

Stella Conference: Forum-XXX

Dr. Jayanta Biswas, Roma Debnath, Kohinoor Begum

Stella, one of the largest sex worker organisations in Canada had invited Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee during their 10th anniversary celebrations. Ms. Rama Debnath, President of Durbar, Kohinoor Begum, Supervisor of Jorabagan and myself Jayanta Biswas, Medical Officer left for Montreal, Canada on 15th May (2005) to participate in the programme. We left at 7.35 a.m. by a British Airways flight from Dum Dum airport. After ten and half-hour journey we reached Heathrow airport in London and from there we reached Montreal, Canada after a six-hour journey. Roxane and Valerie came to the airport to receive us. We took a bus and reached Crown Plaza Hotel. All the other invited girls from different countries of the world were staying in this hotel. The conglomeration of people from one end of the world to the other, the experience of the western world – these were all new experiences for me and it gives me a shudder to think about it.

On the morning of 16th May, Roxana and another girl named Mary Snow took us to a eunuch bar. There a Canadian TV channel interviewed us. I interpreted their questions in Bengali to Rama Debnath and Kohinoor Begum. They asked various questions to Rama Debnath and Kohinoor Begum which I interpreted. The questions were: Are you a sex worker? Do you consider sex work as good work/profession? Are you willing to bring your daughter into this profession? How long have you been in this profession? Do your family members know that you are a sex worker? How long have you been in this organisation? What post do you hold in the organisation? What is your relationship with the police? What is the primary objective of your organisation? Rama Debnath and Kohinoor Begum answered their queries so eloquently and beautifully that the reporters were surprised. On the same day three TV channels televised this interview at 5 p.m. and 10 p.m. Most significantly this interview was arranged only for Durbar.

On 18th May at 7.30 in the evening, Roma Debnath made her speech as chief guest of the Stella

Conference. She spoke about:

1. What or who is Durbar?
2. What is its main demand and the success that has been achieved in the last 10 years like having been able to -

- Create self respect in the sex workers
- Unite the brothel based and street based sex workers
- Form several sex worker organisations
- Successfully replicate the HIV / AIDS prevention model of Sonagachi project in the districts.
- Stop exploitation on sex workers by anti-socials, hooligans, landlords, house owners, police and moneylenders
- Stop entry of minor and unwilling girls into the profession by setting up a self-regulatory board mechanism in sex work sites.
- Organise the sex workers in a movement to demand workers rights, human rights and social rights.
- Make arrangements for the education, entertainment (song and dance) and vocational training (handicrafts) for children of sex workers so as to secure their future.
- Make arrangements for the treatment of HIV positive people and provide ART to poor sex workers free of cost.

Towards the end she spoke at length about the dream and goal of Durbar. I translated all that Rama Debnath spoke of in English for the audience. After this our meeting came to an end.

On 19th May at 2.15 p.m. Kohinoor Begum started her panel discussion, the topic of which was "Relationship between society and sex work and Durbar's strategy to change it". First she spoke about the condition of sex workers in society prior to any work done by Durbar. To stop exploitation, injustice, oppression and ill treatment of sex workers, Durbar took the following steps a) inside the area and b) outside the area in the wider society.

a. Inside the area:

- Uniting the sex workers
- Increasing their self-respect
- Saving them from the exploitation of anti socials, pimps and madams. She cited Kidderpore and Durgapur incidents as examples.
- Stopping the entry of minor and unwilling girls into the trade and the role of self-regulatory board with regard to this and
- Playing a pro-active role in carving out a future for the children of sex workers

b. In the wider society:

- Managing to alleviate their fears and identifying themselves as

sex workers.

- Distributing booklets entitled "Barbanitara Bolchhi" (Sex workers speaking) in the Kolkata Book Fair in 1993.
- Considering sex work as respectable and introducing us as sex workers.
- Putting us before the public through various meetings, fairs and conferences for example the First National Conference of Sex Workers in 1997, *Millennium Milan Mela* (Unity Fair) in 2000 and 'Sonagachi'r Ek Yug (an era of Sonagachi)' in 2004.
- Protesting exploitation on sex workers through processions, meetings, rallies, sit-in demonstrations at police stations and media interviews.



- Having participated in the movement of marginalised groups demanding citizenship.
- Networking and keeping regular contact with other sex worker organisations of the world with regards to their demand for workers rights. She stressed on this by saying that *"you can understand this by seeing us in front of you: having come from one corner of the world to the other ignoring differences in language and race to explain the aims, objectives, strategies, successes and dreams of Durbar"*.

