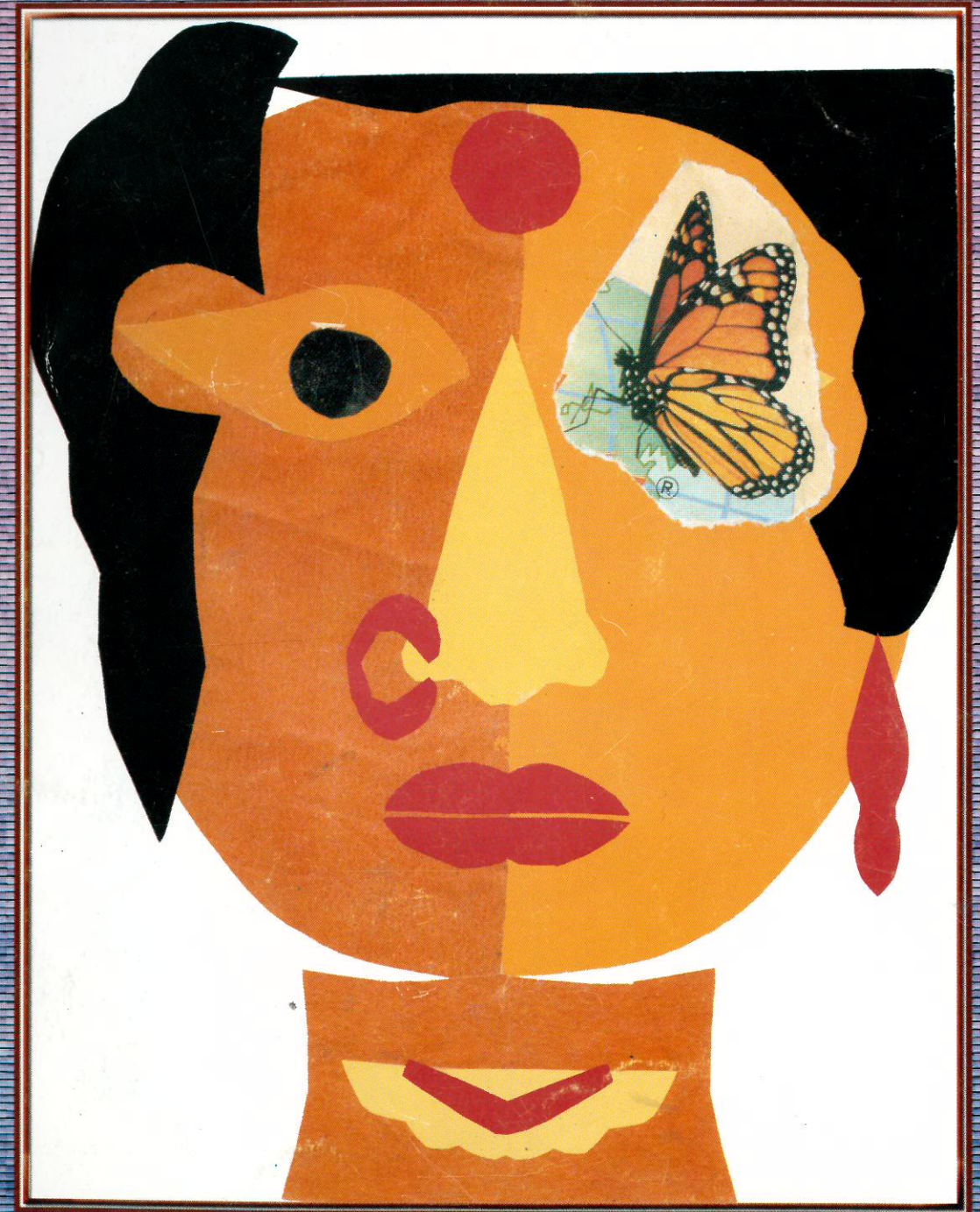


Namaskar



Dr. Smarajit Jana inaugurates the 'Shanti Utsav', 3rd March 2002.
Mr. Sunil Gangopadhyay, Novelist, Poet and Sheriff of Kolkata and
Mr. Suresh Kumar, Project Director, W.B.S.A.P & C.S. look on



Published By: Durbar Prakashani, 8/3 Bhawani Dutta Lane, Kolkata 700 073, India. Printed by: RaysDot.com.

Price Rs. 15.00

ATTACK ON DMSC



Sit-in Demonstration protesting attack by anti-social elements on the President of DMSC



Angura Begum, Secretary, DMSC briefing the press about the attack on Swapna Gayen (standing next to her)

Namaskar

Vol. 5. No. 2, December 2002

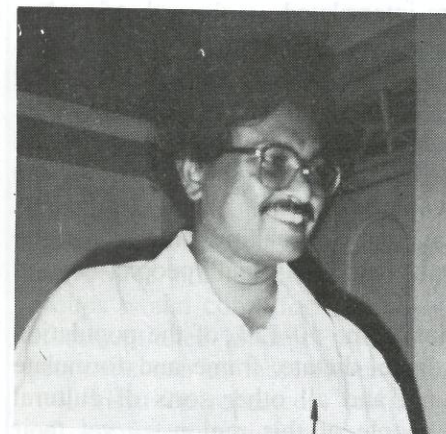
Editor	:	Dr. Smarajit Jana
Editorial Assistants	:	Uma Mondal, Kahinoor Begum, Mrinal Kanti Dutta and Mitra Routh
Cover	:	Debasish Chakraborty
Photo	:	Kushal Roy, Putul Singh, Kanai, Ashish Dutta
Art Director	:	Mitra
Publisher	:	Durbar Prakashani
Editorial Office	:	"Namaskar" 12/5 Nilmoni Mitra Street, Kolkata-700 006 West Bengal, India Phone : +91 33 2543-7451/7650 +91 33 2530-6619 Fax : +91 33 2543-7777 E-Mail : <sonagachi@sify.com> <ship@cal.vsnl.net.in> URL : www.durbarmahila.org

Contents

Editorial	.....	3
• Attack on DMSC	.....	6
• Indecent Queries, Firm Answers	.....	10
• The Sex Workers' Movement in the Netherlands	.....	12
• A Report on the "Shanti Utsav"	.....	15
• On Some Characteristics of the Movement of the Sex Workers of Kolkata	.....	18
• Rights or the wrongs? A case study of G.B. Road rescue-rehabilitation operation	.....	20
• Cultural Change, Community Mobilisation And Participatory Development : A Case Study of Sex Workers In West Bengal	.....	24
• Challenging the Literates	.....	29
• Prize winning Photographs : A brief background	.....	31
• Performance of "Komal Gandhar" at the UNDP Programme	.....	32
• Usha Co-operative Paves the Way	.....	33
• Sex-workers' Forum Kerala : New Partner of National Network of Sex-workers	.....	35
• It is High Time to Call a Spade by its Proper Name	.....	37

Editorial

Social Discrimination against Workers and Underdevelopment in South Asia



The other day I was talking to a well-heeled professional friend of mine, based in London. The issue of poverty cropped up in the course of our discussion. The problem was that of identifying the major differences between the developed countries of the West and, the developing countries of the Indian peninsula or South Asia — from the points of view of levels of earning, poverty and, quality of life. My question was simple : why, we, the people from this part of the world, are poorer in comparison to the people living in the developed countries? My friend mumbled a little and, then he came out with a simple answer : you see, he said, there are hardly any poor people in this country [i.e., in England], who go about half fed and half naked; and, that's the difference between these two regions. But who are the poor? And

why are they poor? — I retorted back. Well, said my friend, the poor people in the developing countries remain poor, but things have changed here in the developed countries. Now-a-days, he continued, you can't find a poor sweeper, carpenter or electrician here and, you know, people like me, who represent the top 5% of the salaried people in the UK, find it difficult to afford their wages and, you know, when their services are asked for, they come driving their own cars. They spend holidays in resorts, go to restaurants, attend social gatherings with us and, mix with many of us — as there is no social taboo or discrimination related to their job. They are not treated differently in social gatherings or in official dealings, on the grounds of the nature of their work or occupation. I consider this to be the major social difference between the developed countries of the West and, the developing countries of South Asia, like India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh etc., where the heritage of caste/occupation based social discrimination prevails in all the spheres of social, economic, political and cultural intercourse.

