



On the Record: Global Movement for Children

Issue 9: Putting Child Rights into Action

From the AP Editorial Desk

The Prayas Institute of Juvenile Justice Combines Advocacy for Child Rights with Practical Assistance

"The notion of child rights must include basic needs for survival, love, care, education and restoration of the child into the mainstream of society and with the family, if possible," explains Rajib Haldar, director of the Prayas Institute of Juvenile Justice. "At Prayas, we certainly believe in raising consciousness about children's rights, but through action. Advocacy must be demonstrated."

"Prayas" is a Hindi word meaning "attempt." It is also one of India's largest child rights organizations.

The Prayas Institute stands tall at an impressive three stories in New Delhi's Tughlakabad Institutional Area where hospitals and slums co-exist. Classrooms for formal and vocational education fill the building's basement. In one room, boys who once lived in slums learn the latest in printing techniques. Some have gone on to open up their own printing businesses.



Next door, a sewing and tailoring workshop is underway for girls who have been trafficked into sexual or domestic servitude. On a floor above, there is a night shelter for girls who were once left alone on the streets or exploited by traffickers. The third floor is made up entirely of dorms for the girls, a counseling center, health clinic, library and single sex classrooms.

Burning Issues: Prayas members burn negative images of the girl child.

In every corner of the home – one of three that is run by Prayas in New Delhi – new partnerships between child and human rights actors are being forged, innovative programs to help children isolated on the margins of life are being launched, and children from some of India's most disadvantaged communities are getting a new lease on life.

It is this all-round approach to child development that underpins the big, all-inclusive child rights complexes run by Prayas. Each home operates like a city for underprivileged children. They hum with constant activity and advocacy. UNICEF's "Say Yes" brochures have helped a lot. The brochures have been effectively used in classrooms and in reaching out to local communities where Prayas activists are promoting a greater awareness of child rights.

The activism extends to policy-making. At the behest of Prayas, the national government amended the country's 1986 Juvenile Justice Act (JJA) to conform to the Convention on the Rights of the Child, which India signed in 1992. As a result, the legal definition of a child as a boy below the age of 14 and a girl below the age of 16, has been amended to include any child below the age of 18.

The amended JJA also includes provisions for the reintegration of disadvantaged children into society and new requirements for child participation in the workings of government. "The Juvenile Justice Act used to be a tool for victimizing children but we've now turned it into an advocacy tool meant to ensure the welfare of children," says Haldar.

Prayas will also send representatives to the May Special Session on Children. Mr. Halda and Prayas General Secretary, Amod Kanth, will accompany India Prime Minister A.B. Vajpayee to the United Nations.

Joint development: students and teachers prepare the curricula at a Prayas vocation center.

But the real success of Prayas, says Junned Khan, Training Manager for Prayas social workers, is measured in the improved lives of children who were once without hope. Junned Khan describes the transformation of Ajay, who Khan rescued several years ago after receiving a call from him on the childline hotline. "At that time, he had maggots in his hair and had not washed himself in days. In one pocket, he had smack (a drug) and in the other he had "solution" (a drug made of white-out)," says Khan. "Now, after years in a Prayas shelter home, Ajay wants to be a professional."



Meanwhile, the battle continues to make India's governmental policies on both local and national levels more child-friendly. Khan points out that sixteen percent of the Indian national budget is spent on defense and only two percent is spent on programming for women and children. It is in this context that the meaning of the Prayas namesake ("attempt" in English), is a poignant

reminder of the work that remains to be done for India's children.

Prayas in Action

Among its many activities, Prayas sponsors HIV/AIDS education workshops for children and child rights activists in disadvantaged communities as well as in government schools. The organization also runs a medical clinic for street and slum children in New Delhi and operates two mobile health vans for poor and working children throughout the capital. And Prayas manages calls to the toll-free childline service in North Delhi. In January 2002, Prayas responded to 2,294 childline calls by sending out emergency aid workers to rescue children in distress.

The organization runs another 22 centers throughout the country in states such as Gujarat, which continues to recover from one of the country's most devastating earthquakes and some of the most vicious Hindu/Muslim violence in the past decade. Prayas operates a community-based shelter in a Gujarati village devastated by the earthquake where families are eager to sell their sons and daughters to traffickers to recoup the costs exacted by the disaster. Prayas also runs nine community based health centers in the state and promotes the education of children—especially girls—and mothers in an effort to prevent the exodus of people seeking to flee the state because of natural and, now, religious crises.

The organization also has a major presence in Bihar, one of India's most impoverished and underdeveloped states. Prayas has helped local authorities in Bihar set up a legal agency for vulnerable children who are susceptible to trafficking. Prayas also runs a number of community-based initiatives in the state to help prevent child trafficking through education and by providing for a child's basic food and healthcare needs.

Prayas coordinates border monitoring patrols with police and local NGOs. One of the group's priorities in its anti-trafficking efforts has been to ensure the health of girl children, who are especially vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. "Trafficking is replacing organized child labor as a major industry," explains Haldar. "And it's girls who are especially vulnerable to this form of abuse." Prayas works with NGOs around the country as well as government officials to support anti-trafficking laws. The organization also raises issues like trafficking at workshops attended by high-level government officials, members of the judiciary, heads of police departments, business leaders and activists.



Picking up the thread: Radha, who is handicapped, learns to sew at a Prayas vocational training class.

Vocational training is another central component of the Prayas model. In Delhi alone, Prayas runs 13 non-formal educational and vocational training centers in slum communities in addition to its three night shelters for street children, which have a total capacity of 500. At these centers, lessons on sanitation, healthcare, and child rights, are held alongside classes in math, Hindi and history. Children at these centers receive food, clothing, shoes, school bags, and school supplies free of cost.

The school curricula are developed in collaboration with the students and tailored for specific communities of children. In the Shadipur Depot area of Delhi where many children of folk musicians have migrated for work from the northern, desert state of Rajasthan, Prayas has incorporated folk traditions and music into its curriculum. Prayas also works with a number of other NGOs and theater groups to involve street and slum children in dance, theater, and musical performance shows throughout the country.

For those children attending non-formal educational centers from nearby slums, parent-teacher meetings are set up and community watch groups are often established soon after. This, reports Junned Khan, Training Manager for Prayas social workers, has led to community mobilization when civic amenities are lacking.

For instance, in the Jahangirpur slum area, which is adjacent to Prayas' largest shelter home for street, working and poor children, a community watch committee made up of slum residents, sanitation workers and shopkeepers, gathered hundreds of signatures for a petition demanding that a road be paved because it was covered with rocks that would fly and hurt residents when big trucks drove by. Within ten days, the government, afraid of losing votes from enraged slum dwellers, paved the road. "In India," says Khan, "mobilizing the masses is sometimes the only way to ensure that a community's basic needs are met."