On 20th May from 2.15 p.m. to 3.15 p.m. and from 4.30 p.m. to 5.30 p.m. we conducted our workshop, the topic of which was "How to face police atrocities". After this workshop, we were faced with many questions like how did we get the strength to fight the police? What are we thinking about the future of aged sex workers? Are we willing to bring the children of sex workers into this profession? How do we manage the treatment of sex workers in such a well-planned manner? How did we manage to unite so many sex workers? How did we manage to increase legal awareness among sex workers in so big a country like India, particularly in an illiterate society? They were amazed to hear about our Usha Multi-Purpose Society. After this a senior sex worker activist from New Zealand remarked that they would never be able to scale the heights reached by Durbar, never be able to reach Durbar. Durbar was ahead of them by 50 years. After this we gave interviews to a French and then a Canadian TV channel, which were broadcast the next day.

Through all these discussions, friends I have realised that the main reason behind Durbar's success has been uniting the sex workers and protesting against all exploitation which has been sadly lacking in other countries. The sex workers in other countries are all scattered, unable to

unable to put forward their demands. But then we cannot afford to be complacent because we have a bigger fight ahead of us. We need more strength.

On behalf of Stella, Claire Thiboudet (President) spoke in her speech about how they could unite the sex workers by involving them in various programmes. Like they had to stand by and lend their support to the aged HIV-positive sex workers, to bring before the media instances of exploitation and torture of sex workers so that it comes out in the newspapers and the TV.

Claire said that some years back they had a meeting to fix customer rates but it did not prove to be very effective. "We have to fix a reasonable rate for ourselves so that we are not cheated by our customers. We have to network with other sex workers. In Montreal we do not have brothel based sex workers, all are street based, that is why sex workers are not so united. However due to our own efforts now we are able to question the Montreal Municipal Court, persuade the media to put forth our views to the people", she said. Claire further said that Health Canada was with them but the law and judiciary being against them a new jail has been set up for them in which 750 sex workers were imprisoned.

A guest from Argentina said that to make the sex workers self-sufficient they had resorted to farming, fish farming, departmental stores etc. For HIV/AIDS awareness they were conducting training and had set up a hospital for sex workers only. To get recognition they have also demonstrated in the Parliament.

On 21st May Stella's Forum XXX ended. In front of all national and international TV channels and press representatives sex workers from all over the world put forth their united demand for workers' rights which reached people all over the world via the media and in front of these thousands of sex workers there was only one yellow banner which read "Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee".

Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee: Calendar of Activities January 2004 – May 2005

16–21 January 2004: "Another World is Possible" DMSC participates in the World Social Forum in Goregaon, Mumbai, with a 120-member team of sex worker activists.

23–31 January 2004: Young photographers, children of sex workers exhibit their photographs at a photo exhibition in New Delhi organised by AVAHAN India AIDS Initiative (Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation).

25 January 2004: Melinda Gates visits 'Sonagachi Project'. Interacts with sex worker leadership of DMSC and meets and speaks with sex workers.

7–9 February 2004: Durbar organises a Film Festival at Nandan, Kolkata. Objective of organising this festival – to provide sex workers with an opportunity to interact with the outside world.

15 February – 3 March 2004: DMSC celebrates 12 years of Sonagachi Project, 'Sonagachi'r Ek Jug Utsav' (A decade of Sonagachi Festival) at different branches of Durbar and at Rabindra Kanan, Kolkata.

19 February 2004: At the 'Sonagachi'r Ek Jug Utsav' celebrations at Kalna, the Sub Divisional Officer, Srikumar Chakrabarty, promises government old age allowance to 10 sex workers. In May 2004, at a function in the SDO's office, 10 sex workers given the allowance forms..

March 2004: DMSC launches a signature campaign to gather support for the recognition of workers rights for sex workers and for self-regulatory boards of sex workers.

3 March 2004: Durbar celebrates International Sex Workers Day in all its branches..

8 March 2004: DMSC observes International Women's Day at a function at the organisational office of Durbar.

30 March 2004: A daylong seminar organised jointly by DMSC and the National Network of Sex Workers in Delhi on the empowerment of

marginalized women in society. Participants present findings from a research study on fisherwomen, workers of self-help groups and empowerment of sex workers in West Bengal at the seminar.

13 April 2004: Mrinal Kanti Dutta, Project Director Durbar, Swapna Gayen, Secretary DMSC and Gita Karmakar conducts a training workshop on organisational development with the activists of Mahila Adhikar Morcha of Muzaffarpur (Bihar).

