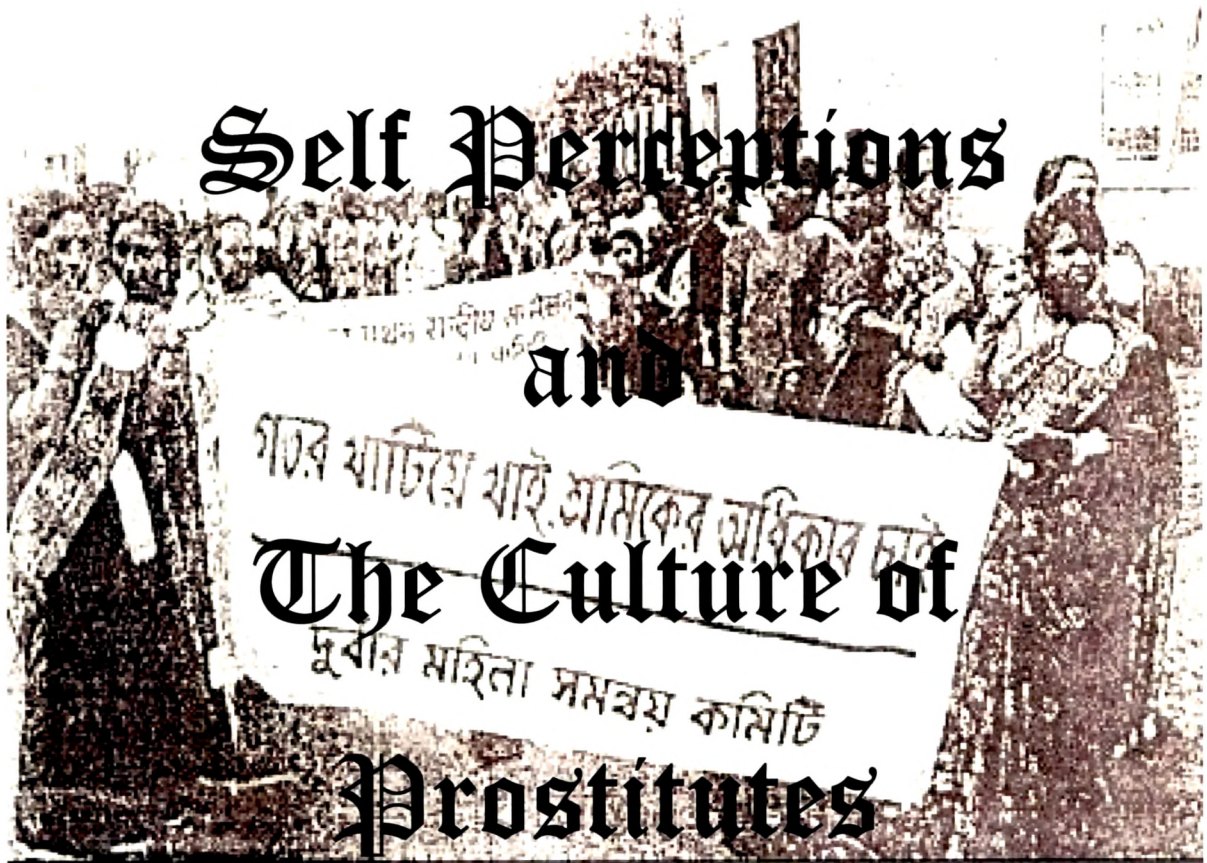


Chapter 4



Chapter IV

Self Perceptions and the Culture of Prostitutes**4.1. Brothel World:**

The flesh trade or the institution of prostitution operates through a highly organized base and superstructure. Brothels are that place which is frequented by people for sexual gratification. But, the clients are not the only determinant to regulate the activities that surround the entire brothel organization. In fact, the entire brothel organization is highly maintained by various other elements like pimps, procurers, madams (*Mashi*) and others.¹

The Class structure of the prostitutes is an important aspect to be focused upon. It throws light upon the position of a prostitute in the brothel world and how it regulates the hierarchy in the profession of prostitution.

4.2. Class Structure of the Prostitutes:

In the brothels, there are mainly three types of prostitutes-

Self-employed Prostitutes: Those who are independent; have their own rooms or flats and do not have to share their incomes with anybody are called '**self-employed**'.

Adha - Adha or Adhiya (half-half): The prostitutes who have no place of their own, use rooms owned by others and have to pay half of their income to the *Mashi* (madam) concerned. These prostitutes are called '**Adhiya**'.

Chhukri: The term *chhukri* means a girl but in the brothel world it means prostitutes who are abducted, seduced and then directly sold off/purchased. For being sold off, they never earn any money. They are kept by *malkins* (*mashi*), who provide them with only boarding and lodging and take away all their income in return. They are forced to serve customers even when sick or unwilling for some reason. There are reports of incidents when *malkins* have mercilessly beaten or tortured the girls for refusing to entertain clients. One form of torture is to put chilly powder, particularly in the vagina. In most cases these girls become ill after some time.²

¹ B. Joardar, *Prostitution In Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter-India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. p. 100

² Mrinalkanti Dutt, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005, p.114

An official document of July 1918 gives a similar description. It mentions three different classes of prostitutes classified as independent, semi-independent and dependent. The first (independent) included the individual prostitute class-dancing girls, kept mistresses, women found in the better class of brothels and also a large section of the poorest type living in the single rooms, in *busti*(slum) tenements. The second or the semi-independent were a numerous class living in houses, owned or supervised by mistresses to whom their relationship was often only that of tenant to land lady. The third were the dependent class of poorer prostitutes who were brothel inmates in virtual restraint, through debt or other causes and who had no real control over their daily earnings. It was among this last class of prostitutes the conditions might be expected miserable. In the majority of cases, it was a form of debt slavery that existed, and brutality, torture or any other form of cruelty was entirely dependent upon the character of the master or the mistress, for whom the girls ply their trades.

A vivid description of the evolving situation in the brothel conditions in Sandal Street is available from the official document:

The mistress has five resident girls, two of whom rent go down each at Rs. 4 per mensem. All of them had been recruited from Mufassal districts, Midnapore, Howrah, etc., or after being in Calcutta sometime in another quarter had been brought to their present situation. Each was in debt to the mistress for food, clothes, ornaments and other things. They could go away conditionally on living security for the debt or paying it up. Half then takings went to the *Bariwallah*, who contrived as most of the class do, so to get the girls into control financially that they do not allow the debt to be paid off entirely. The youngest girl in this brothel was about 16. In recent investigation, I have met occasionally women, who had not left the premises they were in for a long time, but they said that they had nowhere to go and no desire to leave. While, it would be too sweeping a statement to affirm that many of the women in the houses of prostitution are really in slavery, it is perfectly true that a proportion of them are in such virtual restraint that they do not know how to get free.³

Meghnad Gupta also draws a vivid picture of the class structure of the prostitutes in the early twentieth century:

In Calcutta, we see different classes of prostitutes. Those who solicit standing on the road side or on the lane are the lowest of the lot. In most of the cases, they live in the dark, filthy one-storeyed house with roof made of indigenous tiles. Their clients consists of potters and poor *chotoloak* (men of lowest social and economic status). The next higher category of the prostitutes live in the two-storeyed *mathkota* or mud built house. These prostitutes can be seen in the *Malapara lane*, *Dacca Patti* and *Jorabagan*. Generally, *gadiwalla* (businessmen), shopkeeper and the lower grade staff of the rich come here in search of pleasure and sex. In gradation domicile, next come the prostitutes who live in the one-storeyed brick-built or *pukka* building. They are better in appearance, behaviour and more charming than the other two groups already mentioned before. The better off among them live in *Chitpur Road*, *Harkata Gali* (Gali stands for lane) and *Haripadmini Gali*. These prostitutes live in the first and second floor of *Pukka* building. Generally, clerks and the like

