

## CAFÉ CONDOM!

*Nandi Gali*, Mumbai, is like a conversation between a group of friends: earthy, crowded, argumentative and going nowhere in particular. People and shops pack every inch of its narrow breadth; there is seldom any silence to punctuate the din.

Youngsters with red hair and blue jeans run walk briskly towards the station, backpackers exchange currency at the money exchange shops, young women with children on their hips examine the bangles in a stall, tired men stop for a cup of tea or a bite of *pav bhaji* at a roadside cart, motorcycles honk incessantly as they inch forward trying to part the sea of people.

It is a lane that is packed with a slice of urban life with all its flavours.

To take a bite of Mumbai is to taste among others, the distinct flavour of *Udupi* restaurants: the mainstay of Mumbai that lives outside its home for most part of the day. These eateries serve wholesome vegetarian fare at wholesome prices and in an environment that would have one's rosary-wielding grandmother beam with approval.

In Mumbai, there's always an *Udupi* restaurant at an arm's length and these places usually have their hands full.

*Nandi Gali* has one too, a small little affair rather matter-of-factly called *Udupi Café*, right at the beginning if you enter from the station. And it is this rather surprising place that is the centre of the story.

*Udupi Café* is a hole-in-the-wall affair that can seat about two-dozen at its busiest. Three fourths of the walls of its rather dingy insides are adorned by bright red Coca Cola ads. In the remaining quarter, the Gods stubbornly hold their ground, smiling down placidly from their kitschy, heavily garlanded photographs. Evidently, the view from the top is always a pleasant one.

People come in for plates of piping hot food served quickly on slightly chipped tables. Sometimes they come in just so that they can rest their aching feet for a while over a cup of hot tea.

Occasionally however a group comes in that is different from the weary traveller or the quick bite seeker. Its males members are a trifle feminine or at the very least dandyish. They come in and wave at the man behind the cash counter; he waves back nonchalantly.

They usually order cups of tea and the occasional plate of hot crisp *vadais*, there's laughter and chattering; it appears to be an ordinary gathering of ordinary friends. The other people in the café barely look up, everyone has their own clock to follow. But if one had time to kill they could catch conversation that would be anything but run-of-the-mill.

*"Anal penetration is dangerous ..."*

*“You must use a condom...”*

*“Come with me, I’ll get you checked for STI...”*

*“We can get you legal help...”*

This is a group of MSWs and MSMs: safe acronyms for Men Sex Workers and Men Who have Sex with Men. They meet in this café as a part of the *Aastha* programme being spearheaded by FHI in Mumbai.

Aastha, is a HIV prevention programme for all types of sex workers in Mumbai and Thane district of Maharashtra. But its scope makes it a lot more than just a health programme. It works at two levels: it empowers the sex workers by unifying them into a community that is empowered enough to seek, health as a matter of right. This also means working in parallel to create a non-discriminatory and more sensitive environment that is willing to recognise these rights. Advocacy is an important part of the second and involves sensitising many stakeholders: from the police to the *panwala*. The *Udupi* Café in *Nandi Gali* is a case in point.

The Aastha programme often needs a safe space for small groups for sex workers to meet along with their Peer Educator to discuss their issues and also engage in activities such as condom demonstration and SBC communication.

Any formal, structured meeting place is usually not an option; people are hesitant to rent out spaces to sex workers and neighbours are certainly not willing to have them in their midst. Open spaces not only invite undue attention but often the wrath of both the public as well as the authorities. More so because condom demonstration involves using a penis model; clearly not stuff to be carried out in the open.

Chaggan Lal, who works as a Peer Educator in the programme, decided that the first step to empowerment was to be treated with dignity.

*“I would walk towards the Bandra station, through Nandi Gali, to meet with my peers. Sometimes I would reach earlier than expected and stop by this café to kill time with a cup of tea. At other times a couple of us would wait here for the others. Before we knew it this became a de facto meeting place. We’d meet here and carry on to the station. But none of us really enjoyed sitting at the station. People would invariably give us knowing looks. Sometimes a beat constable would come up and yell at us to disperse even if we were sitting and having chai. It was humiliating and my friends would look at me as if to say - what are you talking about, is all this ever going to change?”*

It was then Chaggan started noticing the silent man, who sat at the counter below the photographs of the God, making the bills, accepting payment, and giving back the change, without ever venturing two words where one would do. He was neither pleasant nor hostile, neither indifferent nor overly concerned. He simply stood there through the day, doing his job meticulously, and observing the world go by in a non-judgemental way.

The man was Suresh Shetty, who along with his elder brother run Udupi café.

*“ One day, as I was settling the bill at the counter, he asked me what these meetings were about. He had been able to figure out that we met with a purpose. That was the beginning of a very long conversation. I told him about Astha, about HIV about what we all were trying to do. He just nodded and returned my change.”*

Chaggan couldn't really gauge whether Suresh had understood the larger implications of what they were all involved in. And indeed Suresh gave no indication of having done so. The group continued to meet for discussions, taking care to stay as incongruous as ever because Udupi Café was much better than a Bandra platform. And conversations with Suresh at the counter grew more frequent..

*“ What is it that you exactly do?”*

*“ We work so that people like us don't fall prey to HIV”*

*“ You can do that with one meeting, why do you have to keep meeting regularly?”*

*“ So that we can keep track about each others well-being...make sure people are going for check ups...see if they are facing any harassment .....sometimes new people join...they need to be told as well”*

*“ Are they more groups like yours?”*

*“ Oh yes, several hundreds....HIV is a very big threat and it is important that we reach as many as we can”*

*“ Can anyone get HIV?”*

*“ Yes ...you...me ...the child there...anyone..”*

And just as abruptly as he started questioning, Suresh would stop his queries and hand back the change, a sign that the conversation had ended. Every new conversation would have a new query. Little by little the silent, stolid man, who churned out wholesome healthy food that stood for equally wholesome values, a man who always stood in the shadow of his Gods, found himself learning about the grey world of HIV and sex work.

Chaggan and his friends were Suresh's window to an alien world that both intrigued him and made him look beyond his own simple existence. And what he saw must have made this simple man take a daring step, which a few would venture to. He decided to allow Chaggan's group use Café Udupi for condom demonstration and condom distribution.

When there is a condom demonstration, Chaggan makes sure it is usually after the Café shuts down. Or at least when the traffic is at its lowest. There is a refrigerator right at the entrance perched on which are two cardboard cartons; bearing the brand name Bisleri. Very often men stop by, exchange a friendly nod with Suresh, rummage through the boxes and pocket the content. An absolutely ordinary sequence of events, which does not draw even a glance from those within or outside. Except that what they pocket are condoms. Along with freshly ground coffee and delectable *vadais*, Café Udupi also serves condoms, and the larger cause of HIV.

What make a man brave possible loss of clientele or at least objection from his regulars to let a group use his premises for activities that few would understand let alone allow?

Suresh says simply: *I like what they are doing. It's right. Why should I not help them?*

Why not indeed! Like they say, may his tribe increase.