May 2004: Durbar activists approach candidates for the Lok Sabha (Indian Parliamentary) elections with the demand that the parties recognise sex workers' demand for workers' rights and agree to recognise the setting up of self-regulatory boards in sex work sites to prevent entry of underage girls and unwilling women into sex trade.

1 May 2004: DMSC commemorates International Labour Day (May Day) with a torch-lit midnight march in Kolkata.

16 May 2004: The Sethbagan Branch Committee of DMSC observes the '21st AIDS Candle Light Memorial Day' to commemorate all who died of AIDS.

22 May 2004: DMSC conducts a training programme and a quiz competition for staff of State Bank of India, on Sex and Sexuality, Sexually Transmitted Diseases, HIV/AIDS and Health.

24 May 2004: The Kanthi Branch of DMSC organises a sexual health awareness programme with Juneput fishermen and their families

June 2004: Durbar team visits the starving people of Amlasole with food and medical relief. Subsequently Durbar decides to support the overall development of people of Amlasole.

13 June 2004: State Bank of India opens doors to sex workers: cuts bureaucratic red tape and allows the women to open accounts mentioning they are sex workers.

15 June 2004: DMSC activists collect money from sex workers in various sex work sites to bear the treatment costs of severely ill Najma Khatoon, 5 year old daughter of a member of Durbar from the Matia sex work site of Bashirhat.

19 June 2004: 20 sex workers donate blood at a blood donation camp organised by Bottala Police Station (Kolkata).

22 June 2004: Bharati, a sex worker from Khalpada, Siliguri attacked by three hoodlums. Members of Durbar's Siliguri Branch and sex workers of the area complain at the Siliguri police station. Police patrols the area, and the hoodlums do not dare to come back.

26 June 2004: Sex workers participate in a rally organised by Bottala Police Station to observe Anti-drugs Day.

28 June 2004: DMSC invites NGOs to a seminar on prevention of trafficking at Jorabagan, CMC Hall (Kolkata).

29 June 2004: DMSC activists march against the death sentence. Their posters read, "Can we kill to punish killing? Say NO to Capital Punishment!" At the end of the march the activist hand a Memorandum to the Governor of West Bengal.

1 - 16th July 2004: Six representatives from Durbar attend the 14th International AIDS Conference at Bangkok. They speak on workers' rights for sex workers, on Durbar's self-regulatory boards and on Durbar's goal and objectives at various discussions and meetings. They interact with sex worker activists of other countries and collect signatures in support of workers' rights for sex workers.

7 July 2004: 61 children of sex workers, students of Indubala and Rahul Vidyaniketan participate in a 'Health Camp' organised by Chayani Kala Sangha with the support of DMSC at Nehru Children's Museum (Kolkata).

12 July 2004: DMSC observes the 10th Anniversary of its Foundation day.

14 July 2004: Members of DMSC return a 21-year old housewife from Dinhata to her husband. She had come to the sex work site after quarrelling with her husband.

21 July 2004: DMSC conducts a workshop on

HIV/AIDS awareness and a quiz competition among teachers and students of Bhairab Ganguly College (Kolkata).

23 July 2004: Durbar strongly protests the abuse of a sex worker by her landlady (Malkin) at Bowbazar sex work site. They organise a street-corner meeting and march to the neighbourhood police station with the demand that police take strong action against the perpetrators.

7 August 2004: DMSC declares 7th August as Sex Workers' Empowerment Day. The Organisation inaugurates Joint Project Coordinator Scheme - all projects under Durbar to have a sex worker or the child of one as the Joint Project Coordinator. The aim: to build capacities of community members to take charge of all projects.

October 2004: Sex workers invited to inaugurate the Durga Puja of 22nd Pally Durgotsav Committee, (South Kolkata).

27 October 2004: Sex workers of Shantipur (a district field) barricade the National Highway protesting against forceful collection of money by local police. They lift the barricade only after senior police and administration officials promise to take appropriate action.

30 October 2004: DMSC inaugurates its own VCCTC and advanced care centre for PLWHA: 'Mamata Care and Treatment Centre'.

November 2004: DMSC organises Leadership Development Workshop to develop more leaders from various branches of Durbar in preparation for the proposed march to the Indian Parliament in 2005-2006.

1 November 2004: Local goons of Kalighat sex work site attack and beat up Jharna Ghosh, Treasurer of DMSC for protesting against forceful collection of *puja* subscriptions. DMSC launches a big protest at Kalighat, march to the local police station and compel them to arrest the perpetrators.

4 November 2004: DMSC sends Memorandum on situation of sex workers as unorganised-sector labour, their social protection, their rights as a labourers and other demands to the Office of Parliament Secretariat.