³ *Prostitution(s) among Indians in Calcutta: Conditions of brothels in Bengal*, File P.14B-3 of 1917, Progs 14-19, July 1918. Political Department: Police Branch, Page Number (proceedings volume) – 69

are their clients. Then there is a class of sophisticated prostitutes considered as the highest of the lot. In this category, we find two types of prostitutes, one of them is *Bandha* (permanent) while the other is known as *Chooto* (occasional). The prostitutes who have regular visitors or clients are known as *Bandha* while those who have only the occasional or *chooto* clients are known as *chooto*. The *Bandha* are regarded as aristocrat among the prostitutes. Some of them get honorarium ranging from rupees one hundred and fifty to three or four hundred per month. In some cases, the honorarium is five hundred, seven hundred – and sometimes even as high as rupees one thousand per month. The charge of the *Chooto* ranges from rupees eight to twenty five. Those who are proficient in singing and dancing earn more – in some cases rupees one hundred or one hundred fifty per sitting. In this category, there are some who are *bandha* as well as *chooto*. The *bandha babu* or *lok* or client of such a prostitute visits on particular days of a week and that too in fixed time, and in the remaining days of the week and time, she (prostitute) is free to entertain *chooto* clients. In some other cases, *bandha babu* or *lok* come every day a particular time; and excluding that time, she can invite any client of her choice. The *babu* visiting prostitutes on specific dates and times are known as *timer babu* i.e. clients who maintain time. These highest category prostitutes can be seen mainly in *Sonagachhi* and *Rupagachhi*. Often they are very much proficient in the art of dancing and singing. Some of them are even moderately educated and devout reader of Tagore literature.⁴

Kept Mistress: Joardar pictures the higher-class mistresses when he says that generally, the mistress' house used to be visited by her *babu* at a particular fixed time every night. Therefore, it was quite advantageous for the women to entertain any 'stray visitors' during other time outside the timing fixed for appointment with her *babu* under whom she was kept as mistress. These class of women mostly used to try to 'imitate fashionable society girl' which sometimes raised difficulties to know their true identities. But mostly they were identified from their fascination for using ornaments with special emphasis on nose ring and shoes of golden colours.⁵

Streetwalkers: S.N. Mukherjee offers a contrasting picture of the lower class prostitutes: The streetwalkers were lower class prostitutes. They were extremely exploited and led a miserable life. In the evening they use to solicit standing on the street side dressed in their 'tawdry finery' with a hope of getting clients. Most of these women were dirty and disease. Some of them had contact with thieves and never hesitated to rob clients in order to serve these thieves. These women were mostly addicted to liquor. The main clients of these women were drunken soldiers, sailors, poor low class labourer thieves, 'rowdies'. Village fairs, exhibitions and other public gatherings were always good opportunities for them to find clients. They use to build temporary huts in these gatherings to ply their trade.⁶

⁴ Meghnad Gupta, *Raater Kolkata*, 1991 (first Publication 1923) p. 28-29, as cited in B. Joardar, *Prostitution in Nineteenth and early Twentieth Century*, Calcutta., p.23

⁵ B. Joardar, *Prostitution in Nineteenth and early twentieth century Calcutta*, Inter-India Publication, New Delhi, 1985.p.24

⁶ S. N. Mukherjee, *Prostitution in India*, Das Gupta & Co, Calcutta, 1936, p. 110

According to an insider, Mrinalkanti Dutta, there are four categories of prostitutes/sex-workers in the red-light areas. 'A' category girls, whose rate per customer, per shot is above hundred rupees. Those charging something between fifty-one rupees to hundred rupees are in the 'B' category. Those, whose rates are between thirty-one to fifty rupees per turn, are in the 'C' category. And the girls, who charge rupees twenty to thirty, belong to the 'D' category. Girls belong to the 'D' categories are mostly found in the villages. It is needless to say that the rates depend on the age, figure and beauty of the girls. Working in the flesh trade for some time, these girls can fix their own rates. It is a common thing that an 'A' class woman comes down to 'C' category on losing physical charm with age.⁷

4.3. Socialization of Prostitution: The Initiation into the Profession of Prostitution

Socialization of prostitutes is like any other socialization. Of course there is a difference in the process of socialization in the brothel world. Here it becomes essential for the new comers (would be prostitutes) to leave behind part of their earlier socialization.⁸

Proper training becomes a requirement before venturing into any profession. If the profession is a particular art-form, then training to gather sufficient expertise is all the more necessary. Prostitution or harlotry can also be called a special 'art form'. The main responsibility of the harlots lies in pleasing and entertaining different types of men. Men can be of various kinds—handsome or ugly, refined or crude, educated or illiterate, all have to be satisfied. Therefore, a whore has to dress up and bring out a seductive attitude in her speech, behaviour and movements. Above all, she has to understand the psychology of her visitors. Only physical beauty is not enough; they have to use sexually arousing words, speeches and body movements. There is a saying in Sanskrit—*"Stabdhasya nashyati yashah"*. A beautiful and well-dressed woman, if reticent, fails to arouse interest. If a silent doll could seduce, then there would be no need for music, dance and other vibrating art forms.⁹

⁷ Mrinalkanti, Dutt, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005, p.119 Here we get a vivid description of the lives of sex workers. Being a son of a sex -worker, his description stands extremely authentic and informative. It becomes very helpful in the understanding of brothel organization and various aspects of the life of a sex-worker. It constitutes an important source to understand the nature of prostitution in the red-light areas of Calcutta. His book throws light upon the categorization of prostitutes, which is determined on the basis of payment or rate.

⁸ B. Joardar, *Prostitution In Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter-India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. p. 156; The detail analysis of this section has been already cited under the sub-section 'Bariwallis/Brothelkeepers' in the section 'Dynamics of Operation System' under the chapter 2 entitled 'Empirical Reality'.

⁹ Debrani Kar, *Kolkatar Nagarnati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995 (Bengali), p. 69

Debrani Kar brings in several traditional works to highlight prostitution as an art form. As per her writing — In all ages and in all countries, it was compulsory for the harlots to educate themselves in the art of seductive body movements, facial and eye expressions, showing of certain parts of the body, like cleavage and the navel, scratching of the ground with toe-nails, drawing attention to the ornaments, ear-rings etc and tying their hair and picking their nails with amorous gestures and postures (as described in dramatics).

In today's brothels, learning of make-up and the art of dramatics or of the sixty-four postures have become obsolete. But silent preparations go on in picking up the basic art of alluring the man. The initiation into the sex-act varies from person to person. In some, it is utterly common, in some it starts with cruel barbarism and for some the experience comes with sheer beauty. Girls who are traditionally in this profession start learning the whole thing from the age of 7 or 8. The artistic and the carnal come simultaneously to them. While the mother is their first teacher, in some cases a male member of the family gives the first instructions on the hidden knowledge of sex, and in time she becomes an expert. The girls, who are bought or are forced into the trade, learn all these finally from the *masi* or the keeper. Naturally over a period of time in their own interest to earn more money they learn the special language of the whores along with some music and dance and most important of all, the methods of birth-control.¹⁰

In the celebrated autobiography, '*Sikshita Potitar Atmacharit*' (autobiography of an educated prostitute) Manadadevi describes her experience:

Ranimashi taught me a few tricks. How to wear the sari fashionably, how to stand in the right posture, how to speak and walk so that men are attracted were all shown by her. I was told that even if I was in no happy mood, I should bear a smiling countenance; express such love and emotion that nobody could catch its underlying deceit. If my lover was fond of drinks, I should also pretend to drink by holding the glass close to my lips... Ranimashi arranged for an expert music-teacher to coach me in contemporary music. He said, 'your religious songs or patriotic songs won't do here. You have to learn Hindi *ghazals*, *lapeta*, or the classical *khayal* or *thumri*, which would be appropriate here, in the quarters.'... I learnt how to deceive and hide my own emotions; and along with that I also had to train myself in

¹⁰ Ibid. p.69 – 70. Shudrak's play *Mrichhakatik* describes how young courtesans are being taught the art of dramatics along with appropriate make-up. The theme of the book '*Kuttanimat*' by Damodar Gupta is basically the advices of an old prostitute, to her young disciple about the business of successful harlotry. '*Dashkumarcharit*' says, as soon as a girl child is born, her mother should feed her with tasty, nutritious food so that she grows up beautifully. The prospective courtesan should never come out in public view, not even in front of her father without proper make-up. Her birthdays should be celebrated with pomp and grandeur. She should have knowledge of all subjects including sexology. The future prostitute should learn songs for different occasions; take coaching from experts, if necessary. In '*Arthashastra*' the subjects to be taught to a budding courtesan is listed like this—Music, musical instruments, reading (mythologies etc), dance (bodily movements) and dramatics (expressions, verbal and facial), writing, painting, *veena* and *midanga* (instruments accompanying Indian classical music). Other than these, there are—making of incense (perfumes), stringing flower-garlands, massaging of the body and the sexual act in its sixty-four postures. To allure man and to bring him under control is the art learnt by prostitutes through the ages till today.

