

Relative Value

Amruda Nair, 31, and Ashika Mehta, 31

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# Friends for a cause

**Two classmates from Cathedral reconnect to find harmony in born-to-privilege and struggle of the street**

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**A**mid the labyrinthine alleys of Grant Road, home to Mumbai's taboo neighbourhood of Kamathipura, a large community hall holds hope. The chatter travels outside on to the street as a young volunteer narrates stories to half a dozen children who potter around her. The kids are allowed to be, free of rules.

The branch office of 14-year-old non-profit, Apne Aap Women's Collective doubles up as a night shelter and day care for children of women in prostitution. Their effort is to ensure GenNext wrangles itself out of the fate they were born into. "Not a single daughter from

our NGO has gone into prostitution. And that's something, because otherwise the chances are anywhere between 50 to 80 per cent," says president, Ashika Mehta.

It's with the pride of a mother that the 31-year-old clinical psychologist speaks of marketing and sales jobs getting popular among her girls. "One of them," she smiles, "works as a chef with a five-star. She managed to pull her mother out of commercial sex work, earns enough to support her siblings, and even got them to move out of the red-light district."

Mehta has seen the NGO grow from the time she first arrived here on an internship, while studying at a liberal arts school in America. At 18, this was her first confrontation with reality. "I realised I had a sheltered upbringing," says daughter of industrialists Gauri and Mohan Pohoomul. In fact, it's what persuaded her to acquire a Masters degree in Clinical Social Work at Columbia University.

Back home in 2006, she was able to give more time to the non-profit, working specifically on rehabilitation initiatives. But it's the efficient corporate mind that she missed collaborating with. Schoolmate and childhood friend, Amruda Nair, heir to The Leela Palaces, Hotels and Resorts, was her first choice. "Amruda gets work done," says Mehta, of the

NGO's Vice-President. Nair's job mainly entails appealing to donors, whether trusts or corporates.

The warmth in their relationship is palpable even as the two bring up "constructive debates" that decide the NGO's policy. Their association goes back to the time they studied at The Cathedral and John Connon School. Its alumni has proven useful, laugh the two, because those are the guys they reach out to when funds are short.

Back in school, the two worked with The Pavement Club, a social service group, and tutored underprivileged children. "Back then we didn't think we'd be involved in charity, although our mothers worked together for the Sahachari Foundation," says Mehta. "It's something we decided after getting into the workplace, coming face to face with the struggles people face."

For Nair, working at Apne Aap "is a reality check". She says it's a relief to arrive here from

a "pristine, staged environment." "It makes me feel grateful for what I have," she adds. Despite their horrific circumstances, the kids, say the two, are optimistic, desirous of make something of their lives. "It makes me look at every problem as an opportunity to learn and grow," says Nair.

The life of brothels isn't easy, we know. "While the mother entertains clients, her kids sleep under the bed, often privy to violent acts of sex. It's disturbing," says Mehta, who often steps in to counsel adolescent girls on changes associated with puberty, and dealing with sexual aggression.

The friends know they live in a different oasis, but it's their way of accepting that two worlds coexist in a city they call home. "When you see the disparity, you have two choices — walk away because it is too much to deal with, or do your bit to make a change," says Mehta.

"But despite the differences," Nair interjects, "aren't we all the same? We come with the same data bank of emotions. The agony of heartbreak, the excitement of your first paycheck. It's all the same."

Next month, the two will collaborate again. This time to help their mums scout for new fashion talent for Sahachari's Design One event, where top designers are expected to create exclusive prêt wear for a charity sale.

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— ASHIKA MEHTA