Many of our sociologists, and philosophers consider the absence of all-pervasive caste-like social discrimination in the Western societies to be a sign of development. Some however, consider the Black/White or Hispanic/White tensions in the US to be caste-like in some respects. Yet, in recent days, one does not witness any serious programmatic effort for ushering in any change in this area. What is more, not many of the newly educated scientific and technical intelligentsia in this part of the world, or even in the world as a whole, are aware of the historic efforts in this area, right from the time of the early Buddhists and Jainas, through the Bhakti-Sufi movements, upto the social, religious and, educational reform movements of the 19th and early 20th centuries, in different parts of our sub-continent. There are many theories in the market about the possible current strategies of social and economic development of South Asia. Yet, one does not find a single program, oriented on this issue of eradicating social discrimination around numerous types of work, that prevails here. Policy makers talk of social engineering,

dignity of work

i.e., of changing the behaviour and, of influencing social mores and practices. Yet they are silent on the reality of caste/tribe/occupation oriented social inequities. They are not keen on improving the social "value" or "esteem" or "status" of various kinds of socially necessary labor. The reasons for this silence and for the lack of desire on their part are there right in front of our noses. Like all other discourse in this part of the world, the discourse of 'development' too, is mediated here *by* and *for* the socially dominant and articulate "upper" or ruling castes, or caste-like formations, like the *bhadraloks* or *ashrafs* of Bengal. While speaking of enhancing the social "value" of labour, I am not pressing for increasing the exchange value of all types of socially necessary labour — though all types of values are interrelated — since that is taken care of by the supply-and-demand of the regional, local and global markets of various kinds of labour. I am just pressing for opening up a dialogue on the viability/necessity of continuing the status-wise social classification of various occupations, that still prevails in our societies. So far, not a single NGO or development agency has shown any interest in enhancing the social status of those occupations which carry the stigma of "low" social status in this part of the globe. Here some jobs are considered less dignified and, people engaged in these occupations are continuously denied even their basic human rights. Numerically speaking, they constitute the overwhelming majority — yet, even their well wishers call them "marginal" people, beyond the pale of the "mainstream".

Some tags! The *bhadraloks* or *ashrafs* of Bengal are almost some 10-12% of the population of this region — yet they are the "mainstream"! They dominate, dictate, frame and formulate the terms of social, economic, political, religious, educational and all other sorts of cultural discourse. The peasant castes constitute some 65% of the people of this region — yet their voice, their agenda, has no place in the "mainstream". They must "speak" through their *bhadralok/ashraf* leaders. After agriculture, the two most numerous employment generating sectors of our economy are : sex work and transport services. The transport-workers and sex-workers together constitute some 3% of the population. Add another 3-4% engaged in the services around them. A vast majority of them are sons and daughters of the peasants. So are the vast majority of the other service sector workers and, the industrial workers. In sum : 88-90% of the Bengalees — who are not *bhadraloks*, i.e., are *chhotoloks* — are not the "mainstream"! Thus, those among our people who are engaged in the most numerous socially relevant and important types of activities, are socially, politically and culturally the most powerless in this upside down, topsy-turvy society.

This is the outcome of the pernicious heritage of our ancient caste system. My case here is straight forward. Why can't we launch various kinds of movements for enhancing the social status of all these socially discriminated people, to help their upward movement? It may be articulated in various forms and programs. These may be occupation-specific, e.g., targeted towards the problems of the sex workers, transport workers, tanners, cobblers, fishermen, farm labourers etc. Within and beyond the domains of an occupation, these may be caste/tribe-specific, e.g., targeted at the problems faced by say the *Santhals* and *Gonds*, or *Bauris* and *Bagdis* etc. This must be articulated as our major social issue. It has to be addressed in different institutional and organizational settings — starting from the familial, right through the educational, religious, political, economic and all the other cultural institutions. We shall have to develop and demonstrate various humane, just and forward-looking practices in various social and religious events and ceremonies. We shall have to innovate. But to begin with, we must recognize the need for addressing this most important social issue of South Asia, while planning development programs and strategies for this part of the world.

Our policy planners talk endlessly of poverty reduction, rural upliftment etc. in big gatherings, euphemistically called seminars, workshops etc. There the problem of development was initially

passed off as a technical one : that of inflow of capital, of transfer of technology, of monitoring interventions and, of gathering data etc. Of late, these talks are being supplemented by sermons on : stakeholders' participation, creation of an enabling environment, strategies of empowerment etc. But who are these stakeholders, what is the social environment like? And, what is the specificity of power — in South Asian societies? On that, both the international development agencies and the home-grown NGOs are completely clueless, even though for the last half-a-century or even more, the descriptive, historical and theoretical investigators into the structure and function of the various social groups in these societies, continue to cry hoarse on this score. Why can't we learn the necessary lessons from them, strategise around this problem of social discrimination against workers, create an enabling social environment, and formulate a strategy to empower the powerless sections of the society?

Let us accept that there will be no immediate change in their economic conditions, but it will certainly enhance their self-esteem and dignity. And that certainly is an important social and psychological precondition for these groups to develop *their own agency*. It would be a truism to say that the social and economic upliftment of the poor people would not be a passive process, nor can that be achieved by arranging supply of deliverable goods or services to them. No development program would succeed so long as they remain passive *prajas* and, not transform themselves into active citizens, into agents of social change. Someday, some of these occupational groups would come forward to design, plan and execute their own struggle. Till that time, the aforementioned kinds of social, religious, educational, cultural and, political interventions and programs can at least foster their organization building skills.

I insist on repeatedly raising this question, as to why, in spite of the fact that there are so many developmental theories and practices — that have seen little of success and, more of failures — why have all most all of them avoided this issue of enhancing the social value of labour in South Asia? One may think that it is rather naive on my part to raise this issue. Others may opine that it is just a conceptual lack of our civil society. Yet others may consider it to be the result of the designs of the "princes" of the development agencies, who wanted to bypass this contentious issue related to the status of labour. Be what it may, when we take a look at the socio-economic structure of the developed countries, it strikes us as a glaring difference. And my London-based professional friend articulated this difference in a simple way. He lamented that the "quality" of his life is poorer, even though in cash terms his earnings are several times higher, than that of mine. He told me clearly that he can't afford to hire half a dozen working hands — starting from the sweeper, right through the gardener, the baby-sitter, cook etc. — whom many like me in South Asia can afford to hire very easily, to ensure a hassle-and — tension-free, relatively comfortable — why, almost parasitic — lifestyle. It remains a fact that we, the progressive, leftist, intellectual *bhadraloks* as a social group, are vocal against the socially discriminatory practices related to various occupations, only at the time of discussion, in seminars, workshops, forums etc. We are not serious in initiating the necessary social changes. We are in fact afraid and apprehensive of such changes. We do not intend to lose our 'inherited', caste-based, birth-determined advantages in our home country and, the "edges" that such advantages provide us over our counterparts in the developed countries. By lording it over our labouring *prajas*, we too fail to become citizens. Consequently, the project of building developed civil societies in South Asia remains present continuous — both for the rulers and for the ruled.

Smarajit Jena

Attack on DMSC

".....we need daring, more daring,
daring now and always....."