the art of recognising people. Some men used to come to the colony to rob or steal, some would come with dangerous diseases, some would be wicked and some simple and innocent; we had to know it all by seeing their faces.¹¹

In the present times, the girls of the whore-colonies have to learn all abovementioned tricks in which the *mashi* is their main coach.¹²

The girl first comes to the brothel with lack of knowledge of the profession of prostitution. When she enters the profession she has to undergo some training. In fact, it becomes difficult for a new comer to adjust with the strange, odd environment around in the brothel life. She begins to undergo strange experiences in this world, which generate fears within her. Gradually it results in the development of a 'new attitude' possessed by her towards the *mashi* and other inmates. Within a short period of time she gets accustomed to the new social environment of the brothel world. And, in course of time, she acquires all the qualities and becomes a 'good practitioner of her profession'. Thus a girl that comes with innocence, simplicity and ignorance is turned into a professional prostitute. According to B. Joardar "... this process of adjustment by her (the girl to be prostitute) to the condition or situations which is pre-dominantly determined by the new society of the brothel of which she is now member, can be termed as "socialization" in the life of prostitution... the period between just arrival and agreeing to take up prostitution can be termed as phase of acceptance".¹³

The story of Minati exemplifies the travails of a helpless woman. Joardar furnishes the details about Minati. She was born and brought up in a Bangladesh village. She lost her parents and children during the Liberation Movement of Bangladesh. They were killed by the *Khan-Sena*, i.e. Pakistan Army. Her husband also went traceless in this movement. Later on she came to West Bengal with a group of other people in search of shelter and food. She knew no one of this group. She came first to *Sealdah* Railway Station which is situated in Calcutta and passed four days over there. All these days she suffered from starvation. One day she aimlessly reached *Naihati* Railway Station where rickshaw puller *Dullal* met her and sympathetically proposed her a job of a maidservant. At first she hesitated to accompany *Dullal* but afterwards she agreed to move with him.

Minati's tail and travails are best captured in her own words:

I was not even in a mood to think over the situation. For a while I thought whether it would be good for me to go with him or not. Later, I thought let me take a chance. At that time, for the sympathetic attitude of *Dullal*, I thought that he was a very good man. It never crossed in my mind that he was out and out a rogue. Instead of offering me a job of a maidservant he took me to his house – a dingy hovel in *Naihati*. After reaching there, he said, 'I have no wife, why you will go to someone else's house to work a maidservant? Better you be here. We can live as husband and wife.' Then, I requested him to let me go the railway station,

¹¹ Manada Devi, *Sikshita Patitar Atmacharit*, (autobiography in Bengali), Chirayat Prakashan, Kolkata, 2004. p.56 .

¹² Debrani Kar, *Kolkatar Nagarnati*, p.71

¹³ B. Joardar, *Prostitution In Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter-India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. p.157-59

where I might find something for me. It was then nearly eight O'clock in the night. He raped me, I tried to resist but it was in vain. He showed me a knife and told, 'If you disagree, I will cut into pieces and throw into the Ganges (river).'

So, I had no other way than to live with him. A few days after this, one night at about nine O'clock, *Dullal* came with a man. He introduced me to this new man and told me that he was his friend. He told me further that for some reason he would pass the night outside and that his friend would pass the night in our room.

At this I became angry and asked him, 'do not you know that we have one room only? How can your friend pass the night in the same room?' At this he replied, 'why? I will not be on the bed with you so he can easily sleep there.' Now the picture became clear to me. I also found there ten rupee note in his hand. He took this money from that man. I became very angry and replied, 'no, I will not go to bed with him'. At this, *Dullal* became very hot and abused me in filthy language and warned me that if I say it again, he would kill me. At the same time, I was physically assaulted by him.

So that night I had to accept him on my bed. Ten days after this, the same man came and asked me to go with him. I refused to go with him. At that time, *Dullal* was not at home. But just at that time I saw *Dullal* coming with his rickshaw. *Dullal* asked me the matter. I told him. *Dullal* became very angry and kicked him on the buttocks. The man fell down, *Dullal* beat him. At this, man went back and threatened *Dullal*.

After two or three hours, the man came back with four or five people, all with sword or knife. They were shouting, 'we want *Dullal's* head, we want *Dullal's* head'. At this both of us became afraid. Within a twinkle, *Dullal* was no more to be found. He had escaped. I was left out, I could not runaway.

Now that man ordered me to go with him. He was infact, a notorious *Goonda* of the locality. He told me 'if you disobey I will cut you into pieces and throw into the *Ganges*'.

So I followed him. This man took me to a brothel of *Naihati* Red-light area and introduced me to a woman. At that time I could not know that she was a *mashi*, the area was a brothel area and I would have to sell sex there. On that very day, the *mashi* concerned asked me to appear before the market of sex selling. But I refused.

... till then I had the idea that though *Dullal* and other man have enjoyed me, I am not a harlot. That night, that is the first night when I could not sleep. I was then just thinking about it. The *mashi's* behaviour was very polite. She said, 'daughter, conventional society will not give you any place, it will hate you, neglect you, abuse you, but it will not give you even the scope of getting a single piece of bread'.

Yet now I can remember that on the first day I did not take any food and in fact I wept the whole night.

The next morning, that *mashi* requested me to take some food but still then I refused. But how long can one control one's hunger! So in the evening when she asked me to take food with a very affectionate tone, I could not but obey. I can still remember that she told me 'daughter, you have not taken food for the last one day. If you do not take food your health will go wrong. Here you have none who will look after you! Here all are very busy with their own. I am like your mother. I had also a daughter like you. Her face was to some extent like yours. Her eyes were as beautiful as you have. When I saw you, first I thought that my dead daughter has come'. Saying this her voice became choked and tears were rolling down her cheeks. She then added 'you are then my daughter and so you must pay respect to my request'.

For such behaviour, I thought that this *mashi* had some soft corner for me and so at last I agreed.¹⁴

Within few days *Minati* had come to adjust herself to the social environment of the brothel world. Joardar testifies to that process in the following words:

The day when *Minati* first came in the brothel I saw her weeping. In her appearance still then there was something which easily identified her as a good *Hindu* housewife. It seemed to me that she was timid, nice and innocent in appearance.

After a week I saw her, to my surprise, smoking and within a month she started taking drinks.¹⁵

Debrani Kar elaborates on the technology of breaking a new girl's will power. When a young girl first enters this colony, she has either been purchased through a pimp or is kidnapped and brought here. Unable to adjust and out of shock she tries to run away, cries and screams. To break her will, she is then stripped, her hands and legs are tied to chains and she is left alone in a dark room without food or water for 2-3 days. If the room is close to public thoroughfare, the radio is switched on in full volume to suppress her loud screams. Even after this, if the girl is not docile enough, she gets relentless beatings. The matrons (*masis*), local goons and pimps, all join hands in beating her up. They brainwash the girl, saying repeatedly that since she has entered this prohibited area, she is now spoilt and has become a fallen woman; nobody in her family would take her back and it was impossible to run away from this colony etc. Sometimes the hired goons are the first to rape her. Ultimately after tremendous physical and mental torture and many nightmarish experiences the girl agrees to join the profession.

The method adopted to turn a minor girl into a full-bodied woman is truly, extremely cruel. The girl is made to eat certain herbs, and apply some on her body, so that her thin body swells up and her skin shines. Hormones are injected to enhance the size of her breasts. In this way, a 12 or 13-year-old girl can pass off as 15 or 16. "A thirteen year-old but matured girl named *Champa* was telling, 'All these can be somehow tolerated, but what they do to increase the size of the vagina and the uterus, is unbearable' A piece of a substance, like pith is inserted into the vagina. It swells up when soaked in water; so the girl is made to stand in waist-deep water in a tank for hours. The pain is excruciating." Even after going through this horror, there is no respite for the girl but to bear the burden of her entire life. She bears her body like carrying a corpse. After this the feeling of pain is blunted and the girl 'would not mind giving her body even to a gorilla'.¹⁶

¹⁴ Ibid p. 159-61. *Naihati* is a place situated in North Greater Calcutta.

