



Spreading Smiles in an Infamous Street

October 1, 2012 ■ Features

By Rajul Jain

It is a crèche like no other. No spacious classrooms. No decorated walls. No playgrounds to play in. No shining wooden benches to sit on.

She is a woman like no other. No fear in her heart. No guilt in her mind. No qualms about her work. No apologies for standing up for a cause and speaking her mind, even though she is a woman.

They are children like no other. No rich fathers to support them. No 'respectable' mothers to be proud of. Forbidden by society.

But still, this two-room set within a shabby alley, adjacent to a public urinal, called **Mashaal Kendra**, is like a second home to the bright faces that flock here everyday looking forward to a day full of activity and learning. This place is a small stream of hope in the dim lives of several women who entrust their children to the care of *Lalithaji* and the staff at a centre run for the care, basic education and development of children of sex-workers here on **G.B road**. This infamous street is situated in the heart of Delhi and for over a century has housed more than 80 brothels. This is the street we all know exists, but we rarely talk about. This street is home to the women who can entertain men and be their lovers but can never be their sisters, daughters or wives. The women behind the dirty curtains are called names, while the men who use them are called, well of course, just men.

But it's in this street, even more remote and far away from our eyes, where a noble initiative began over two decades ago; one that's changing lives.

Inspired and encouraged, we decided to visit these unspeakable streets of G.B road. What we found was a small world, which is so different from our 'normal' world; where people are so different from our 'normal' timid selves.

We were welcomed by the 52 year old *Lalithaji* to the center. Her warm smile, impressive and conspicuous yet polite demeanor is striking. She is so fluent in Hindi, it seems unlikely that she belongs to a non-Hindi speaking region. Originally from Karnataka, she has worked with various research and action based organisations and chose a field of social work that not many dare to venture in- the area of commercial sexual exploitation, that is marred by mafia, danger, abductions and use of force for monetary gains.

While working with an NGO in her home state, she witnessed exploitation among the *devadasi* women and developed an interest to work in the field with the victims of such exploitation. Many may consider even social work in this field to be a taboo profession, especially for women, who can easily be called names and branded unacceptable by society.

Her journey began 24 years ago when she would just walk into brothels on G.B Road and casually chat with the women here in her free time. Her ability to speak south-Indian languages helped her gain trust amongst the women who hailed from her home state and ensured her acceptance. Soon she became a common name and face in the area. Her conviction to work here, and for this cause, convinced the NGO she was working with to initiate activities for the welfare of the children of the sex-workers. And this is how the foundation of the centre was laid. Over the years, Lalitha*ji* has witnessed a number of legal battles, dirty politics, ego clashes and attempts to dampen her spirits to work here. But with time she has also learnt to accept all the positives and negatives that come her way. And with time she has grown more determined and dedicated to her work.

The atmosphere at the crèche is serene- while some kids are busy hovering around Shakuntala*ji*, who is a teacher here, some are taking a nap, and a few are just lost in their own world playing with anything that they can lay their hands on. While we were busy chatting with Lalitha*ji*, a kid quietly walked in to the table near us and picked up the tea cups. He responded to our 'thank you' with a warm "welcome" in his sweet yet naughty voice, and he left the room jumping happily. This reflects the teaching and the culture that the staff here is trying to instill in the children. Lalitha*ji* believes that they are merely trying to bring out all the positivity that these children already have.

The centre engages the children in various educational activities and helps them in getting through prep-school, enabling them to join MCD schools, other affordable private schools, or hostels run by big organisations like SOS Villages. They have a record of sending at least 10-15 children to such institutions every year! Here, the kids are able to not only focus and study, but also develop an all-round personality. It's thanks to Lalitha*ji*'s efforts that many of the children have now grown into graduates working respectable jobs, or are even pursuing further studies. She has even seen a number of them getting happily married.

We asked her about how she finds strength and the power to emotionally handle all that she witnesses. She smiles, and her answer is a simple one- "for the world, it may not be 100 % successful but my purpose is met even if I can save one child". It is the smiles on their sad faces that motivate her day after day to stand up and voice her opinions and fight the battles. The centre can be accredited with saving a number of youngsters, who can now step out into the mainstream and build a future for themselves, leaving behind shadows of their past. The center's counseling of the women and children have also helped in strengthening this bond.

They serve not only as a crèche for children, but have all along acted as mentors, saviors and a refuge where the women can just walk in on a lazy afternoon to chit-chat and even take a nap. They have been able to build personal relationships with them, building their trust like they were family. In fact, on the demand of the women the crèche has now even started a night shelter too.

Delhi, she says, has added a lot to her personality, her professional and personal life, and given her satisfaction and success. Her work takes her to various cities all over India, but it is Delhi where she has her foundation, and has changed lives. This city has introduced her to many different people, an opportunity that she cherishes.

