
PRAYAS – SOCIAL WORK IN CRIMINAL JUSTICE, MUMBAI



Sanober Sahni and Vijay Raghavan (next to her) at the inauguration of the legal guidance project in collaboration with the Government Law College, Mumbai

The work with undertrials started when Sanober Sahni visited to the Arthur Road Prison for her doctorate thesis with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), Mumbai, to look into the rehabilitation of women and children undertrials released into society from custodial institutions in the 1980s. Conventionally, only convicts are considered in discussions about law and order and undertrials ignored and considered temporary. This is in spite of the fact that they constitute the majority within custodial institutions such as jails, remand homes and juvenile justice homes.

She found also custodial institutions extremely punitive and secluded from the communities outside; with no differentiation made within between first-time offenders and seasoned criminals. Inside, those that had committed larger crimes were respected more and treated better. Small transgressions were looked upon with

contempt. Thus, graduation to serious crimes became a reasonable ambition. Further, when undertrials were released, they found themselves in more vulnerable positions of exploitation in similar circumstances that encouraged the crime.

This understanding materialized in the shape of a rehabilitation project called Prayas in the early 1990s; originally housed in the Criminology and Correctional Administration department of TISS. The project and later the organization was to work with the rehabilitation of undertrials into their communities and families.

Prayas systematically traces the thread that links the individual undertrial within the custodial institutions and the community. Many of them do not belong to a nurturing family or community and are vulnerable to antisocial elements: they are often migrants with no special skills and with no shelter in the new areas. When they come into



At the inauguration of the activity centre in the women's section of the Mumbai Central Prison



Exposure picnic with Prayas staff and clients

conflict with the law, they find these law and order institutions alienating and calculative. Societal patterns of discrimination/marginalization that make their survival uncertain are not considered. Instead, this is personalized and the individual loses confidence within the institution and when he/she comes out. He/she receives no support for rehabilitation from families, the community or the state; and becomes isolated and rendered helpless to survive, critical factors in dragging him/her down the spiral of serious crime.

Prayas acts as a 're-connector'. The social workers of Prayas give specific attention to the needs of the individual; and his/her linkages with the community of origin or employment. They seek to establish a clear contract with each client about using a standard set of rehabilitation services evolved over 15 years of work. The organization uses an 'area-to-area' approach, where undertrials are encouraged to move from the originating areas that foster criminal activity, to original homes where possible or to new more stable contexts. In this transition, Prayas helps finding them safe shelter, skill training and employment.

Prayas also seeks to create discussion spaces and provides different forums that act as safety nets. These allow clients to reflect, mediate their entry into the world, share problem-solving and express themselves within non-punitive contexts.

It validates and legalizes their existence; and seeks to transform these 'rebels without a cause' with purpose, constructive methods and aggression management skills; to counter judgement with positive relations and money with human dignity.

Sanober Sahni's role is now mainly in directing the vision of the organization: of troubleshooting, discussing with the teams of workers and taking ideas that emerge from the collective forward. Daily institutional and systemic discipline is maintained by Vijay Raghavan, the project director.

In working with insecure undertrials with a propensity for violence, being non-reactive is essential for security. In this Vijay Raghavan draws attention to Dr Sahni's patience and consideration in creating open discussion forums and groups; as well as to her poise in ensuring emotional balance in the culture of the organization. The concern for each worker and client is evident in her conversations.

Many of the people that the workers of Prayas interact with are emotionally very vulnerable and sometimes unstable. She facilitates the team to work closely and openly so that each worker is tied to the organization and is safe-guarded from systemic violence and from destructive relations with individual clients. She ensures that detailed discussions are held on any subject that the team

feels concerned about; and regular weekly meetings are held where no client goes undiscussed. Within a year, one or two retreats are held to focus on recurring problems and seeking systemic solutions.

Dr Sahni says that she continues to participate in the organization because of the open climate for honest expression and problem solving. Prayas is intended as a work space that allows the individual worker to realize himself/herself and work as much as he/she is capable in matters larger than those concerning the individual. Both Dr Sahni and Raghavan continued to be excited in their role of 'social reflectors', where they design and redesign processes for social well being. Since Prayas' work is not insulated, it allows the organization's work to remain open to the realities of the clients they serve.

The unique role of Prayas lies in its ability to act as the mouthpiece of the field. It does this by developing a small lab of experiential reality; that reflects society and its role in the care and rehabilitation of undertrials. In looking to the future, Dr Sahni points to Raghavan's continued commitment to Prayas as well as the team which is in place now. When Prayas started, work with undertrials was non-existent, and this had to be evolved often through the complete commitment of its workers to their clients, sometimes leading to unpredictable situations. Now the territory of rehabilitation has been marked, with many of the essential intervention processes emerging clearly. This, she believes has to be put in a public knowledge platform where it is accessed universally.

Prayas firmly believes that public governance has to give priority to and makes systemic, regular provisions for rehabilitation that does not leave it to voluntary and often small-scaled efforts. It is this viewpoint that has guided Prayas in its non-

confrontative relations with custodial institutions. This relationship is continuously fostered to sensitize these institutions as well as to make changes that reintegrate undertrials into their communities. This includes legitimizing the rehabilitation work in these institutions, restoring citizenship and state benefits to undertrials by reverting from their identities of criminals and prostitutes to their identities as youth and women; and transforming state institutions and resources to ensure that the rehabilitation is seen as a social welfare function of the state.

The most critical challenges that Prayas now faces are two-fold. One is the translation of the vast knowledge that the organization has about rehabilitation into institutional policies and procedures. The second is sustaining the resources of the organization. Currently most of the funding is from the private sector where rehabilitation has traditionally been seen from reformist/philanthropic/human rights perspectives with undertrials as victims. The support remains unreliable.

The organization is working towards creating an equal balance between state funding and private sector funding, where the salaries for workers come from the state and those for programs come from philanthropic concerns.

In light of this, Raghavan points to the criticality of the two kinds of support that the RD Tata Trust has offered to Prayas (a grant of Rs. 9.58 million is ongoing). One is for the institutional and resource grounding of the organization, especially given the edge that the organization works on, particularly in overcoming obstacles in the initial experimental stages. The second is to highlight the importance of its work and encourage the growth needed to ensure that it becomes sustainable, both in terms of physical size and extent of impact.