¹⁵ Ibid p. 161

¹⁶ Debrani Kar, *Kolkata's Nagarnati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995. , p.71

4.4. The Changing Values:

According to Bryan that 'it seems reasonable to assume that the value structure serves in general, to create in group solidarity and to alienate the girl from 'Square' society and this structure serves the political advantage of the trainer and the economic gains of the trainee more than it allays the personal anxieties of either'. It is also said by Bryan 'any unnecessary interaction with the customer is typically frowned upon, and the trainee will receive exhortations to be quick about her business'. (As quoted by B. Joardar) The development of this 'transmission of value structure' does not occur within a very short period of time. But it takes time. By the passage of time through everyday dealings/ 'encounter' with the clients, other inmates and elements of the brothel world the new comers (would be prostitutes) learn this. As Bryan has maintained that 'the content of the training pertains both to a general philosophical stands and to some specifics (usually non-sexual) or inter-personal behaviour with customers and colleagues'. (As quoted by B. Joardar).¹⁷

The autobiography of *Manadadevi* throws immense light on the 'transformation of value structure' in the life of a prostitute:

I realised how someone's bad company lead one's life on the immoral path and causes degradation in her life. Gradually I started forgetting all the learning acquired in the school. The knowledge whatever I had gathered in literature, history etc. from *Mukulda* is now put on aside. The girls with whom I was associated, no one among them cultivated any interest in the academic or cultural discussion; rather they were more fond of the discussions like how many clients were entertained by whom, what was the conversation between them and their lovers (client/*babu*) and all other vulgar issues...

In the Red-light areas the libertine lover is called *babu*... These *babus* often caused the issue of conflict among the prostitutes. If someone's *babu* went to another prostitute then it would have caused a major tension between those two prostitutes, which use to lead tremendous conflict and quarrelling among them. All prostitutes used to become a part of it. I was also not out of them. Listening to the abusive languages used here in the brothel life, by the passage of time, I was also accustomed to it.

... After coming to Sonagachi my earnings went down. The condition of my health also started deteriorating. I started suffering from various diseases, which made me pale and weak. My monthly expenditure became huge which comprised house-rent, food charges, maintenance of servants, medicines etc. I also practiced some rituals. *Swaraswati Puja* was one of them, which was never missed by me. But my earnings were not sufficient to meet this huge expense.

I had two clients, one was lawyer and another was a barrister.... Out of monetary crisis, I accepted these two clients as my *babus* with a hope of earning more.... Gradually I observed these lawyer-barrister *babus* had good contacts with the high-class people, few of them visited my room too. Suddenly one idea came to my mind. It was very much known to me that lawyer and barrister often mix-up with or associate with rich high-class people of

¹⁷ B. Joardar, *Prostitution In Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter-India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. p.163-64

Calcutta. I appointed my two lawyer-barrister *babu* as *dalal* to secure these rich people as clients of mine. The agreement was, half of the income would go to them.

I have now become a real prostitute.... I was aware of the fact that there are people belong to *bhadralok* family in Calcutta who act as *dalal* of prostitutes. Some other prostitutes had also advised me to appoint *bhadralok dalal* for securing clients, but till that time the principles of moral and ethical values were still remaining within me to some extent, which restrained me to do so. Today when I have reached the extreme level of this immoral path (prostitution), I did not hesitate to trample that part of purity of soul and virtues which was still remaining within me. ... A new *Manada* was born in my place.¹⁸

4.5. Use of Fake Identities:

Prostitutes often use fake names while entering into the profession of the prostitution. Prostitutes generally use the surname of the respective *mashi* under whom she works. *Subhadra Roy*, 70 years aged sex-worker of Kalighat says, while she decided to take upon prostitution as profession:

Kalyani found a rented room for me. The land lady asked my name and I said, '*Shobha*'. Since then I am known as *Shobha* in this locality.¹⁹

Joardar's study on prostitution also reveals the same fact mentioned above. According to the research, prostitutes mostly are seen to adopt single name which sounds exotic such *Anima*, '*Kanika*', *Geeta*, *Saabi* which is corrupt form of the name '*Sabitri*', *Jaya*, *Maya*, *Monika*, *Gulabi*, *Ayesha* etc. He says, it is also seen in some cases depending on the situation, the Hindu prostitutes adopt the Muslim name and the Muslim prostitutes adopt the Hindu name. Very rarely they are seen to use surnames.²⁰ *Maladi*, a sex-worker living in the *Munshigunj* of *Khidirpore* who has been the ex-general secretary of the Durbar Mahila Samannoy Committee was not known by this name about twentyfive- thirty years back. That time her name was *Reshma Khatun*, her father was *Fakir Mohammad* and mother was *Ramija Bibi*.²¹ Here it is sharply visible that how a Muslim girl's name has been converted into Hindu name while entering into the profession of prostitution. And in every case they introduce themselves by their name only, e.g. *Lakshmi*, *Maladi*, *Durga* etc. without using surnames. We find in *Manada Devi's Shikshita Patitar Atmcharita*, the existence of the same fact where *Manada*, adopted a Muslim name while she was Hindu:

I was fond of wearing '*feroza*' colour, so in *Rambagan* I was called *Feroza Bibi*.²²

¹⁸ Manada Devi, *Sikshita Patitar Atmcharit*, Kolkata, 2004, p. 52 – 82

¹⁹ Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005. p.25

²⁰ B. Joardar, *Prostitution In Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter.India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. p.164-165

²¹ Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005. p.151-156

²² Manada Devi, *Sikshita Patitar Atmcharit*, (autobiography of an educated prostitute), Chirayat Prakashan, Kolkata, 2004. p.73

Money is the only strength of a prostitute. Therefore, to make money they need to adopt various methods. One is using fake names to disguise one's own identity. The use of fake names many times depends upon the circumstances and nature of client. This is very much evident from *Manada's* autobiography where she says:

As I grew older, the number of my customers and clients in Sonagachhi reduced gradually. But even during the beginning of my bad days too, my lawyer and barrister friends did not leave me. According to their advice I left my house and shifted to *Bhowanipur* to start business afresh. Psychologists know and I, due to my long experience in this dirty business, have experienced that in this world whatever is cheap and easily available do not allure people. All covet things that are rare and the most expensive. I took a beautiful flat in *Bhowanipur* and started living with the barrister as his sister-in-law, Ms. Mukherjee and tried to make a fresh start. Results were immediate. I had studied well in my childhood and early youth. Thereafter, mixing freely with various creatures of different levels of the society, I gathered enough knowledge about the deepest truths of the human mind. So when I started joking and flirting with stylish gentlefolk as Miss Mukherjee, dressed as a fashionable society lady hiding my real self, presenting myself in a new package covering up my looks of receding youth, when I roamed around in the park holding hands with my barrister brother-in-law, with one single glance I could make a stranger feel like a close friend and bring him home to offer tea with my own hands; it would give him enough satisfaction and arouse in him an irrepressible desire for my company. This would give me immense pleasure. Nobody would know my subtle pretensions; each would look for a chance to be intimate with me. But I have to say that I ... nobody. Whoever came close to me would feel that he was the closest to my heart and all others would be rejected soon.²³

The attitude to disguise one's real identity is thus a part of the 'game' – prostitution and prostitutes learn all the arts from *mashi* and other inmates of the brothel.²⁴ And by the passage of time they acquire proficiency in these skills. If any client shows interests to their names, they simply try to avoid that and turn the issue to a new discussion. But despite all efforts to avoid the matter, if any client constantly insists them, one's answer with a smiling face would be,

'What's the use of that? I have no surname. I am *Kanika* (or any other name as the case may) only, simply *Kanika* and nothing else.

After too much insistence sometimes they reveal their surnames.²⁵ My personal interview with *Lakshmi* faced the above fact. She initially introduced herself as *Lakshmi*. When I asked her surname, she replied, '*Majumdar*'. But later on through discussions, it was revealed that it was not her surname but her landlady's surname which she uses. Her actual surname is '*Das*'.²⁶ If anyone shows too much curiosity to know sex-worker's background, e.g. native place, parent's name, her

²³ Ibid. p.83

²⁴ B. Joardar, *Prostitution In Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter.India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. p.165

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Interview with Lakshmi Das, Harakata Red-light area, Premchand Baral Street, House No. 73, Ground Floor, age approximately 45 years, education- illiterate, Independent.

early life, she would either decline and keep quiet or tell a story which is not at all authentic and totally fake.²⁷

4.6. Customary Practices in the Brothel World:

How the reluctant entrants get accustomed to the brothel culture is exemplified the customary practices which in due course of time also become habits of the inhabitants. Not only in Kolkata, all over India, customs like—'Noth Khola', 'Chhukrikata', 'Adiya', 'Kisti' etc are intrinsically related to the practice of prostitution. These customs, testify to the tremendous amount of exploitation and oppression that the girls undergo and exceed any other crime in its severity. At present, some of these customs are dwindling but still they are not totally uprooted.²⁸ There were several other types of customs prevalent in the Red-light areas of Calcutta. These customs were mostly related to the economic exploitation of sex-workers/prostitutes. – *Dadon*, which includes three types of moneylenders – *kistiwallahs* (as mentioned above), goldsmith or local jewelers and the *chotawallahs*²⁹. Though after the establishment of *Durbar* (the NGOs run by sex-workers) these types of money lending systems are not that much prevalent in the Red-light areas but cannot be claimed that they are totally uprooted.