Listening to Lalitha's share her experiences is inspiring, encouraging, saddening and shocking all at once. When it was time for us to leave, a group of children, 40 in all, beaming with energy and enthusiasm bid us goodbyes in their chirpy voices. That moment defined why the place is different. That moment and their smiles spoke about the success of Lalitha's work, way more than any words can express, reinforcing the vigor behind her will.

If you believe in the good work that Lalithaji has nurtured for well over two decades and would like to contribute to her efforts you can volunteer with or contribute financially/materially to the crèche.

◦ – You can donate items needed of daily use at the crèche which include bed sheets, small hand towel, blankets, plastic buckets, drums (for water storage), floor mats, quilts, heaters, computers, toys and board games for children (excluding soft toys), television set, cupboards etc.

◦ – Financial donations can be made in the name of Sarahana Education Society in account number 10138085009, at SBI Daryaganj branch. However donations made in the name of Sarahana Education Society are not tax exempt.

◦ – In case donors need receipts for 80G (IT) they can contribute through the Society for Participatory Integrated Development which is a partner organization. Cheques can be made in their name in the account number: **000701257325** at ICICI Bank, Connaught place branch, New Delhi. For further queries related to volunteer opportunities and donations you can also e-mail at lalithasa10@gmail.com.

About the Author | Rajul is currently pursuing her LLB from Delhi University, Faculty of Law. She has worked with various non-profit organizations, and is currently engaged with an NGO called *Shakti Vahini* that works on the issue of trafficking. Her interests include reading, meeting new people, and visiting monuments.

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b r i j e n d r a t h a k u r

says:

June 9, 2013 at 11:56 PM

First of all i would like to thank all the people who are doing GENUENLY for the welfare of prostitutes,i mention genuenly. i m searching some good ngo to join who work for the welfare of those,actually i want to do much much bigger things for them but can't do due to some private and social problems. i really feel very bad for thier lives,thier works and please tell me how to help them,how to join u and do some good for them,i saw,met,spend time with them and really feel bad about them.please tell me and reply me soon for procedure to join the ngo

S h u c h i K a p o o r

says:

April 17, 2013 at 2:21 PM

Hi Rajul,

I am a documentary photographer and writer and have been working on a personal long term project on prostitution in different cities. I would like to discuss and know more about your experiences. Could you reply on my email and we can interact further. I am also coming to delhi in the first week of May. Will be going to GB road. So it would be great if we can meet. Kudos for the good work.

R a j u l J a i n

says:

March 29, 2013 at 3:43 PM

Thanks Shubham. After all this time I realised that this comment was here. But thanks anyway. :)

v i n o d

says:

August 2, 2013 at 9:39 PM

Dear Ms Rajul,

I am an urban design student and was specifically reading about socially excluded communities in india, which ofcourse include sex workers. I dont know by profession how can i help the initiatives by lalitaji, but i hop there willbe something. May be not in the field of educating children.

I would.like to associate it with academic project as well, and hope can contribute something through what i have learned or trained.

Hoping for a favourable reply

Nb: even if it is not possible in the wy i intending, i am willing to contribute

Cheers

S h u b h a m B h a t n a g a r

says:

November 18, 2012 at 3:23 PM

First of all I would like to thank LBBD for publishing this initiative. Such articles work as a catalyst for those who are thinking to do something for the society but due to some reasons they are not taking the first step. I request you to continue such articles which are the real introduction of DILLIWAALAS. Secondly I would like to thank Ms Rajul.

A B O U T T H E A U T H O R

S u c h i t a

The former events manager, and PR and Marketing executive decided to give up the good life, to take on something greater- running her own start-up. Give her a non-fiction book, some place in the outdoors, running shoes, Bombay Bicycle Club and Jay Z, and you've got a happy camper.

R E L A T E D P O S T S

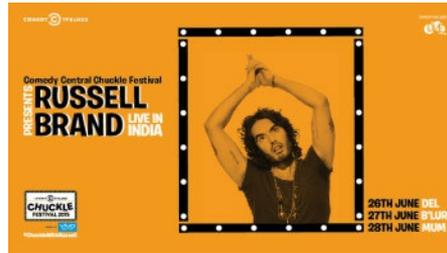


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N E W O N



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This Film Festival



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S O , W H A T

B O O K ?

We're your one stop for the best in food, lifestyle and events in your city. Find new restaurants and bars in town, make a plan with your friends using our events checklist, explore the quaintest & coolest hoods in town... Discover your city simply, with Little Black Book! We're currently in our Delhi and Gurgaon edition.

B E A N L B

Whether you're a big multinational, a local neighbourhood bar, or a burgeoning startup- we've got the best content and engagement platform for you to connect with a hyper-local, up and active audience. Get in touch with us at contactus@littleblackbookdelhi.com

L B B A R O U



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