Georges Jacques Danton

Swapna Gayen, President of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee and, her six year old son were beaten-up severely by local goons on the night of 6 October '02 at the Tollygaunge red light area, Kolkata, because she sheltered one of the local sex workers, who is a member of the DMSC. The goons stormed into Swapna's room and dragged her out. Her six years old son and, fixed customer ("Babu") ^{note} staying with her were also not spared. The President was held back by her hair by some, others took their turns to kick and punch her. Swapna was admitted to Shree Vishuddhanand Saraswati Marwari Hospital with severe pain, in chest and abdomen and with vomiting tendencies.

The problem goes back to last August when local antisocials, who masquerade as neighbourhood big brothers, severely beat up Rekha Lodh, a sex worker. These bigwigs of neighbourhood live off the earning of Sex Workers, and run various other rackets in the locality. According to them Rekha needed to be punished for having had a public altercation with her 'Babu' (fixed customer). In the middle of the night Rekha and her two young children were thrown out of their room and locked out, because she needed to be taught a further lesson for violating the rules made by the local anti-socials and for that the beating alone was not enough. Swapna Gayen, President of DMSC, is also a resident of the same red light area. She vehemently protested and with her full support Rekha dared to lodge a complaint with the local ('Regent Park') police station.

Antisocials retaliated by launching a hate campaign against the President of DMSC. She was persistently intimidated, abused and harassed. But, under her leadership DMSC continued to protest. They had been compelled to close down the STD clinic in the locality, as under the threat of the antisocials, local members stopped visiting the clinic. This clinic is a part of the HIV/AIDS prevention programme (Internationally known as "Sonagachi Project") which DMSC runs effectively for the last ten years. This programme is recognised throughout the world as a model project.

Under the banner of DMSC the Sex Workers of West Bengal have been organising themselves to protect their rights, against violence on Sex Workers and to end their exploitation. The members of DMSC have been in the forefront of the movement. So, the attacks on our President Swapna and on Rekha were not isolated incidents against individual sex workers. These were premeditated acts to undermine this movement. It is a strike at the heart of DMSC's leadership. As marginalised and exploited people came forward and holding had-in-hand made an attempt to take control of their lives, those whose interests are vested in their subordinations have to hit back.

DMSC took to the streets in protest where thousands of sex workers from Kolkata and the districts of West Bengal organised a rally, demanding arrest of the perpetrators. At last police

did file a FIR and two out of three antisocials, were arrested (of whom one was released recently). Unfortunately, the main culprit 'Lal' is still absconding. He and his companions are ceaselessly sending out threats to DMSC members and activists. A press conference was called, in the presence of many intellectuals, where press was informed and their co-operation was asked for.

Following the rally, DMSC put up a mass sit-in programme from morning till evening at the mouth of the den of the criminals to agitate for immediate arrest of the criminals and to bring it to the forefront. DMSC was supported by many intellectuals, members from various Trade Unions and NGOS. Besides, overwhelming response was received from organisations and individuals, protesting the attack on the President and active member of DMSC, from all over the world. Yet the local police could do very little except a few raids in the said red light area. Main accused 'Lal' remain untouched and the racket of baiting, gambling dens and selling hooch in the area, the prime sources of income of the criminals, are at full swing and are flourishing. On the other side, Ms. Swapna Gayen, Ms. Rekha Lodh along with their family members still remain homeless and are continuing a never ending search for a 'safe shelter'.

A Report by Mitra Routh



...ues of India, Kol
 Wednesday, October 9, 2002
আজকের
দুবার' সভানেত্রী প্রহত টালিগা
 প্রতিবেদন: এক বোনকর্মীকে নাগ্ননার প্রতিবাদ করে
 দু'বার মহিলা সমন্বয় কমিটির সভানেত্রী স্বপ্না গায়ের
 বোনকর্মী মহম্মদ এই ঘটনা ঘটেছে। দু'বার
 সমস্তি রেখা লোধ নামে ওয়া
 এর প্রতিবাদ করে। তখন
 গিয়ে উদ্ধার করে
 রিজেন্ট

জানকন্যা

The Times of
 বার ৩০ অক্টোবর ২০০২ ৮ পেজ রু. ৩.০০ কোলকাতা, দিল্লী ওরায়পুর সে প্রকাশিত

Wednesday, Oct



পুলিছে আমাদের
 সন্নীতে সমাজ বিরোধীদের অত্যাচারের প্রতিবাদে
 বনস্বৈ অপ্রাধীদের শান্তির দাবীতে

Sex w
 2,000
 against
 police
 area o
 memb
 Sama
 also r
 ing in
 Acco
 tary S
 mem
 Lodh
 lums
 thro
 DMS

অসামাজিক শক্তি'র হুমকী'র বিরোধে মঙ্গলবার কলকাতার দু'বার' সভানেত্রী স্বপ্না গায়ের
 who is a resident of the area,
 protested, he too was beaten up
 the miscreant

৮ অক্টোবর
 প্রতিবাদ করে
 গায়ের
 নামে
 করে

৮ • NAMASKAR

Wednesday, Oct
 Indian Times,
**Sex worker
 beaten up for
 opposing goons**
 OBER 20
aten up by goons



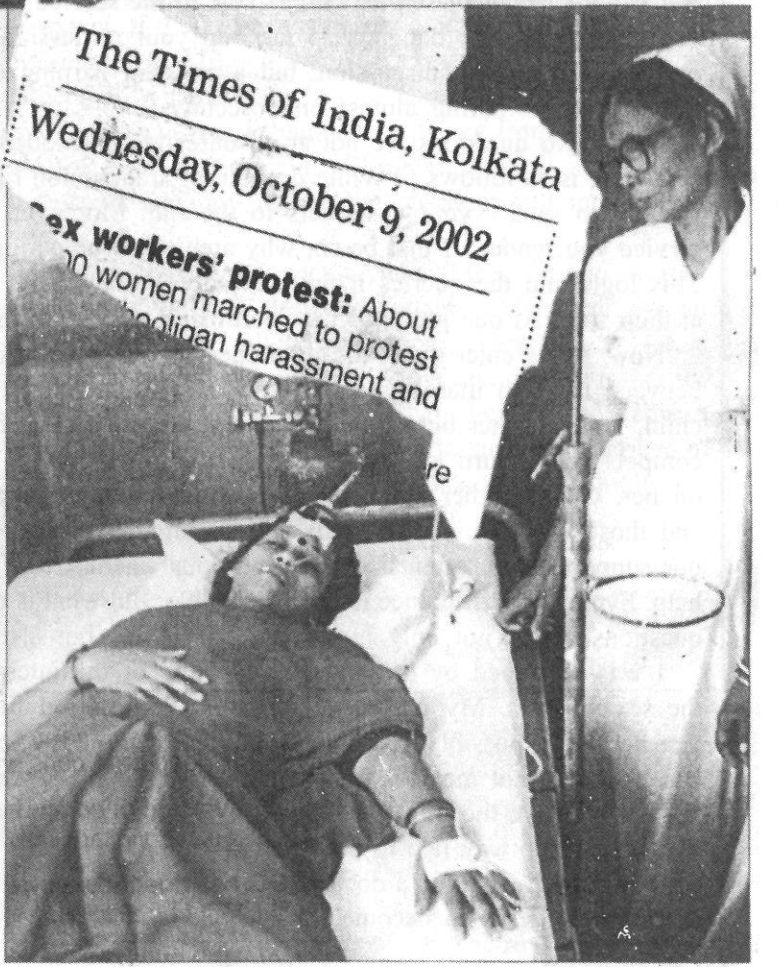
IN PROTEST: Activists of the Durbar Mahilen,
 stration in the city on Tuesday protesting red
 Regent Park PS, was
 te last evening allegedly