Adiya or Adhiya system:- From the word it is evident that it is a method of dividing into half the income of the girls of this profession (*Adha* in Hindi means 'half'). Under this scheme, half of the earning a woman makes by selling her self goes to the *Masi* or matron, under whose strict and continuous supervision the whole business goes on. In almost all the pros-colonies of Kolkata, this system still functions widely, namely– Sonagachhi, Harkata, Watgunge, Kalighat and Shethgali. It works in two ways:

i) In some places, the girl does not have to pay the rent, but only has to shell out half of her income to the *Masi* in charge.

ii) Again in some of the houses the vacant rooms owned by the *Masi* or the landlady in this case, can be used for entertaining customers. After paying half of her income made thus, to the owner of the house, the girl goes back to her own home.

Chhukrikata custom: As per this custom, the *Masi* buys the girls directly from the pimps against a large amount. This price along with the interest accrued is deducted from the earnings made by using the girl as a whore, thereby collecting the entire amount from her for six months to two years as the case may be. As a result, the girl has to depend only on the small amounts received as tips

²⁷ B. Joardar, *Prostitution In Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter.India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. p.165.

²⁸ Debrani Kar, *Kolkatar Nagarnati*, p. 66

²⁹ Mrinakanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005, p.133

from her clients. This system works in many countries of the world and women become the victims of utmost exploitation through this custom. The prevalence of this custom has reduced to some extent in the present day, as girls have become more conscious about their rights and freedom. It is observed more in instances of Nepalese young girls and their guardian *Masis*.

Noth Khola:- This is a ritual practiced by Agrawallis (girls from Agra) of Sonagachhi. Tribal women (tribes like Deredar, Beria etc) from the state of Uttar Pradesh have retained this practice. Small girls from towns like Agra, Morel, Basei Khurat and other villages are taught singing and dancing, along with the art of love-making by their mothers or other family members. At the age of 9 they are ritually made to wear anklets or *ghungrus* used by dancers. After that, at 14 or 15 years, they are brought to the brothel for the first time. Here through the ceremonial taking off of the *nath* or nose-ring, they are initiated into their first sex-act. The man, who is selected for this work of '*noth-khola*', has to pay a large amount of money. Sometimes the amount exceeds Rs.50000. At times, there is auction too; the girl goes to the highest bidder.

The same custom is practiced a bit differently among the *tawaifs* in Uttar Pradesh. The word *tawaif* is used to mean Muslim courtesans. In this case, the girl starts her lessons in dancing and singing from the age of 7 or 8. As she grows up she is ceremoniously taught to dress up and start using the 'bodice' as part of her attire. Then the search for her paramour starts. When a reasonable amount of money is ensured and fixed as her price, she is sent to her paramour. Two rituals take place- *shirdhankai* or covering of the head, and *mishmi* or coloring of the teeth with reddish black powder. (*sishi*=a dentifrice made out of tobacco and copperas). The young teen-aged girl is dressed like a bride, made to go round the streets, singing and dancing. This ceremony is known as '*sathni-utarna*' (same as *nath-khola* or opening of the nose-ring). Through this taking off of the nose-ring, she formally gives permission to take away her virginity.

In Sonagachhi, after the *Nath-khola* ceremony, when the girl becomes pregnant for the first time, she is taken to her home in the remote village, where she is given off to marriage with a 'coin' in the presence of all the family members. Symbolically, she vows to be married to money, or in other words, she carries on her profession as a whore only for earning money.³⁰

Kisti-system:- Girls from the various prostitute-colonies generally have to bear a perpetual burden of debts. Since they never have enough savings, they have to borrow continuously for medical treatments and other things. A class of moneylenders thriving in Harkata, Watgunge, Kalighat and

³⁰ Debrani Kar, *Kolkata Nagarnati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995. .p.66-68

Sonagachhi localities give loans at a high rate of interest. These loans are to be repaid within 72 days. Because of this tremendous financial pressure, the girls have to earn money even when sick or menstruating. Sometimes we hear about instances of suicide under unbearable pressure. But mostly women of very low-income group only suffer this fate.³¹

The rate of installments in this *Kisti* system is like this: - If someone borrows 500 rupees, she would have to pay back at the rate of 10 per day for seventy-two days that is 720 rupees with interest. Again, if any one fail to clear the loan in seventy-two days after the due date she will have to continue to pay a daily fine of rupees 5 per hundred. If it was 500, she will have to pay 25 as fine daily for breach of contract, over and above the loan amount. This fine is known as '*khelap*' (*khelap* - failure to keep one's word).³²

Pawn-Brokers:- If one notices carefully one encounters many small gold shops around the brothel areas of Calcutta. The reason for mushrooming of this gold business was that, firstly, the prostitutes prefer to keep their savings in the form of gold jewelry, which they could use to raise loans in times of emergency, or keep for their retired life. The same shop owners would give them loan against the gold ornaments. In those days it was difficult for these 'fallen girls' to go to the banks to open accounts. They therefore remained outside the mainstream of society. The only more or less safe method of saving was by buying gold ornaments, or by 'opening a book' at the gold shop.

Now let us see how they pawned their gold for cash. In case of exigency these girls used to keep the ornaments at the gold shop and take money as loan. In those days, the interest charged by the shopkeepers was at the rate of 6 rupees per month per 100 rupees loan. That comes to a huge interest of 72% per annum. In some other case, the girl had to give in writing that if for some reason, she fail to clear the loan amount within a certain period, the ornament would go back to the shop owner. Whatever was the current rate of gold on the day of taking loan was the basis of the amount of lending loan. The price or monetary value of the deposited gold jewelry would be measured or weighed on the basis/line of that current rate of the gold on that particular day concerned and half the value of the gold was the available loan amount. For example a girl goes with a gold chain weighing 1 *bhori* 4 *annas* (approximately 11 grams); and on that day the going rate of gold was 2000 rupees. Then the price of the chain on the day comes to 2500 rupees. The maximum loan amount available to the girl would be 1250 rupees.

³¹ Ibid.p.68

³² Mrinalkanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005, p.133

Chotawallas: - Those who did not have gold, used to borrow money from 'Chotawallas'. In these red light areas, these *chotawallas* were usually the rich and influential men of the locality, like landlords, local *Dadas* or goons (hoodlum) or their relatives. Before lending they used to get a white paper with a revenue stamp signed (thumb impressions in most cases) by the borrower.

Here too, the fine or payment for default was similar. If any sex-worker failed to repay on a certain day, her penalty at the rate of 5 per 100 rupees would be added to the principal. For example, a girl has borrowed 1000 rupees. She repays a daily amount of 50 (20 rupees interest and 30 towards principal). After repaying for 5 days, her repayable loan amount come to the original loan amount less Rs.30 for 5 days {or, $1000 - 30 \times 5 = 850$.} For some serious problem if a girl fails to make any payment on the sixth day, her *Dadon* or loan amount would become 5 rupees per 100. That comes to 40 rupees for 800 + 2.50 for 50 = a total of Rs 42.50. In case of *Kistiwallas* or installment payment, there was a convenience. Once the principal amount was repaid, the penalties were deducted on a daily basis. But in case of *Chotawallas*, the penalty amount was added to the principal amount .So, or failing to repay on the sixth day, the principal becomes $850 + 42.50 = 892.50$ ³³

Guruprasadi custom: This custom is not directly related to 'prostitution' as a profession. But it may be mentioned as a form of sexual slavery. It was once upon a time prevailing in Bengal. Just as a prospective harlot is first offered to the Gods in some places, similarly a newly-wed bride was first offered to the family-Guru (the priest or spiritual guide attached to a family) before she could start sleeping with her young husband. Fortunately, under tremendous protests from the younger generation, this custom has now become obsolete.³⁴

4.7. Art of Making Money:

A prostitute has to learn how to enhance their glamour and beauty. In time they also learn how to make money and manage to keep for them the extra income made by them outside the trade. It is said in Sanskrit—

Na dharmaya na kamaya, byayamarthaya nirmittah-

³³ Ibid.p.133-35; This 'book' was a small 4" by 3" notebook bought from the stationers to keep their accounts. Even though it resembled a bank's pass book, it was by no way a savings account. Banks at least used to give interest at the rate of 4% on one's savings. These petty goldsmiths not only gave any interest, they even refused to sign the entries of money deposited in the 'book'. Entries were like this:- 23.5.1984 Deposited Rs. 400. There was ample scope for the moneylenders to cheat the girls at a later date; even though such instances were rare. It would read as follows:- I, Ms. so and so is borrowing 5000 rupees from this *Dada*. I will repay him within such and such date. If I fail to do so, I am bound to give my such and such thing to *Dada*. There was no mention about interest. But in effect, the *dada* would collect 2 rupees per day for 100; and that came to astronomical 730% per annum.