21 - 27 November 2004: 150 representatives from 17 partner NGOs of International HIV/AIDS Alliance (Hyderabad) come to observe the



activities of Durbar. Sex workers of Andhra Pradesh and West Bengal share their experiences during this 7-day workshop.

30 November 2004: Different branches of Durbar observe International Day Against Exploitation of Women and Children.

1 December 2004: Durbar observes World AIDS Day.

3 - 5 December 2004: Durbar staff, Chief Advisor and activist attend the 4th International Consultative Workshop of DMSC-TAAH Project at Geneva (Switzerland). The meeting identifies the over-arching values, programme values and key processes that helped make Sonagachi Project successful and proposes a model to depict the Sonagachi Experience.

7 December 2004: Durbar conducts a workshop and quiz competition for staffs of Calcutta Electric Supply Corporation on HIV/AIDS and Health.

14 December 2004: Sex workers of Rajgunj march

in protest against a group of hooligans.

28 December 2004: Renowned writer Abul Basar inaugurates 'Manadasundari Granthagar and Sangrahasala' (Manadasundari Library) at a function in Kalighat.

29 December 2004: 'Sonagachi Sastho Unnayan Committee' (Sonagachi Health and Development Committee) comes into existence at a function in Press Club (Kolkata). Eminent filmmaker Goutam Ghosh, Dr. Smarajit Jana and Swapna Gayen selected as President, Vice-president and Secretary respectively. On the same day, Mr. R. S. Misra, Deputy Secretary of the Parliamentary Secretariat (Govt. of India) meets representatives of Durbar and discusses their demands.

January 2005: Durbar begins funds-collection drive to assist coastal fishermen devastated by the Tsunami.

14 January 2005: Sex workers meet Samaresh Majumdar, an eminent writer. Mr. Majumdar writes an article on Durbar and its work, which

is published by the largest circulated Bengali daily (Anandabazar Patrika).

22 January 2005: Sex workers' children, residents of Rahul Vidyaniketan of Durbar, participate in the Annual Sports of Aikatan Club at Baruipur. They secure a number of prizes including the first prize in different sporting categories.

18 - 19 February 2005: National Network of Sex Workers organise a meeting at Sangli, Maharashtra. Representatives from Durbar and Chief Advisor Durbar participate at the meeting and share their viewpoint with other organisations of the National Network.

19 February - 6 March 2005: DMSC staff and activists complete the first round of Awareness Campaigns in different sex work sites on the issue of March to Parliament to demand workers' rights for sex workers.

March 2005: Rama Debnath, President DMSC sits on the high-profile "Bishakha Committee" of the South Eastern Railways as NGO Representative. The Railways instituted this committee to probe into charges of sexual harassment brought by Ms Bishakha, one of their employees.

March 2005: Activists of Durbar protest in print and electronic media against the wrongful depiction of Kolkata sex workers by the Oscar-winning documentary film, 'Born into Brothels' by Zana Brisky.

March 2005: At Durgapur, hooligans set fire to and destroy four brothels. Durbar provides the victims of arson economic support and protest against the incident, and police swing into action and arrest the perpetrators.

2 - 5 March 2005: DMSC organises the 5th International Consultative Workshop of DMSC-TAAH Project. Representatives from WHO

(HIV/AIDS Division), University of Nottingham (Dept. of Public Health), CARE-India, etc. meet and interact with sex worker activists and researchers on the reasons for success of Sonagachi Project.

3 March 2005: Sex workers celebrate International Sex Workers' Day. They hold a gorgeous rally. They raise the slogan: "We want rights, not rehabilitation". Mr. Ashokmohan Chakrabarty, Labour Commissioner, Government of West Bengal inaugurates the Durbar website (www.durbar.org) and Mr. Gautam Ghosh launches the Durbar Calendar on the same day.

2 April 2005: Siliguri Sex workers force the police to arrest local hooligan, Alam and his gang who attacked Mithu Chakrabarty, an important sex worker leader.

May 2005: Sex workers launch the construction of a health and research centre at Sonagachi. A long-awaited dream of sex workers becomes a reality.

May 2005: Bar Dancers in Mumbai face government ban. Begin statewide protest. Durbar representatives attend their protest meeting in Mumbai and profess solidarity.

1 May 2005: Durbar activists observe International Labour Day (May Day) by staging a torchlight rally at midnight. Activists protest anti-sex worker policies of George Bush Administration by distributing leaflets, slogans and through performance of a street drama. Rally attended by about 3000 sex workers and covered by local, national and international media (electronic and print).

3 May 2005: A group of Durbar representatives participate at a seminar on economic empowerment of sex workers and their children in Bangladesh.