

Rewriting Stories: Healing Wounds of Childhood Trauma in India



bookwallah

A closer look at childhood trauma in India and the impact of Bookwallah's libraries and storytelling programs in orphanages.



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Slums sit in the shadow of fancy high-rises. A new shopping mall gleams with luxury brands, though more than 60 percent of the population—which lives on less than three dollars a day—will never darken its doorstep. With rags next to riches and extreme wealth alongside extreme poverty, India is a land of gutting contrasts and contradictions. Though the nation boasts the third-highest number of billionaires in the world, it is also home to more than 65,000 million slum-dwellers, many of whom depend on meager sums collected from daily wage jobs. The hardships induced by huge wealth disparities are myriad, and they are compounded by the severe overcrowding in urban areas. In turn, the country is plagued by a number of public health challenges and high rates of worker's suicide, domestic violence and substance abuse.

Under the weight of these harsh realities, a crisis emerges: more than 29 million children in India have been orphaned or abandoned by parents unable or unwilling to care for them. Still others have been forced to flee their families because of the dangers of domestic violence and addiction under their roofs. Many of these children, then, make their home on the streets, sleeping on sidewalks and searching for someone—anyone—to help them.

And this gives rise to yet another problem: the exploitation of predators. Desperate for food, shelter and protection, many children are tricked by adults who promise to care for them and fill their starving bellies. Beaten and forced into submission, they become victims of trafficking cartels and are coerced into various forms of child labor, including prostitution and begging. These child beggars weave in and out of traffic on India's streets, crying "*Please, didi,*" (sister) as they tap the arms of ladies scrolling their phones in the back of

stopped rickshaws. Persistent, they reach out their empty hands or hold their fingers up to their lips to mimic eating. They beg to be offered a few rupees of pocket change. *They beg to be seen.*

Few, however, will offer them money—knowing that it likely won't go toward their lunch anyway, but will end up lining the pockets of the trafficking cartel leader they work for. Some will sympathetically hand them a packet of biscuits (cookies), being sure to open it first so that it can't be resold. But most, desensitized to extreme poverty that surrounds them, will ignore them.

For the orphans and abandoned children of India, then, trauma follows trauma. In addition to losing their parents and being forced from their homes, they also experience the pain of being marginalized by their own society. They are outcasts.

Sustained Trauma

Even when these children find refuge in orphanages and safe homes, however, they carry their trauma with them. This trauma impairs brain development, causing a number of other issues—including negative self-concept, difficulty learning, highly destructive behaviors and various mental health problems.

While orphanages play a critical role in meeting basic physical needs, they often do not have resources available to respond to their psychological needs. Facing limited resources and funding, many orphanages are unable to offer trauma-informed care or close social integration gaps. And because of the still-prevalent stigma around mental health in India, they generally lack access to critical counseling services. Additionally, though larger humanitarian organizations are working to tackle the underlying causes of these issues in India, most

do not focus their efforts on addressing children's sustained trauma. Life after the orphanage, then, is rarely happily ever after for these children. Many struggle to find a meaningful place to belong in society, and nearly 90 percent of them will never make it to college. Without proper care, then, childhood trauma results in tremendous costs to society.

Not the End of the Story

Bookwallah fills the gaps with a unique, holistic solution. To bind the wounds of trauma, Bookwallah establishes vibrant, imaginative storybook libraries and reading spaces in orphanages across India. By providing this focused, concentrated programming, Bookwallah helps orphaned and abandoned children overcome the obstacles preventing them from social integration and find true, lasting healing.

This means much more, however, than full bookshelves. Passionate about bringing libraries to life and forming safe, meaningful connections between children and storytellers, Bookwallah also launches storytelling programs and trains local volunteers in trauma-informed methods and proven storytelling techniques. So while orphanages appreciate the ability to encourage education through Bookwallah's libraries, the

benefits extend far beyond literacy. Bookwallah's innovative methodology addresses social-emotional learning needs, improves mental health and instills hope through the imaginative power of storybooks.

Unlike some narrow forms of bibliotherapy, Bookwallah's approach is more comprehensive, facilitating healing through secure environments, strong social-emotional messages and inspirational figures. By selecting books with characters who endure and overcome painful realities—including *The Secret Garden*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Cinderella* and *The Invention of Hugo Cabret*—Bookwallah helps orphaned and abandoned children reflect on their own stories, hardships and emotions in a safe, more removed way.