³⁴ Debrani Kar, *Kolkatar Nagarnati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995. .p.68

We the prostitutes are created not for faith, not for lust, but for money.³⁵

There are many methods for making an extra income. They make pretentious claims to have diseases, as health is the most valuable and important asset of a whore. They make sob stories talking in front of the *babu* about their various problems so that the client in fear of disease, or out of compassion agrees to pay extra money. The conversations may be something like this-

As soon as the *babu* comes, *masi* will call the girl, say Mita—'O Mita, your *babu* has come, (out of humour she may call him 'son-in-law')'. Mita would come out of her room and start bargaining with the visitor. In between *masi* will talk about Mita's illness, 'O Mita, what about your injection? Give me the money; I got to pay the doctor'. Mita would reply sadly, 'I Can not take injection this month, got no money at all'. *Masi* will say with false anger, 'Do not take; and remember, once you have the disease, I won't allow you to stay in my house. I will simply throw you out.' Mita will have tears in her eyes. *Babu* will see all this, and immediately take out some money from his pocket. This would be their extra earning, which would later be divided between Mita and her *masi*.³⁶

In the well known autobiography of *Manada Devi*, '*Shikshita Patitar Atmcharit*' we find partly similar picture where *mashi* advises *Manada*

My daughter, at this stage of your youth earn as much as you can. You have to be very much careful about your old age. If you fail to save money to secure your old age then your future life would be in a miserable condition. You must have noticed that in this profession neither you have friends, relatives nor you have other shelters; money is the only strength.³⁷

The farce '*Aponar Mukh Apuni Dekho*' (look at your own face) written by *Bholanath Mukhopadhyay* in 1863 present a detail picture of the changing nature of prostitutes during this transitional phase. '*Rammoni*' is one of character who is an 'elderly prostitute'. She hailed from '*Baiti community*' (it was lower caste whose main occupation was manufacturing lime from shells). *Channabilashi* is one character who has been brought up by *Rammoni*. *Channabilasi* was the daughter of her servant who belonged to '*Bagdi Community*' which was a lower caste community of cultivators. *Channabilashi* got the entire training under *Rammoni*'s guidance and succeeded in reaching higher in her profession. She won the favour of *babu* of Calcutta who was one of the richest *babus* of Calcutta during the late 19th century. This *babu* was also known for his lavish extravagant life-style which has been vividly described in the *Bholanath*'s farce.³⁸

Rammoni advices *Channabilashi* not to get swept away by any allurements (fun and game) and says:

³⁵ The Sanskrit saying cited in Debrani Kar, *Kolkatar Nagarnati*, Calcutta, 1995, p.71.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ *Manada Devi*, *Sikshita Patitar Atmcharit*, (autobiography in Bengali), Chirayat Prakashan, Kolkata, 2004, p.57

³⁸ Sumanta Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast: The Prostitute in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 2000, p.94-96

We do not have any lasting relations with the 'babus', they are from the outside; they are here today, but may disappear tomorrow. But they have cash.... Now is the time to fleece them; you will never get this opportunity again. As long as the 'babus' fancy us, however learned they may be, they submit to one word uttered by a whore- the word is *aan*[bring]. My darling! This word *aan* has to be cultivated in such a manner that once you utter it, no 'babus' can resist it... He will have to bring it to you, even if he has to steal or sell his wife's ornaments...

Rammoni advises *Channabilashi* to extract money and wealth from 'babu' as much as possible, to secure her future life. She says:

Many among the whores, even though they managed to acquire a lot of expensive ornaments, could not live wisely; some among them did not pay attention to the need for earning enough when they could. Some are now maid-servants, others are working in granaries, wallowing in dust and earning somehow a handful of rice.³⁹

Since earning money is one of the essential objectives of a whore, we can very well understand how a whore behaves with a man who cannot pay and still wants it. In ancient writings on this trade, we find the prescribed method—'Somehow start an argument in some pretext and throw him out. If he is poor and still is addicted to the pros-quarters, tease him in front of everybody, abuse him, remove the girls away from him, show him that there is another man preferred by the girl and get rid of him.'⁴⁰

The 'Travelogue' of Durgacharan Roy – a Bengali author constitutes an important source of prostitution in the context of 19th century Calcutta. Durgacharan Roy describes that how the poor clerks were looked down upon and badly treated by prostitutes. These clerks had to walk along the Chitpore main road on the way returning home from the office. One day these clerks opposed against these prostitutes and faced a tremendous aggressive repercussion from them. One prostitute spat pan juice from the balcony with her other associates burst out upon him like anything:

Look at the cheek of the bloke! He is a mere clerk, and yet affords to indulge in anger!...We may be prostitutes, but we can keep lots of clerks like you. Here are you- after having spent the whole day as a pen-pusher, what are you bringing home? We earned from eight to ten rupees every hour sitting in our homes. We can earn in one generation what you and your descendants can never hope to gain in three generations. ⁴¹

In the present-day situation, it is clear from the survey that the entire atmosphere of the pros-colonies has undergone a change. Many ruffians and goons infest the localities and dictate their own terms; so much so that at times, these anti-social elements enjoy the girls free of charge. Occasionally, the girls' mothers or grandmothers prove strong enough to refuse them and chase them out. Here, in this profession, the girl's body is the main asset and the instrument for earning money. There can be no place for love here. To

³⁹ Bholanath Mukhopadhyay, *Aapnar Mukh Aaponi Dekho* (In Bengali), In Basu, Kanchan (ed.) *Dushprapya Sahitya Sangraha*, Vol II, Reflect Publication, Calcutta, 2001 (First Publication 1991). p.109-110 (Translated by Sumanta Banerjee, cited in *Dangerous Outcast*, p.96)

⁴⁰ Debrani Kar, *Kolkatar Nagarnati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995. .p.71

⁴¹ Sumanta Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast: The Prostitute in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 2000.p.83-84

pretend love in return for money is the main subject worth learning here. At present, the flesh trade has become a commercial venture and many women are seduced or misled and forced to join the trade. There are artificial methods to mature a young minor girl to make her suitable for business. It is a cruel world and the practice points the finger of accusation towards our society and its law and order.⁴²

4.8. The Best time and Season to Work:

The 'business of sex-selling' generally begins with the advent of the darkness. When the entire world sleeps, it is a day time for prostitutes in the brothel world. It can also be said that when the other avenues like shopkeepers, businessmen or employees are busy with their work, the prostitutes in the brothel involve themselves in the performance of domestic work, for some it is a leisure time to take rest or sleep and sometimes they even go to cinema during this time.⁴³ Prostitutes are generally seen to solicit standing in front of brothel by the side of road/by the side of the street. They generally wear heavy make-up to look charming and attractive even in the dark shade. Most often prostitutes are seen to wait for clients till late night. The number of clients which they entertain varies day to day. Sometimes, even they do not find a single client. Though, with the advent of the darkness prostitutes begin soliciting but in some areas it has also been noticed that during day time, mainly at noon they stand in front of their house to get customers. According to the observations made by the researcher, prostitutes generally do not expose them too much while they solicit on the road. But, the nature of displaying themselves also varies from area to area (red-light area), e.g. prostitutes in the Sonagachhi (Nilmoni Mitra Street and other) are keen to put gaudy make-up and expose themselves. But on the other hand, prostitutes in the Kalighat, Chetla and Bowbazar area are not seen to expose themselves too much and put decent make-up generally.



পুজোয় ওঁদের রোজগার দ্বিগুণ হয়

Sambad Pratidin. 9th Oct. 2004. Saturday

Puja is regarded as the best season to earn money

⁴² Debrani Kar, *Kolkatar Nagarnati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995. .p.72,

⁴³ B. Joardar, *Prostitution In Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter.India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. p.153.

