

CAUSE CONCERNS

Band Aid

A Mumbai ensemble performs exclusively for disadvantaged groups

MALAY DESAI

UNDER A DARKENING AUGUST SKY, in the red-light district of Kamathipura in Mumbai, I made my way past the crumbling Alankar Theatre, past a clutch of men at an iron gate, and into a classroom on the ground floor of a building that houses Prerana, a non-profit that works with sex workers and their children. A guitarist tuned up in a corner, and a chart reading “I am powerful” hung on one wall. I sat on the floor with over three dozen children—toddlers in the front, teenagers at the back. After a few minutes, a five-member band took to the front of the room, introduced themselves as Pehli Baarish, and launched into song: “*Ajeeb dastan hai yeh...*” (Strange is this saga).

This was the band’s first performance. Prerana was an unusual choice of venue for a debut, but then this was an unusual band. Pehli Baarish—“first rain”—performs exclusively for disadvantaged and marginalised communities in Mumbai. At the Prerana show, the band’s lead singer, Ritika Sahni, said that Pehli Baarish wants to give its listeners the same elation they might feel at the arrival of the first shower of the monsoon. “These kids, senior citizens, cancer patients—they all are part of our society, yet invisible to us,” she explained to me later. Sahni said society’s neglect of such groups results in more than physical deprivation, and also limits their access to culture and entertainment. “Filling their living spaces with this entertaining vibe really matters, right?” she added. “It’s a way of making them feel a part of us, and help them forget their lives’ troubles.”

The ensemble began rehearsing in June, initially with just Sahni and Rohan Mehra, son of the late Bollywood actor Vinod Mehra and an aspiring actor himself. Sahni also has a connection to the film industry: she was a playback singer, and recorded the Bollywood hit ‘*Tumse mili nazar*’ in 2003, before shifting focus towards work for the rights of people with disabilities. She now produces music for children with special needs, holds workshops to educate companies on the needs of customers and employees with disabilities, and runs Trinayani, an NGO that operates a spa in north Mumbai staffed by blind people. Other band members, many of them blind, soon joined in to form an informal collective, and now the group’s line-up changes slightly from one show to another (Mehra, for instance, hasn’t

yet played a gig). Their performances are hosted by Kishore Gohil, the head of the National Organisation of the Disabled Artists and a blind artist himself. But Sahni remains the band’s driving force, coordinating rehearsals, arranging shows and fine-tuning the playlist.

She tries to tailor each show to its particular audience. For the children at Prerana, Pehli Baarish played cheerful numbers mostly from post-2000 Bollywood films. In mid September, as the monsoon wound down, the band visited a home for the destitute on the grounds of the King George V Memorial, a landmark when it was built in 1938 but now largely overlooked by passers-by, many of them hurrying to the malls down the road. Pehli Baarish played in a high-ceilinged hall packed with people in wheelchairs, nearly all of them with physical disabilities and over the age of fifty. The audience was soon smiling and tapping along to a selection of nostalgic favourites, including hits from the singers Kishore Kumar and Mukesh, as numerous onlookers peered in from outside. For a show planned for later in the year at a Catholic home for the elderly, Sahni told me, “we’ll have an all-English playlist led by a Western-classical singer.”

For the band’s blind musicians, Pehli Baarish is as much a professional project as a charitable cause. “Every show costs us about ten to fifteen thousand rupees, as we pay the sound team and the blind musicians,” Sahni explained. Sahni is trying to find donors to keep the band going, and hopes to start touring year-round in Mumbai and beyond. It’s a challenging task, but the band has started out on the right note. In the first song of the debut show at Prerana, the 1960 classic ‘*Ajeeb dastan hai yeh*,’ Sahni sang, “*Mubaarakein tumhe ke tum kisi ke noor ho gaye*” (Congratulations to you for having become someone’s light). It seemed to capture the band’s very essence. ■



DIYUTI BASU

According to Pehli Baarish’s lead singer, the band hopes to give its listeners the same sense of elation they might feel at the arrival of the first monsoon shower.