As they follow the journeys of heroes they can identify with, the children begin to believe that they, too, can become heroes. Filled with wonder and joy, their eyes are opened to new possibilities, allowing them to reimagine their own futures. And along the way, these children are empowered by Bookwallah's compassionate storytelling volunteers. As volunteers build rapport in the orphanages, they serve as inspirational role models and reinforce the message that the children's stories aren't over—they're still being written.

BOOKWALLAH'S TRANSFORMATION PROCESS



Heal. Bookwallah partners with orphanages to develop renovated reading spaces that are stocked with storybooks. These spaces often become children's safe havens - reducing stress and fear and increasing trust and hope. This warm, inspiring environment becomes a context for inner healing.



Empower. Dedicated volunteer storytellers empower children by sharing hope-filled messages in fun experiential ways and by building positive relationships that break down social barriers and help children learn to trust again.



Transform. Through regular interaction with volunteers and identification with heroes in storybooks who have endured hardship, children begin to transform. Bookwallah's psychologists report that within eight months, these children experience an increase in hope, persistence and prosocial behavior and a decrease in hyperactivity.



JYOTI'S STORY

Once upon a time, we met a 13-year-old girl named Jyoti in an orphanage for girls in Mumbai, India. Housing orphans and other street children, the home provides shelter from the abuse and exploitation found on Mumbai's overcrowded streets. Eager to offer these children the joy, beauty and magic of storybooks, we launched a Bookwallah library and storytelling program there in 2013, and soon after, we boarded a flight and made the 20-hour journey from Chicago to Mumbai. We were eager to meet these precious children, get glimpses of their personalities, and listen to the dreams they had for themselves. We wanted them to know that despite all the odds stacked against them, they could be whoever and whatever they wanted to be.

So upon meeting Jyoti, we looked her in the eyes and smiled. "What about you, Jyoti? What do you want to be when you grow up?" we asked. She sat quietly for a moment, pondering thoughtfully. "A beggar," she answered.

There was no trace of despair, sarcasm or fear in her voice. It wasn't a dejected answer, but an honest one, born from a childhood spent on the streets. It's all she knew she could be, because, apart from the orphanage, it was the only life she knew—the life she lived when her family was together and her father was still alive.

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Her father, like many in Mumbai, didn't have a permanent job, but worked as a daily wage earner, earning less than three dollars a day. He also suffered from HIV. Unable to make ends meet, Jyoti's family lived on the streets and found most of their meals at the mercy of strangers. "We managed with whatever money he could get," Jyoti says. "I could never ask for money because I understood that

he did not have the money. So when I was hungry, I would beg for food.”

Eventually, her father lost his battle with AIDS and passed away. Her mother, frail from her own battle with the disease—and with no financial means of her own—faced a difficult reality: the inability to care for her own child.

Fortunately, Jyoti was moved to the girls' orphanage, finding regular, warm meals, a roof over her head, and refuge from the dangers of life on the streets apart from her parents' protection. Still, she carried the wounds of loss and separation from her mother. The pain of extreme poverty. And the trauma of living as a social outcast.

A New Chapter

During her time in the orphanage, Jyoti built relationships with several Bookwallah volunteers—regular people from all walks of life trained by Bookwallah in trauma, mental health and storytelling techniques. In addition to telling stories, these volunteers also served as mentors and role models for Jyoti. Instead of treating her as an outcast, they treated her with honor and dignity, seeing her value and enormous potential.

For Jyoti, these volunteers stood in stark contrast from many of the others who visited the orphanage. Often, she explained, visitors would pay visits to the orphanage—but never to build real relationships. Rather, they would come for a day, ask tough questions about her life and her struggles, and never come back again. Reliving her trauma with people who saw her only as a charity case, she explained, was difficult. Bookwallah volunteers, on the other hand, were people she could trust. They were familiar faces. People who knew her name. People who she knew truly cared about her. As Jyoti participated in Bookwallah's storytelling sessions, hearing powerful, impactful stories

about characters like her—heroes who endured hard, painful circumstances and overcame tremendous obstacles—Jyoti began to believe that she could do the same. Finding these heroes in books like *The BFG* by Roald Dahl, her confidence grew. Inspired to dream up new possibilities for herself and discover her passions, she began to take baking classes, learning new skills to make treats and birthday cakes for other girls in the orphanage. Bookwallah volunteers also watched as Jyoti transformed into a leader, serving as an older sister, companion, and role model to the younger girls there.