There are certain days and occasions when the prostitutes do financially better than on other days. The prostitutes do financially better mainly during weekends than the weekdays. The season of Puja (Durga Puja, Kali Puja etc.) is peak time of their business. During this time they earn as much as possible and with that they send money and gifts to their home, enjoy themselves and some also do savings out of that earnings. Except Puja, the government holidays are also peak time of their business. Prostitutes need to have special preparation before the Puja season for the purpose of their business. According to Rupa, during Puja time she earns eight to ten thousand rupees on a day (Rs.8,000 to Rs.10,000) but she needs to spend on herself for preparation before Puja. She has to buy fashionable dresses, cosmetics, visit parlour for hair cutting, facial, bleach etc. In 2004 Puja, she had purchased two designer dresses. Rupa recalls her childhood memories during Puja time. She used to be dressed up by her mother and sent to the Puja Mandop but her mother could never visit Puja Mandop to offer homage to goddess due to her father's tortures. Out of sheer depression, on one Navami night, her mother died. But there was a controversy about her death, some people used to say that she had committed suicide by setting herself on fire but some denied the fact and accused her father of killing her mother. After her death, Rupa took prostitution as profession but she used to never entertain clients on Navami night in initial three four years. But now, she entertains clients on this day but could not get herself relieved of the pain of losing her mother. To forget all these memories of life she entertains clients as many as possible, earn a lot of money and consume alcohol extremely. The beautiful girl Kamala, celebrates her Puja cooking various tasty foods and also send gifts to the family in village. These gifts comprise of new clothes for everybody. She also purchases four sarees for special four days of Puja (Shasthi, Saptami, Ashtami & Navami). But despite doing all such things she cannot restrain herself recalling her childhood memories of Puja. Though her childhood was spent in dire poverty but even then she feels those days were much better and joyful than today. She could not get any dresses but visiting Mandop with all others used to give her pleasure which is totally absent today despite having money, dress, and the glittering Puja atmosphere in Kolkata. As if she has lost those old glorious days in which she used to visits Mondops along with her siblings and had delicious food made by her mother. Bharati Dey, also miss her childhood during this Puja season. Before joining Durbar Mahila Samannoy Committee (DMSC), she had a feeling of sin as people stigmatize them as public women and segregate in the society. But her experience working in Durbar has got herself rid of this feeling and now she is not that much bothered to all these. During Puja season, she earns average two to three thousand per day but due to her ill-fate she does not have any dependency on god and therefore, she neither visits goddess nor pay homage to her. But the expression of Maya Sharma is something different. She finds the life of prostitution more complacent than her childhood spent in

dire poverty. She could not get either a dress or food in Puja and there was no limit of her parents' restrictions. Once she was terribly bitten for watching 'Baghboni Khela'(a Bengali Movie) and she used to face abusive languages if she had to approach someone for debt. But now the scenario is different. In her own word,

'aami aazad!' Khushi mato saajoj kori, berate jaai, ichhe hole customer nei na hole nein a. (I am free! I dress the way I want, I travel on my own will, if I wish, I take customer else I do not).

Maya lives with her babu just like husband-wife. Her earning is also good. For her ill-fate, she does not believe in god but she loves to play traditional religious celebration, which is played by married women using vermilion on the last day of Durga Puja – Dashami. Maya too sends gifts and clothes after Bijoya Dashami to her relatives and family members from her additional income which she earns during Puja. Apart from this, she also saves money for her future from her income during Puja. Though she earns one hundred to one hundred fifty rupees per day during normal season, but during Puja she earns as high as two to three thousand rupees a day.

During Puja season the number of clients flocking to the red-light areas is limitless. A large number of tourists also visit the red-light areas in this time.⁴⁴ Manada's statement stands quite similar to this:

...During the Puja holiday, Christmas etc the lawyers, the officials of the govt. office come to Calcutta from the muffusal areas. During that time they visit us.⁴⁵

After visiting Puja Mondops along with their family and then keeping their family back home, many men use to visit the red-light areas in the late nights.⁴⁶ In Srikarna's descriptions we find these pictures of the red-light areas during the Puja season where he says:

... the 1994 Durga Puja. On the evening of Dashami I had just come out of my house to go to my aunt's place with sweets to pay my respects to her. The locality is not much crowded today. Exhausted with entertaining people in different ways throughout the nights of Saptami, Ashtami and Navami, the entire locality was, as if, fast asleep. To tell the truth the place looked numbed. For these days there was huge crowd. It is better to call it a sea of men. From brothers to grandfathers – who weren't there in the group? After twelve at night the crowd was so huge that much more than the people who were there to see the earthen goddess, there were people to see the goddess of the earth.⁴⁷

Due to this high demand of prostitute during Puja time, they find their earning on rise to a large extent. But the earning of prostitutes varies according to the class-structures. A girl belongs to 'A' category earn eight to ten thousand rupees a day during the puja season. The earning of the 'B' as

⁴⁴ Shyamoli Bandyopadhyay, *Pujoi Oder Rojgaar Dwigoon Hoi*, Sanbaad Protidin, Saturday, 9th October, 2004.

⁴⁵ Manada Devi, *Sikshita Patitar Atmacharit*, (autobiography of an educated prostitute), Chirayat Prakashan, Kolkata, 2004. p.76

⁴⁶ Shyamoli Bandyopadhyay, *Pujoi Oder Rojgaar Dwigoon Hoi*, Sanbaad Protidin, Saturday, 9th October, 2004.

⁴⁷ Shrikarna, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003.p.44

well as 'C' category prostitutes stands comparatively less to the 'A' category. The earning of Prostitutes belong to the 'D' category is very much less to that of the prostitutes of other categories.⁴⁸

The picture of the red-light areas during the festival season and the condition of prostitutes and clientele during this time, has been beautifully captured in the literary description of Meghnad Gupta in his *Rater Kolkata* during the first half of twentieth century. Gupta writes:

During the nights of 'Durga Puja', Pathureghata used to be flooded with crowds of people – one after another; and then another – there would be no end to people moving up and down the streets. The streets would be lit up, the atmosphere would reverberate with the festive sound of drums, dholes and cymbals – everyone would have a smile on their face and be in new clothes! Everybody would freely visit the houses where worship was arranged. And from evening, crowds of people would come and go to see the image of goddess Durga. In the crowds, the number of women used to be quite a lot. Many girls from poor families used to come to see the Goddess, and not to say about the prostitutes. The crowds were favorite haunts with the prostitutes since it was convenient for them there to catch their prey. So they would dress as gaudily as possible and continuously move up and down in the crowded streets. There has never been any shortage of 'talented' people in these crowds; there were many with various special talents. Some of them came only to see to satisfy their visual desires. From courtesans to gentle ladies out on the streets to the interiors of these aristocrat buildings and under the veils that covered the heads of these conservative ladies – their eyes left nothing undetected. They spot some exquisite beauties, and their eyes get stuck there! These talented people, though indecent, were rather safe. Because, other than staring, they had no courage to go ahead any further. The second group of 'talented' people had a keen sense of touch as well as of sight. These were the ones who waited patiently for long hours in front of these 'puja' (worship) buildings. Decent and indecent – both kinds of women would come and go in large groups. Whenever these people saw an especially attractive face, they would leave their strategic places and move with the crowds. After crossing the main door, these houses usually have a narrow path leading into the interior of the house. So naturally, while entering it is inevitable to have a bit of pushing and jostling with each other. And at is what these specially talented people wait for! They take these opportunities to have a feel of the figures that have attracted them by their looks, and get thrilled. They enter the gates with the women and come out with them. Then they wait in front of the main gate for yet another bunch of women. I have seen a well-known professor of English from a college in Kolkata among this group. The third group is further advanced in their talent. They take this opportunity to try to do the maximum damage to decent housewives. The fourth class of people comes simply to select prostitutes – they are rather safe for common people. ...

On diwali nights (festival of lights associated with worship of the goddess Kali) Chitpur road, particularly the portion between the crossing of Chorbagan and the crossing of Mechho bagan witnesses a flood of human beings – innumerable heads of men and women can be seen flowing. The roadside shops are decorated with strings of lights and paintings by bad and cheap artists with their pathetic attempts at art! Even though there was no beauty in them, the passers by stopped invariably to have a look at them. We noticed every year since my childhood the roads and shops were being decorated in the same fashion! In seemed these absolutely monotonous and poor decoration was making a mockery the

⁴⁸ Shyamoli Bandyopadhyay, *Pujoi Oder Rojgaar Dwigoon Hoi*, Sanbaad Protidin, Saturday, 9th October, 2004.

present day standard of paintings of superior quality. ... Right above the string of lights were the verandahs. The darkness could not any more hide the figures on the balconies dressed in colorful printed saris and blouses, faces powdered (with chalk powder in absence of talcum) and cheeks reddened by rouge (red liquid known as 'alta'), eyebrows painted to join them together, eyes darkened with kohl – these hellish creatures tried to hide their ugliness as far as possible – though in most cases their attempts to enhance their god-given looks failed miserably! ...

