as an influential leader within her community.
- **Economic Rehabilitation as Child Protection:** By providing Saroj with a targeted micro-grant and financial inclusion pathways (Post Office and Central Bank integration), the intervention addressed the root cause of systemic vulnerability.
- **Rapid-Response Educational Sponsorship:** Institutional rigidity—such as a school denying an expected fee concession—can cause immediate, permanent academic disruption for marginalized youth. Covering 50% of her fees served as a critical protective buffer and ensured her tenth-grade board preparation remained completely uninterrupted.
- **Targeted Psycho-Social Scaffolding:** Living in a high-risk neighborhood while carrying the heavy expectations of a school leadership role and upcoming Board Exams creates an intense cognitive load. Caseworkers mitigated this by involving Afreen in structured adolescent education and stress-management sessions. This provided her with healthy coping mechanisms, emotional containment, and a safe space to process the unique complexities of her environment.

CHAPTER 5: A MIND FOR ENTERPRISE

(SHIVANI'S JOURNEY)

Shivani first walked into Prerana's Night Care Center in 2015, a wide-eyed first grader. Today, she is a focused, sharp, and ambitious young woman navigating her first year of college, pursuing a Bachelor of Commerce from the University of Mumbai. Her story is not just about survival; it is about a young woman mastering the



language of economics to systematically secure her family's independence.

Shivani lives in a rented room in Kamathipura with her mother, Komal, and her younger brother, Avi, who is currently in the fifth grade. Komal is a victim of commercial sexual exploitation who made a definitive decision to fundamentally reshape her family's financial landscape.

Through Prerana's Economic Rehabilitation Program, Komal has started a tiffin service – cooking and delivering meals to workers in the small-scale manufacturing units nearby. It is early-morning work, physically demanding, with the kind of income that requires careful management to stretch. Prerana's caseworkers have been sitting with her on the finances – savings strategies, planning for Avi's education,

thinking about how to gradually reduce the family's dependence on sponsorship without pulling the floor out from under it prematurely. The goal isn't rescue. It's self-sufficiency, arrived at on a timeline that doesn't collapse what's already been built.

Shivani chose Commerce because it matched something already in her. She has a natural instinct for how money moves — how it can be made to do more than survive on. During a DSP session on savings, investments, and the stock market, she was the student asking the follow-up questions. She is currently completing a computer course through OASIS alongside her college curriculum, adding the technical vocabulary the modern business world requires before she has formally entered it.

Her first year of college tested all of this more severely than she had planned.

In the middle of the academic year, she contracted both malaria and typhoid simultaneously — weeks of bed rest at a moment when attendance, early impressions, and the rhythm of a new institution were still being established. The kind of illness that, for a first-generation college student without a safety net, can quietly end an academic year before it has properly begun.

Prerana's caseworkers got on the phone with her college while she was still recovering. Absences communicated, explained, formally excused. Enrollment protected. The moment she was well enough to sit up without dizziness, Shivani was back in the classroom, working her attendance back up to standard.

Beyond The Student

At Prerana's 2024 Open House, Shivani was one of the young people who sat with Ms. Priti Patkar for an interview discussion representing the children's collective – speaking about her experience not as a beneficiary reciting gratitude but as a participant with opinions worth hearing.

For years, there was a discrepancy – a mismatch between the name she was known by and the name recorded on her official paperwork, the kind of bureaucratic error that compounds across every form and every application. Getting it formally changed is not a simple task. But with the right support, she got it all done.

Shivani is eighteen, studying Commerce, watching her mother run a tiffin service, and thinking about investments. There is something precise about the way their two projects rhyme. Komal learned to build an income with her hands. Shivani is learning the language of capital – how money moves, accumulates, multiplies. Between them, they are assembling something that neither could have built alone: the knowledge and the means, both, in the same household.

She is not waiting to find out how it turns out. She already knows what she is building toward. She just has to get there.





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Facilitating an economic and social transition of this magnitude requires a multi-tiered caseworker strategy that moves parallel to the family's growth. Below is the clinical and structural framework that guided Shivani's casework:

- **Intergenerational Economic Rehabilitation:** By providing a micro-enterprise framework (the tiffin service) alongside targeted micro-finance mentoring, the caseworker shifted the family's economic reliance away from transactional vulnerability. This structural pivot allowed the mother to become the primary economic protector of her daughter's academic future.
- **Active Institutional Advocacy during Medical Crisis:** A sudden, severe health crisis can cause marginalized students to drop out due to institutional rigidity. The caseworker's rapid transition into an administrative advocate—mediating directly between the university and the bedridden student—served as a vital protective intervention.
- **Fostering Meaningful Child Participation:** By providing platforms like the 2024 Open House dialogue with Ms. Priti Patkar, caseworkers facilitated a space for Shivani to hone her executive communication and public advocacy skills, solidifying her self-concept as a leader and a representative of her community.
- **Administrative Inclusion and Portfolio Building:** Long-term social security and personal liberty require full, unassailable integration into civic systems. Helping the family navigate the legal name-change gazette process and systematically securing a complete portfolio of social security linked documentation (Bank Account and Passport) effectively transitions a young person from the invisible margins of society into a fully recognized citizen with unrestricted economic mobility.

The Children Not Yet Named

This book holds five stories. The Night Care Center holds many more.

Tonight, somewhere in Kamathipura or Falkland Road, a three-year-old is walking through a door for the first time. She doesn't know yet that this room is different from the one she came from. She will learn that she is allowed to take up space and make noise and fall asleep without fear.

Somewhere else tonight, a boy is sitting at a table doing homework he didn't think he'd be allowed to do. A girl is rehearsing something – a speech, a dance, an argument she's been building in her head for weeks.

None of them are in these pages. All of them are real.

The five children you've met here – Alice, Samir, Ishan, Afreen, Shivani – are not exceptions. They are what becomes possible when a child is seen, consistently and without condition, over years.

If these stories moved you – if you found yourself, somewhere in these pages, understanding something you hadn't before about what a childhood can survive, and what it can become – then you have already done part of what this book was made to do.

The rest of the work happens in the red-light areas. It has been happening there for over forty years.

And tonight, it continues.

With Gratitude

Behind every one of those journeys is a caseworker who showed up.

Who made the home visit when it would have been easier not to. Who sat with a mother in a hospital corridor, or got on the phone with a school, or helped a family navigate a government office that wasn't designed to help them. Who walked into hostile environments and kept walking. Who worked through the heat of a Mumbai summer and the chaos of monsoon lanes and the particular exhaustion of doing difficult work inside systems that don't always make it easy.

To the caseworkers, the project coordinators, and every member of the Prerana team who has given their knowledge, their patience, and in many cases their years to this work – thank you!

To learn more about Prerana's work, visit our website <https://preranaantitrafficking.org/>

Or write to us at contact@preranaantitrafficking.org