The Times of India, Kolkata
 Wednesday, October 9, 2002

Sex workers' protest: About
 2,000 women marched to protest
 against "hooligan harassment and
 police inaction" in the Tollygunge
 area on Tuesday. Most of them were
 members of the Durbar Mahila
 Samanwaya Committee. There wer
 also representatives of NGOs wor
 ing in red light areas.
 According to DMSC general secre
 tary Shikha Das, on August 27, a
 member of the organisation, Rekh
 Lodh, was beaten up by local hoo
 lums and her two children were
 thrown out of their house. Wed
 DMSC president Swapna Gayen
 who is a resident of the area,
 protested, he too was beaten up
 the miscreant

৮ অক্টোবর
 প্রতিবাদ করে
 গায়ের
 নামে
 করে

**Woman beaten
 by goons**



Swapna Gayen, a sex worker of the Tollygunge area who was beaten up by anti-socials, in a
 hospital in Kolkata on Monday — The Statesman
 9 • NAMASKAR

Indecent Queries, Firm Answers

Subhoranjan Dasgupta

Swapna Gayen, General Secretary of Durbar, narrated her life's story in a simple and moving manner at a recent seminar held in Kolkata. She answered the basic question, "How did I become a sex-worker?" Her style of narration proved that this was not her first disclosure. Nonetheless, her voice trembled at certain points. We, who listened, were moved by her recollection and our sympathy for her persisted during the question and answer session.

Only two listeners created problems. Both were ladies and social activists. Remaining rightly faithful to the tenets of typical, middle class moralism, they repeatedly asked the two following questions, almost in concert : (1) "You are demanding trade union rights like other workers. But is your labour or service comparable to the service and labour of other workers?" (2) "Will you encourage your daughter to take up your profession?" Those queries can be raised once or twice in an open discussion, but a constant harping on them exhibits an attitude of cruel insensitivity bordering almost on obscenity.

These two questions are not at all unrelated. A hidden, mischievous logic connects the two. The logic is as follows : "While demanding trade union rights you claim that like other workers you try to satisfy your customers to the full. Moreover, no special stigma is attached to the service you render. If that be so, why aren't you preparing your daughters for this profession?" This logic and the queries it provides are irrelevant and inhuman. A dangerous non-reason is at their root. At one point, as the coordinator of the seminar, I had to eliminate these questions.

Now, let us enter the realm of proper reason. The basic argument is, no intrinsic link exists between the two interrogations. A sex worker can think of any career or profession for her child, it is also her birthright to implement this thought into action. If her existential situation compels her to turn her child into a sex-worker, we try to understand the nature of pressure on her. On the other hand, those who are eager to prepare another future for their children and those who struggle to fulfil this dream in the most uncharitable conditions, they deserve our support. More often than not, 'virtuous' members of 'virtuous' society do not extend any help. Even this indifference is understandable. But what is not endorsable is the raising of harmful questions which not only hurt those questioned but also damage their cause.

I was perturbed by the aggressive nature of the interrogation and the defensive posture of the sex workers. My wish is to furnish a strong and firm answer which Swapna and others like her could possibly give when they feel cornered. The answer is : "Yes I am a sex worker. But that does not mean that my daughter has to be a sex worker too. I, for my daughter, and she herself have the full right of envisaging another kind of life. That is our basic, fundamental right it is in no way tied to the demands and compulsions of my profession. A nurse's daughter could wellnigh try to be a doctor. A housemaid's daughter could try to become teacher. A clerk's daughter could try to become a big officer. Have you ever questioned the aspirations of these

women, or the aspirations of their daughters? You have not. Then why are you hammering away this question at me? Why are you so surprised when I claim that my daughter will not follow my footsteps? "Why are you so worried?"

This forceful reply will lead straight to that crucial argument which will break the false connection between 'daughter's aspiration' and 'trade union rights'. The argument is as follows : "There is absolutely no link between my daughter's future vocation and my demand for trade union rights for my present profession. Please do not try to forge a pointless link between these two totally separate issues, this very effort is unethical and graceless. My society, my country, my judicial system, my government accept and recognize my profession as legal. Thousands of sex workers practise this profession openly, they are not penalized for it. If that is the reality, I have every right to demand trade union rights. What has my daughter's vocation to do with this struggle?"

No doubt, this struggle has gained immense importance at this moment. Precisely because the sex worker as the provider of services does not enjoy the slightest protection. She is exploited and persecuted at several levels—by the police, by the agent, by the mistress and even by local political bosses. Absolutely unprotected and deprived of minimum rights, the sex worker often finds herself in desperate situations. The extent of this merciless desperation has been underlined by Buddhadev Dasgupta in his film 'Manda Meyer Upakhyan' (the story of a bad girl). It is simply not possible for 'virtuous' members of 'virtuous' society to comprehend the depth of despair engulfing sex workers' colonies. What, however, we can safely ensure from our distance is unqualified support for their struggle for trade union rights. These rights will not remove all their miseries at one stroke, but these will certainly reduce the quantum and intensity of exploitation.

As for those who regard this profession as immoral and condemnable and therefore not worthy of trade union rights, they can follow another wide path designed for them. They can appeal to the court and state to ban this trade and guarantee full rehabilitation of sex workers—this is the first step. Then, in the second stage, they can file criminal suits against thousands of suitors who seek these services voluntarily. And, as the third corrective, they should demand the full exposure of all those 'hidden' sex workers who indulge in the same profession in health resorts, guest houses, hotels and parlours. Middle class moralists will not attempt a single one out of these three tasks. So let us ignore them and their questions.

The author is the Senior Correspondent of "Voice of Germany."

The Sex Workers' Movement in the Netherlands

Sietske Altink

It was twenty years ago (not today). There was no RTHE (Red Thread) yet. At that time I met a big shot of one of the two Dutch labour unions – the FNV – in a pub. He addressed me on the subject of prostitution and I asked him if he would accept sex-workers as members. "Over my dead body", was his answer. Little did he know at the time, that shortly after his death the FNV would indeed accept sex-workers as members.

History took its course. The Red Thread came into being and the decriminalization of prostitution was initiated. The idea of working with a regular trade union came into focus. In 1991 there was the first contact with the trade unions.

The good news was that they were not fully opposed to sex-work as a concern of the labour movement any more. The bad news was that they couldn't do anything for sex-workers at that time. They only took on members who were employees in a clear employer-employee relationship. In other words, there should be talk of a labour contract, oral or written. There was no way that could be arranged with a full safeguard for anonymity. Moreover, at that time the Red Thread was reluctant to accept the idea of employment and preferred the status of independent entrepreneur or self employed contractors. The Red Thread was concocting all sorts of constructions to realize this with full guarantees for anonymity.

The upshot was that we failed. The reason was that legalization of brothels meant 'normalization', and there was the taxman, looming behind the whole operation. And there is no way to pay tax anonymously. Well, you can give a donation to the taxman anonymously, but then you can never prove that you have paid your share.

But then, a few years before the long awaited legalization took effect, two developments took place :

1. The Red Thread relinquished the idea that employment with a labour contract was unconditionally out of the question.

2. Second, and more important, the FNV decided to start a department for entrepreneurs without personnel.

These developments paved the way for a second round of contacts. The board of directors of the FNV decided that whatever the floor, their members thought that they should take up prostitutes' rights. Formally members could stop them, but that never happened.

To make a long story short :

How do we now work with the unions?

– They support us in making an union for sex-workers, in our office that is associated with the big union. So we do the intake. And women don't have to state their names etc in a rather official setting of a regular trade union. We can use their expertise in concrete cases. Time will tell if it has to stay this way or if we'll become fully integrated. Self employed sex-workers

can also become members.

– The FNV gives us full support in case of labour conflicts in brothels whether individually or collectively.

– They also support us in political action and they pull all their forces because they are fully recognized by the government as a social partner in our poldermodel.