A Happier Ending

Now 21 years old, Jyoti has moved away from the orphanage. But rather than moving on with her life and leaving her past behind, Jyoti has found a way to leverage her past to build a stronger future for others. With enough savings in her account, Jyoti has applied for a government housing scheme to find a better home for her mother. She also regularly visits her old orphanage, sharing her experiences with other girls there and encouraging them that they, too, can overcome the obstacles in their lives.

And recognizing the stigma that is still attached to orphans, street children, and other impoverished people in India, she helps manage a popular, trendy cafe that is focused on welcoming, serving and employing them. And the best part? It also offers a library of free books to everyone who enters.

Jyoti's story has come full circle. Having experienced the magic of storybooks and the power of mentorship through Bookwallah, she now focuses her efforts on extending those same gifts to others—so every child can live happily ever after. Her story, like the characters in the books she learned to treasure, is a hero's journey.

LARGER IMPACT



45,000+ orphans and children of trauma have been impacted through Bookwallah's libraries, programs and initiatives.



Bookwallah has built libraries in India and Indonesia and has sent storybooks to Bangladesh, Ghana, Ecuador, Jamaica, Sri Lanka, Colombia and the United States.



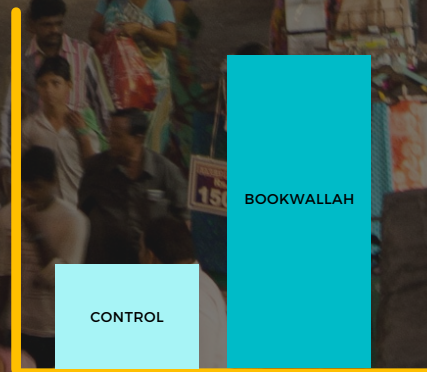
Bookwallah's work has resulted in \$70,000+ societal cost savings per child of trauma (in developing countries).



Bookwallah is 93% volunteer-operated, with more than 80% volunteer retention annually.



Bookwallah has distributed more than 20,000 storybooks around the globe.



Bookwallah's IRB-approved study found that within 8 months, caregivers found an increase in children's pro-social behavior.

IMAGINE THE STORIES YOU COULD REWRITE

Jyoti's story is just one example of how changing one life has the power to change a community. By healing childhood trauma, Bookwallah promotes social integration and empowers children to become impactful members of society and strong global citizens. And in an increasingly globalized world, this impact matters now more than ever.

Every child deserves the hope of a happy story. And by joining Bookwallah's donor community, you can extend this hope to children around the globe. You can heal wounds inflicted by harsh conditions outside their control. You can heal wounds inflicted by massive wealth disparities. You can restore a sense of stability and safety to children who have lived in a constant state of fear and turmoil. You can bring hope to millions of children who have suffered sustained trauma—including children

who have been orphaned due to COVID, children who have been rescued from brothels and refugee children who have been uprooted from their homes. And by directing your donations to the developing world, you can make your dollars go a long way.

In a world rocked by disease, violence, political turmoil, abuse and exploitation, let's be strong global citizens. Rather than turning a blind eye to the widespread needs that weigh heavy in distant lands, let's heal these wounds with sustainable, proven solutions. Let's join hands to bring joy to precious children who deserve better. Let's invest in the next generation of leaders around the globe—the ones who will impact the futures of our children's children.

Let's leverage the power of stories to write new ones.

Bookwallah Organization is a 501c(3) charitable organization committed to healing the wounds of childhood trauma with the power of storybooks. Having experienced the healing, transformative power of a happy story in her own life, Seena Jacob founded Bookwallah to bring the gift of imagination to orphans, refugees and victims of trauma around the globe. In Hindi, "wallah" is a common suffix frequently used in combination with other nouns to communicate a person's association with a particular service, activity or thing. A chai wallah, for example, is one who makes or sells tea, while an auto wallah is one who drives an auto-rickshaw. For Bookwallah Organization, this name highlights its primary mission: to be a provider of books to the people and places that need them most. Beyond distributing storybooks, Bookwallah builds inspiring "libraries of imagination" through storytelling programs with local volunteers trained in trauma-informed care. In doing this, Bookwallah builds trust through positive relationships, closes gaps in social-emotional learning and brings healing to the wounds of childhood trauma. Since its establishment in 2010, Bookwallah has leveraged the simple power and magic of storybooks to extend the hope of a happy story to children of trauma around the world. For more information about Bookwallah Organization, visit bookwallah.org.

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