– Besides they are developing a tailor made training programme for sex-workers so that they can become full-fledged shop stewards.

– And they made over to us some materials.

– And last but not least, they are entitled to make a collective labour contract that should be valuable nation wide for those sex-workers who want to enter the employer-employee relationship.

We see the working with a regular trade union as a great step forward : we have

– first and foremost : official recognition,

– expertise in the case of labour conflicts,

– weighty partner in political issues.

In sum, a sex-worker-union relationship utopia. Well, this was only possible after the legalisation, according to the FNV. Because legalisation gave them the authority to defend our case against the 'traditional members'. And they could rally the powers that be, like the ministry of social affairs, that they come up with workable policies towards prostitution. Besides, it is hard to see how sex-workers can fully enjoy workers' rights when the necessary activities for their work, like soliciting clients is forbidden. That kind of regulation is inviting crime to take over, and when crime takes over, workers' rights go down the drain. So that it is one of the reasons why it would be fantastic if the UK unions (or other unions) would join in the fight for decriminalisation of prostitution.

But can a union only do something with an official legal working force. Now we are debating with them about let's say exploitation of undocumented sex-workers. We want to know if there is some kind of action possible in parallel with exploitation of people in textile sweatshops, domestic work in conditions of slavery. We are trying to work something out for those sex-workers, so that they have a means of redress, which should be better than just deportation. But ... there is this sensitive issue about undocumented women : we want more women to be documented but you should not make exceptions. Our view is : migrant sex-workers should enjoy the same rights and restrictions as migrants in other professions. Of course you can denounce national immigration politics as too limited. But then you should address it as a matter of immigration policy that concerns people in ALL professions.

And that brings me to the 50000 pounds question : what are the advantages for a sex-worker who won't or can't associate? E.g. the aforementioned undocumented women? Or for sex-workers who don't perceive themselves as sex-workers and have taken up the work 'just for a couple of days', to get some temporary financial relief?

The answer should be plain and simple : they should be able to apply for support, even if we don't know their names and legal status. That's why we keep up the old work, the work of the foundation and we support them anyway. We as a union are not the police, we don't check on residence permits or whatever. We don't do the work of the police.

And as to the police : they hardly ever come to our office and when they do, it is for an open discussion on policies. And we have a drink of lemonade with them and celebrate the poldermodel.

But how do brothel owners react? They didn't exactly send us a box of cigars to celebrate. We encouraged the existing organisations of brothelownwers to take their next historically important step and become a member of the official organization for employers. Some of them had come across that idea themselves. Some are willing to take their seat at the negotiating table. But on the whole, they sort of reacted scary and aggressive; not unlike the great captains of industry in the nineteenth century when workers got organized.

In practice, this means we get kicked out of brothels often. There is a long way to go. We don't expect we will succeed within the next year.

But let me conclude : there is one thing worse than fighting brothel owners and that is not fighting brothel owners. There is one thing worse than fighting exploitation, and that is not fighting exploiting. And there is one thing worse than organizing and that is not organizing. And there is one thing worse than just a small group of organized sex-workers and that is no group at all.

So sex-workers in the UK and in the other countries : go for it. So labour unions of the UK and of all the countries of the world, go for it. And try to get ahead of us in the Netherlands.

e-mail : saltink@rodebrad.nl
URL : WWW.rodebrad.nl

A Report on the "Shanti Utsav"

A carnival was celebrated at the International Sex Workers' Mela, between the 3rd and the 9th of March 2002. Organised by the Durbar Mahila Samanyaya Committee (DMSC), the Mela has become an annual event, held in Calcutta. An organisation of almost 60,000 sex workers', DMSC was started in Sonagachi, a red light area in Calcutta, in the year 1995. Although it began with an HIV/AIDS intervention project (SHIP), over the years sex workers in Sonagachi have mobilised themselves as an organisation claiming their rightful stake in the process of development.

Last year, DMSC had organised the Millennium Mela in Calcutta, where at the opening ceremony, the women declared the 3rd of March as the International Sex Workers' Rights day. Sex Workers groups from all over the country came together to form the National Network of Sex Workers, whose key demands to the state were for decriminalisation of sex work and recognition of their work as formal labour. This year too the Mela attracted a huge number of enthusiastic individuals and groups, apart from sex workers' organisations, sexual minority groups and other allied organisations. The theme of this year's Mela was a call for peace, hence the name "Shanti Utsav", in view of the growing global hostility, especially after the September 11th last year.

It was indeed a transformative space for all those who were present, as the seven days were filled with a variety of cultural events such as folk dances and music as well as discussions and debates. The vibrancy of the space emerged from the impressive photographs exhibited by the children of sex workers, an art camp which presented panitings by renowned artists and the soul-stirring music of the Bauls, from Bengal. On the eve of the International Women's Day thousands of women, sex workers and their allies came together for a torchlight march, while the Bauls' sang about life, body, mind and spirit.

The Mela provided the space for lively discussions concerning the much craved for freedom and liberty of human beings all over the world, and towards the marginalization of minority communities.

Some of the key themes that were discussed at the Mela were on the status and rights of sex workers, on the role of the state towards the community, issues of sexual minorities, the role of sex workers in the health sector as well as on the much debated anti-trafficking initiatives.

Status and Rights of Sex Workers in India

As a community, sex workers in India are a heavily stigmatised group, and remain socially and politically marginalized. The intersectionality of gender, caste and ethnicity, together with the strict social sanction against paid sex, creates a situation where sex workers are located at the bottom of the social structure. The services provided by sex workers always receive negative sanctions in society, and they are viewed as deviants, in a society that prescribes familial, procreative sexuality as the norm.

The social identity of sex workers is constantly reduced to a morally objectionable status by society, which fails to recognise them as human beings, workers, mothers, and citizens. Practising sex work often means losing one's parental rights, rights to basic health, right to state protection and other fundamental rights as a citizen of the country. The sexual identity and the stigma attached limits their access to social services, denying sex workers the possibility to move out of sex work by choice, as their past sexual identity produces an unalterable condition of stigma that is attached to their personality.

In light of this situation, it becomes necessary to critically evaluate the existing situation and produce a strategy that can counter the stigma at the social and political levels. The Mela provided that public space where sex workers along with other marginalised members of society could stake their claim to citizenship rights, and resolve to resist stigmatisation.

Attitude of the State towards Sex Workers

The state in India has been very high handed and dismissive towards sex workers. Their marginalized status prevents them from claiming social benefits such as health, education and social security. In the past fifty years, planning in India has excluded many disadvantaged communities including sex workers, whose basic rights as citizens have been denied. For example, in India, a huge portion of the country's expenditure is allotted to the defence budget, at the cost of providing basic food and shelter to the citizens. Participants at a session also discussed the impact of war and terrorism on deepening insecurities of marginalized communities.

Within the country's service sector, the sex industry remains the most invisible economic site. Due to stigmatisation, the exploitation of these women is also far greater. There is clearly little focus on this area of work within the government's policy framework. In fact, last year the government, in the latest census report of India, clubbed sex workers along with beggars and criminals. This classification is completely arbitrary and unacceptable to the sex workers.

In recent years, sex workers have been in the focus of attention of legislative and judicial bodies owing to the growing prevalence of the HIV/AIDS epidemic and rising international concern over trafficking in women and children. At best, women in the profession are merely conceived of as "victims" of poverty and oppression, who have been trafficked into a site of crime and who must be "rehabilitated".

Such an approach fails to recognise the agency of the women, ignoring the fact that many women, living in the matrix of unequal gender relations, poverty and illiteracy, believe that often sex work is the only option that allows them to independently seek their livelihood.

Role of Sex Workers in the Health Sector

The growing concern over the HIV/AIDS epidemic has resulted in the rise of intervention work. The sex workers, have been identified as a high-risk-behaviour prone group, hence there is targeted intervention for these women.

In the health sector, the role of people's participation towards ensuring better health services in the country is critical, and the special needs of different communities need to be assessed, in order to effect interventions. For example, health policies are currently focussing on the Anti-Retroviral drug for HIV patients. Although ARV drugs are meant to improve the quality of people's lives, its high pricing contradicts its purpose and remains inaccessible to most.

The significance of the empowerment of sex workers in HIV/AIDS prevention programmes was also discussed. Under circumstances of human rights violation, it is unlikely that the overall living conditions of the sex workers will improve and an enabling environment will be created for any meaningful intervention for HIV/AIDS prevention. Secondly, there is still a lack of information on the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and the people who suffer most are the minorities such as sex workers.

In view of this situation, the two principles of self-representation and participation must be adhered to while devising any community based initiative, here active involvement of sex workers should be mandatory. The Sonagachi project in West Bengal has proved that community participation is critical towards ensuring the sustainability of any intervention programme. Within the Sonagachi project, sex workers have played a significant role in ensuring the success of HIV intervention programmes in the region. The STD/HIV Intervention programme at Sonagachi has been running since 1992, and it is centred on clinical services, supported by a team of outreach workers known as the peer educators. This entire process empowers the sex workers who feel that they have a stake in the project; it is only when sex workers are empowered and take ownership of such projects that HIV/AIDS intervention programme can be effective.

Issues of Sexual Minorities

Discussions at the Mela focussed on the rights of sexual minorities in the country. In India, 'hijras' (the transgendered) have remained a heavily marginalized community, and are excluded from mainstream society. The community does not have access to basic facilities such as health, education or employment, and are denied any social status or recognition. There are no special provisions under law and there is very little recognition of the marginalized status of the 'hijras' within the socio-political process. Under such circumstances, their struggle for survival is a very severe one.

Apart from the 'hijra' community, sexual minorities (lesbians, homosexuals, bi-sexuals) are also targeted and stigmatised in society. Male sex workers are also a sexual minority. Sexual minorities often face abuse and harassment in public spheres, and by police authorities. In their daily lives, they are deprived of their basic human rights, and even under law, they have very little bargaining power, thus being pushed to a marginalized identity.

Anti-Trafficking Initiatives : The Case for Empowering Sex Workers

The session on the last day focussed on the role that the sex workers' organisations play to combat trafficking of women. Even though there exists a large number of national and international conventions and policies on trafficking of women, the term 'trafficking' itself continues to be ambiguous and is interpreted differently in different contexts. For instance, the SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution, in effect equates sex work with trafficking of women. Hence anti-trafficking measures translate into attempts to prevent prostitution.

In India, the anti-trafficking law, ITPA (Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act, of 1956), makes no distinction between voluntary and forced prostitution. Hence authorities never address the issue of consent. There must be strategies to monitor the traffickers and use national and international bodies to ensure human rights. But, as long as sex workers are viewed as criminals, the women, including those facing violence and abuse, will continue to suffer. Very few will come forward to report the violence for fear of being charged with the crime of prostitution.

Sex workers' organisations, therefore, need to address the issue of trafficking and provide information on the real situation. In this regard, the Self-Regulatory Board in Sonagachi has been effective in monitoring trafficking of women into brothel areas. The Board includes sex workers and other distinguished citizens of society, who scrutinise the entry of every woman into the trade, determining whether the person is an adult who consensually wishes to do sex work.

The overall ideas that were generated during these sessions, both by sex workers themselves, as well as by professionals from all walks of life, unpacked questions of morality, sex work, rights of sex workers, and individual freedom. In a society, which is rife with social inequality, the freedom of the individual becomes heavily restricted, and minority citizens are denied any form of cooperation and support from the state. The Mela provided a platform where both sex workers and other workers came together to claim their rights, to security and liberty as citizens of the country.

The sex workers in India are fast realising the need to mobilise their community and, the need to challenge the powerful. In this respect, the role of sex workers' organisations have been critical in charting the map of resistance. And it is this resistance that provides optimism, as more and more sex workers organise themselves to construct a movement that empowers all disadvantaged women in Indian society.

On Some Characteristics of the Movement of the Sex Workers of Kolkata

Prabha Kotiswaran

Attending Shanti Utsab, the second Millennial Conference on the rights of Sex Workers organized by the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) this March was one of the most unique experiences of my life. To begin with, this was my first visit to the City of Joy. Secondly, though I have tried my best to follow this most exciting social movement from my current location in the US, I had never really attended a sex workers' conference in India. Through my long flight to Kolkata, my expectations of the sex workers' conference were based on books like Good Girls/Bad Girls and the sharp distinctions it drew between sex workers and feminists. Ten days later, however, I realized that Shanti Utsab was a space that could not be categorized in any coherent manner; it drew both men and women, be we sex workers, feminists, students, sexual minorities, activists, academics or professionals at the fringe of our disciplines, into an atmosphere where open, honest conversations based on mutual respect and recognition could occur.

My hope in attending Shanti Utsab was to document the emergence of the Indian sex workers' movement as a new social movement and to understand its interactions with the state, especially in the realm of law and policy reform. In this short essay, I will not be able to plot in any depth the complex interactions between the various actors in this new social movement or their relationships with the state and the law. Hence I will restrict myself to what from my perspective are the most striking features of the sex workers' movement in light of my stated goals.

The sex workers' movement shares many characteristics of new social movements in that it is motivated by ideology rather than interest analysis, that it adopts libertarian means of protest, has an open and decentralized organizational structure, is more committed to non-institutional rather than institutional reform and in that it lacks political power conventionally expressed through institutions of representative democracy. In this regard, I would like to highlight the focus on participatory and popular politics which characterizes the Indian sex workers' movement. This was evident in many ways throughout Shanti Utsab. For instance, the first person that I met on the second day of the Utsab was a sex worker who accompanied me to the venue of the conference. When we got talking, her first question to me was where I plied my trade. Having witnessed numerous conferences on prostitution where sex workers were conspicuous by their very absence, I was excited to find that Shanti Utsab was by default, for and by the workers and that the rest of us were professional assistants who could never forget to put sex workers and their agenda first. This commitment to putting sex workers first was evident throughout the conference be it in terms of interacting with the media, or speaking at the several panels at the Flexi Forum or having sex worker organizations set up the majority of the stalls and exhibits at the conference. More importantly, this participatory aspect of the movement was reflected in the substantive agenda of the discussion panels at the Utsab. For instance, while surveying literature for my presentation on the role of sex workers in anti-trafficking efforts,

I found this to be a non-issue as far as the state, women's organizations, the media and international institutions were concerned. The very fact that there was a panel on this issue at the conference reflects how the Indian sex workers' movement has identified through its participatory processes of mobilization, issues of concern to sex workers not addressed by the mainstream. It is in continuation of this aspect of the sex workers' movement that I reflect on the direction that the debate surrounding policy and law reform is taking within the movement.

Much recent debate surrounding prostitution law reform in India has focused on the three policy options of partial decriminalization, decriminalization and legalization. However, after attending Shanti Utsab, I came away with the distinct impression that the sex workers' movement was altering the very terms of this debate through its campaign for workers' rights. It is not that labor law models for prostitution had not been suggested previously. They were however rejected for being impractical. In addition, they were problematic because they were purely academic exercises and did not involve any discussion with sex workers themselves. The sex workers' movement however now believes that there is the need to push for path breaking labor legislation before the political opportunity offered by HIV is lost and AIDS comes to be treated merely as a chronic condition. At the same time, it is necessary to understand the contours of this demand and the role of the law that it envisages. For instance, on the one hand, slogans of the movement often indicate that sex workers desire social rather than legal recognition of prostitution as sex work. In that case, is the use of rights talk merely a mobilizational tool that confers a sense of identity and legitimacy on the sex workers' movement? On the other hand, the sex workers' movement favors the legal treatment of sex work as labor. Consequently, sex workers' would form trade unions and avail of the legal framework that protects workers in an industrial setting against the inequalities of the employer-employee relationships by providing health care, pension and insurance benefits. Another apparent contradiction that appears in the demands of the sex workers' movement is that while the movement clearly distinguishes itself from those demanding conventional legalization i.e. treating sex work as a professional service (that would empower the state to regulate the profession and levy taxes on sex workers which would in turn disempower sex workers), the movement often refers to the professional model when demanding self-regulatory boards for sex workers on the lines of bar associations and medical councils regulating the legal and medical professions respectively. It also calls for sex workers to be treated as self-employed. In conclusion, I would like to note that the demand for workers' rights has emerged from within the sex workers' movement. Hence, rather than dismiss these demands because they do not fit into our preconceived notions of work, workers' rights and labor laws or because they appear contradictory, we must use them as an opportunity to fundamentally rethink our notions of work, workers' rights and labor laws while simultaneously evaluating the conceptual, legal and political implications of adopting a work based strategy for regulating sex work.

The author is currently S.J.D. candidate of the Harvard Law School.
e-mail : pkotiswa@law.harvard.edu

Rights or the wrongs?

A case study of G.B. Road rescue-rehabilitation operation

G.B. Road Delhi – located at the centre of the city, Delhi's most famous red light area had about 2000 sex workers from various states of India and the neighbouring countries like Nepal and Bangladesh. There are 91 brothels of the economic categories A, B and C. (Category A comprising of the highest paid sex workers and categories B and C follow in descending order). A considerable number of sex workers are from the Bedia community, where sex work is the family occupation and hence socially accepted.

In 1992, an organisation called Honest Organisation had filed a public interest litigation at the High Court of Delhi asking the court to take action on police corruption and forced prostitution citing a particular incident of a girl in G.B. Road. The court took its own motion of the case since 1993 and in 2000 ordered immediate and drastic action to ensure that prostitution, being an 'undesirable occupation', is completely eradicated. The High Court ordered that only STOP, an NGO doing rescue and rehabilitation of minor girls in sex work, along with the police have the authority to conduct rescue operations.

From June 2001, STOP along with the police has 'rescued' about 600 "minor looking" women from about 20 brothels in about 20 raids, conducted till March 2002. The raids were conducted mostly late at night, initially unaccompanied by women police. The G.B. Road women, have alleged that both the police and Roma Deabrata of STOP have used physical force (beaten up and dragged along) to 'rescue' the women. During later raids the women were promised that they would be allowed to come back in a day or two. A video film was made during the initial raids where the entire process of these raids was recorded, in which the ACP, Kamla Market performed the role of the narrator. The arrested women were filmed being rescued by the police. The police have showed this film in many conferences, to the media.

STOP and police from Kamla Market, Delhi rescued "minor looking" women during the raids. However, reportedly most of the women picked up are not minors and in fact have children of their own. Two rounds of age confirmation tests were done as the first round showed most of the women to be not minors. Most of them are the only earning members of their families and have been in the trade for quite some time. The women have no information on why they were picked up, when they would be released or what kind of legal facilities they can avail of. According to the information from G.B. Road residents, two of the women have died inside the remand homes. One who was pregnant at the time of the raid has given birth to a son. Women inside these remand homes are not being allowed to meet anyone (including parents and children).

A few hundred rescued women are sitting inside the remand homes. The High Court has ordered the respective state governments to design rehabilitation programmes for the women. Till their rehabilitation is organised these women will not be allowed to meet anyone, as they are witnesses in the cases going on in the lower courts against their brothel owners and managers. There are only about 450 women left on G.B. Road as many women left the city due to chaotic and uncertain working conditions. Police repression in partnership with STOP has severely

note
51

damaged livelihood options for all the women on G.B. Road.

The manners of these rescue operations are completely inhuman and violate the basic human rights of the women. The arbitrary detention of the women in the remand homes violates all legal norms. Their basic rights to access legal help and other support are also being violated, as the women are not being allowed to seek help from either their family members or from other organisations.

As a result of these measures to combat trafficking of 'minors', the sex workers and their families are severely affected. The families of the women are suffering, as they are dependent on the sex workers for their sustenance. The NGOs working in G.B. Road on health and education of the sex workers are facing serious problems as the women are running away from being 'rescued'. In the face of police and NGO high-handedness, the clientele of the G.B. Road sex workers has declined phenomenally and the sex workers are extremely hard pressed to eke out a daily wage. Vulnerability to STD/HIV has increased, as the women in their desperation are becoming careless about their own health. Education and care of their children has been affected, as in the absence of the mothers there is no one to look after the children.

The National Network of Sex Workers', with sex workers from Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee and, the Centre for Feminist Legal Research intervened in the situation in January 2002. Through several meetings with the sex workers it was decided that to prevent trafficking as well as violation of sex workers rights it is necessary to involve the community in the process. The women also had meetings with the ACP Kamla Market Police Station and Roma Deabrata of STOP. The women decided to form their own organisation and combat trafficking from within the community and to work in cooperation with the police and others working for the same.

On 18th February 2002 in a public meeting, in the presence of Roma Deabrata and the police the women launched their own organisation - Milan Mahila Sangathan. Milan Mahila Sangathan has been registered under the society act. The women demand that arbitrary raids be stopped and the women be released immediately. In addition they resolved to end:

1. The entry of minor girls into sex work around G.B. Road.
2. Forcible induction and confinement of women in the trade.
3. Buying or selling of women in the area.

Many serious issues have arisen from the nature of the 'rescue' operations conducted by the police and STOP.

Age determination

1. The basis on which the police and STOP are determining the age of the women during the raids is questionable. 'Minor looking' as a basis is completely unreliable and needs to be clarified.

2. The reliability of the results of the tests conducted by the police to determine the age of these women in the absence of any statutory body is questionable. These questions have arisen as whenever the first round of tests are showing the women to be adults, another round of tests are being conducted. The second round results are uncannily showing most women to be in the age group of 17 to 19.

Human Rights Violation

3. There are no justifications for the use of force while conducting these raids and hence for violating the basic human rights of the women: there are reports of use of physical force or power by the police and STOP in rounding up the women out of the brothels during the raids. Incidents of arrests of women who went to visit rescued women in the jail are also being reported.

4/50/2000
verm.

4. The illegality of the arbitrary detention of these women : the lack of proper planning and rehabilitation programmes has led to the arbitrary detention of the women creating more complications and worse conditions for these already marginalised women and their families.

5. Living conditions of the rescued women : the capacity and the existing facilities in the government remand homes are not adequate for accommodating the large number of women 'rescued'. The death of two women inside these homes raises doubts about the conditions of the women inside.

6. The High Court's decision to vest enormous power to the police and STOP : exclusive and absolute power rendered by the court in the hands of STOP and the police have led to abuse of these power and, to more violations of the women's rights.

7. The right to participation of the women in their own future : women's consent is not being taken into account at any point of these proceedings whether at the time of the rescue or during the rehabilitation process.

8. The unavailability of information about the proceedings and action : the dramatically secretive and exclusionary nature of the operations has made ~~information~~ and services inaccessible to the women. It has also become impossible for other organisations to provide these women with any kind of relief.

These rescue-rehabilitation operations in the G.B. Road have led to the following human rights violations :

- Right to freedom from violence,
- Right to shelter and residence,
- Right to freedom of occupation,
- Right to seek legal help,
- Right to family,
- Right to information,
- Right to representation,

It is obvious that the nature of this rescue rehabilitation process has failed to respect any of the basic human rights standards stipulated for conducting rescue-rehabilitation as well as for the subsequent treatment of trafficked persons. Hence the following demands:

1. Release the women and provide them with correct and adequate information to enable them to make informed decisions.
2. Stop the arbitrary raids.
3. Involve the sex workers' community in all future anti-trafficking activities.
4. Make the police and NGO's activities transparent.
5. Design rehabilitation programmes based on equal participation and the needs of the women concerned.
6. Ensure voluntary acceptance by the women of whatever measures the state functionaries decide to take, be it in anti-trafficking or HIV intervention work.

Rescue-rehabilitation by the state or NGOs, as an anti-trafficking measure is an old strategy. It has been observed that only rescue and rehabilitation will not stop trafficking. Over the years trafficking has increased along with the increase in rescue-rehabilitation efforts. Why is it that so far no amount of anti-trafficking activity has been able to bring down the number of trafficked persons? Why are anti-trafficking policies eventually taking the shape of anti-migration policies particularly for women? It is obvious that rescue-rehabilitation needs to be complimented with more affirmative activities and policies to actually solve the trafficking problem. Community involvement and self-regulation by the sex workers is one such strategy. In India, organised sex workers in West Bengal and some parts of south India have already started self-regulatory

boards to curb the problem of trafficking. These boards comprise of sex workers and political and state representatives. The sex workers monitor any new entry into the trade from within the community, and the other representatives investigate and confirm that no minor enters the trade. In case of a minor's entry the sex workers take measures to counsel and subsequently either repatriate the girl to her family or rehabilitate her through the government and NGOs, depending on the girl's condition and preference.

The need for government intervention in anti-trafficking activities can not be denied. However, what is required is a deeper understanding of the issues and the contexts in which trafficking occurs. Keeping in mind the recent incidents of violence on sex workers in the pretext of fighting trafficking, there must be clear guidelines for NGOs and state functionaries working in the area. These guidelines should specify and ensure that rights of the sex workers are not violated while working for the rights of minors. This has to be done in consultation with the sex workers collectives and, NGOs working with the sex workers on various issues; with those, who have direct practical experience and understanding of the context. These guidelines must adopt a rights based approach and operate within the human rights framework. The protocol on treatment of trafficked persons supplementing the UN Convention on the Suppression of Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others should form the basis of the guidelines for rescue and rehabilitation. The UNHRC has recently developed extensive human rights guidelines for the implementation and enforcement of the Protocol. All measures to provide protection and redress to the trafficked persons must be consistent to these human rights protocols and guidelines. The specific conditions and needs of sex workers must be taken into account while designing any programme or formulating any policy on sex work and sex workers. The government, NGOs and others working on the trafficking issue have to keep in mind that trafficking is a complex social issue and that it follows no simplistic pattern. Hence contextualisation and evidence-based studies and planning are required to formulate any beneficial action. Any hasty and drastic action causes more harm than good.

Prepared by : *Banamallika Choudhury*, National Network of Sex Workers and Centre for Feminist Legal Research, India, May 2002.

Cultural Change, Community Mobilisation And Participatory Development : A Case Study of Sex Workers In West Bengal

Nandini Gooptu

➤ SexWorkers' self-perception in the past

"I was lost in darkness. No sooner do they come to the bright world, most women in our trade get lost in dense darkness".

"Mine is a life of a caged bird".

"Society condemns me because I am a prostitute. I have no place in society".

➤ Sex workers today : The 'new self' after mobilisation

"We are no longer imprisoned; we are no longer in chains; we have broken away from the world of those who rejected us; we have torn away our masks; we have burst forth from darkness into daylight. The caged bird is flying free in the open sky".

"After miles of a dark road, there is a sudden burst of light."

"We are free now. We have rights. No one can kick us any longer. If they do, we stand up to them. We now have power."

Concepts used by sex workers to characterise their new self after mobilisation

Pratibaad = protest *andolan/larai* = struggle *adhikar* = rights

shadhinata = freedom/liberation *ekata* = unity *khamata* = capacity/power

shangathan = organisation *shahosh* = courage

shoman = equal/equality

❖ Key themes of this research project

The central analytical concern of this research is to understand how poor and marginalised people recast their self-perception and reinvent themselves as social actors and subject agents endowed with a sense of rights and capacity. This theme is explored through a case study of sex workers in West Bengal. In the course of a STD-HIV health intervention programme (SHIP), which started in 1992 and is still running, West Bengal sex workers, mainly the poorest and most vulnerable sections, organised themselves into a powerful autonomous political organisation (DMSC – *Durbar Mahila Samanyaya Committee*). Ten years ago, oppressed by a sense of social exploitation and powerlessness, sex workers lacked faith in the possibility of change and were resolutely averse to social and political engagement. Today they claim rights for themselves in society, challenge social norms that ostracise them, and involve themselves in a range of public action and development initiatives, notably HIV/AIDS prevention.

This research project suggests that the case of West Bengal sex workers' social movement

and activist organisation provides a model for the self-mobilisation of other deprived and excluded groups of the poor, in the context of a development intervention. This research has revealed the significance and relevance of wider social and political mobilisation for the success of development interventions, as manifested in the sex workers' case, where the sustained effectiveness of the STD-HIV intervention programme clearly rests on sex workers' collective mobilisation.

The subject of enquiry of this research is the sea change in sex workers' *subjectivity*, involving a radical transformation of their self-image and worldview, their perception of themselves – their capacities and potentials, and their relation to others and wider society. This analytical exercise illuminates how *subject agents* are born from those who saw themselves as passive, socially alienated 'victims', and how development intervention might provide an enabling environment for this.

The broader aim of this research is to suggest how a change of poor people's subjectivity in this way can underpin participatory development, democratic politics and good governance. Institutional reforms such as democratic decentralisation, buttressed by ideologies of stakeholder partnership or citizenship rights of the poor, are surely necessary for the participation of the poor in development and democracy. But, this research strongly points to the indispensability of something else for the poor to propel themselves into civic engagement and public action. It requires the crystallisation of a powerful *notion* of agency, a *perceived sense* of rights and capacity, and a *conviction* in their ability to change the entrenched order of hierarchy and dominance. Put simply, the poor have to come to *believe* that they have both the power and the right to reverse exploitation and alienation. While the significance of this recasting of subjectivity may seem obvious both for participation and for empowerment from the perspective of the poor, it remains a *marginal, largely missing, theme* in dominant development discourse and practice on governance and participatory development. West Bengal sex workers provide an excellent case to explore the various elements that contributed towards their change of subjectivity, and the role of development intervention in facilitating this. What follows is a brief discussion of some of these elements.

➤ Aspects of sex workers' self-mobilisation

Egalitarian organisational culture : From an early stage, the health intervention programme – SHIP – was notable for an ideological and normative emphasis on equality between non-sex worker staff of the intervention programme and sex workers, and this egalitarian norm was institutionalised in everyday practices of both SHIP and DMSC. Equality was not premised upon an imaginary sameness, but was envisaged in terms of an absence of hierarchy of authority, knowledge and capacity. It was recognised that sex workers and non-sex workers each had a different range of life experiences and therefore had different kinds of aptitude and ability, but each of these was accorded equal value. The problem of hierarchisation of knowledge was consciously sought to be avoided in this way, and each relied on the knowledge and expertise of the other. The *principle* of reciprocity, exchange and dialogue on a footing of substantive equality was thus securely rooted in organisational culture early on. While it was not always easy for mere mortals to translate this principle into practice, it was the *normative and institutional* emphasis on equality that enabled sex workers to surmount their ingrained sense of inferiority and lack of capacity. It facilitated their full participation not only within the organisation, but in due course also emboldened them to act in other public fora. In usual participatory development initiatives, it is often assumed that if conscientiously invited to participate as equal partners,