Kartik and *Saraswati* are two deities whose worships are religiously conducted in every house in Kolkata and they are particular favorites of prostitutes.⁴⁹

In the nights of *Kartik* and *Saraswati* pujas, the prostitutes used to receive a handsome amount of tips from their *babus* (clients). During such pujas, the prostitutes used to invite most of the paramour and friends with a warm heart. Regarding the payment of tips, the *babus* in fact use to involve themselves in competition. If a *babu* offered rupees five, the other *babu* gave an offer of rupees ten, while another *babus* offer rupees twenty only. The more and more the competition was, the more and more was the earning of the prostitutes. Like the gentleman's house, there was no dearth of reception and arrangements of good dishes.⁵⁰

Meghnad Gupta further states:

Some of those who are invited to these festivals, come and attend, sit at the carpet with cushions, take a few puffs from the silver bound pipes of 'huccahs' and go out politely showing some excuses, after taking one 'paan' (betel leaf). But then there are no dearths of people who eat at their places. In fact such people are more in number. Those who do not mind losing everything at the feet of a prostitute – do they have any qualms about losing their honour or culture! On festive days there were songs and dances till late in the nights arranged by aristocratic courtesans, to please their guests. Bottles of drinks emptied one after another at the blink of an eyelid! Sometimes being invited in the same house, an uncle and his nephew got caught red-handed by each other. It is needless to say that the prostitutes take away the entire expenses of this 'Puja' from the easiest prey among the group of friends. Once, a young man from a goldsmith family made a big name in society. That buffoon just learnt to spend his father's money and donated five or seven hundred rupees for a *Saraswati* idol. He also spent proportionate amount on other luxuries on the night of the worship. Soon after that when I heard that he had declared himself as 'insolvent' I was not surprised. I knew that these captains had a peculiar psychology. Like insects they jumped into fire knowing fully well that they would be burnt. As if they got pleasure by burning themselves. Even after being immersed in debt up to their necks they tried their best to drown deeper. They prefer not to swim even if they know how to swim. It is also a kind of madness or a way of committing suicide!⁵¹

⁴⁹ Meghnad Gupta, *Rater Kolkata*, Pratibha, Kolkata, 1991 (1st Publication 1923), p.52-54.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p.54-55.

⁵¹ Ibid. p.55

4.9. Living Conditions of the Prostitutes:

(a) Life Style:

High-class prostitutes might have led a luxurious life but insecurity of losing beauty and charm of youth was always there which used to make her feel afraid of, with the growing old age. But the less fortunate woman had to take make up to hide the paleness of her face and she needed to adopt a smile forcibly imposed on her face just to attract clients. Their conditions were miserable. Despite having sickness, they needed to solicit standing on the roadside being exposed to cold or rains just with a hope of securing clients. They were not having any fixed income. It varied with the weather, season and condition of the money market.⁵² Meghnad Gupta has portrayed the scene of prostitutes taking make-up to attract clients. He observed:

On *diwali* nights (festival of lights associated with worship of the goddess *Kali*) Chitpur road, particularly the portion between the crossing of Chorbagan and the crossing of Mechho bagan witnesses a flood of human beings – innumerable heads of men and women can be seen flowing. The roadside shops are decorated with strings of lights and paintings by bad and cheap artists with their pathetic attempts at art! Even though there was no beauty in them, the passers by stopped invariably to have a look at them. We noticed every year since my childhood the roads and shops were being decorated in the same fashion! It seemed this absolutely monotonous and poor decoration was making a mockery of the present day standard of paintings of superior quality. ... Right above the string of lights were the verandahs. The darkness could not any more hide the figures on the balconies dressed in colorful printed saris and blouses, faces powdered (with chalk powder in absence of talcum) and cheeks reddened by rouge (red liquid known as '*alta*'), eyebrows painted to join them together, eyes darkened with kohl – these hellish creatures tried to hide their ugliness as far as possible – though in most cases their attempts to enhance their god-given looks failed miserably! The pedestrians with their upturned eyes, tried to drink up their beauty to the utmost; some teased them with poor jokes; some made signals with their hands and entered the houses in a hurry, their heads covered with shawls; some wicked boys threw lighted colored match-sticks at them and went away happily laughing in spite of their ugly abuses – some even did not hesitate to throw lighted fire-works on their balconies! ... You can see foreign prostitutes on the roads but can not differentiate between them and the normal foreign women unless you have good observation skills. But if you put a little effort, you will see the normal characteristics of prostitutes in these foreigners. Their cheap and colourful dress, tired eyes, excess use of talcum powder in the face and their style of walking and expressions clearly appear.⁵³

The chief asset of a sex-worker is no doubt her body, which is the main attraction for the customer. If the body is not in shape, nobody will visit a prostitute. So, the girls here have to be tip-top in health and fitness, and use loud make up to look attractive. Some girls even stop nursing their babies after 2/3 months to keep their breasts in good shape. It is a common thing that an 'A' class woman comes down to 'C' category on losing physical charm with age. The actual age for retirement of girls of this

⁵² S. N. Mukherjee, *Prostitution in India*, DasGupta & Co, Calcutta, 1936. p.253

⁵³ Meghnad Gupta, *Rater Kolkata*, Pratik, Kolkata, 1991 (first *Publication* 1923), p.18, 53-54

line is forty-five. After this they still have their bodies, their minds, even the strength to work but there are no more customers.⁵⁴

The lifestyle of prostitutes varies according to their class structure within the institution of prostitution. '*Rater Kolkata*' (Calcutta by Night), written by Meghnad Gupta gives the description of living condition of prostitutes according to their class structure in the early twentieth century. Which has already been in discussed in the previous section 'Class Structure of the Prostitutes' of this chapter.

There is a popular belief that the prostitutes are hyper-sexed. But in reality the picture is totally different. In fact they are not over-sexed and in most cases they do not get sexual satisfaction from their clients.⁵⁵ It is evident from my sources that the sex-workers do not have sex with any customer. They even do not let them kiss or touch their breasts. Surely there are exceptions but for that one needs to spend much more money, some remain so cold after the customer sits on their bodies that it is heard several people sadly saying, 'I got on top of a dead body'. But as one gets more skillful in the profession, she learns various tricks. That is, one who learns to act well in sex with customers earns success in this profession. The acting means that it must seem to the customer as if the sex-worker is deriving more pleasure out of this sexual intercourse than the customer himself. The one who are perfect in this get more customers. One cannot succeed in this profession if she cannot give the customer his sense of self-satisfaction. For this reason some less attractive girls get more customers than more beautiful one. Because giving the customer self-satisfaction does not depend on someone's beauty. One has to be adept in several sexual arts to give sexual pleasure to the customer.⁵⁶

In this regard, the experience and the lifestyle in the red-light areas narrated by Manoda during the early twentieth century stand very much relevant. It also reflects the continuity of the various arts and skills acquired by the prostitutes with the motto of fulfilling clients' sexual as well as other demands, over the hundred years – throughout the twentieth century in the same way. Manoda says:

Staying in these unhygienic surroundings my health deteriorated day by day. As per Ranimasi's advice I was taking some medicine to prevent getting pregnant – after that I developed various diseases. Rajbala also had the same medicine, but she had no problem. I became very thin and weak. The whole body ached. Hands and feet had ugly marks. Face was covered with rashes that turned into painful eczema. Ranimasi saw me and said 'You have to go to hospital – no other way!'

⁵⁴ Shrikama, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003 p.83

⁵⁵ B. Joardar, *Prostitution In Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter-India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. p.151

⁵⁶ Shrikama, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003. p.15-16

I lost all hopes of living. Lying in bed I used to cry day and night – wetting my pillow with endless tears. That time I thought for the first time that may be death is pleasurable. I had no friends or relatives. All other women are busy with their own chores. After evening all are going to stand at the doors for business. Spending the night with drinks and other excitements, they would wake up late – by 8-9 am. Who will look after me? I found everything filthy all around me. As if, we were all pigs – a bunch of pigs rolling in mud. I realized that it was time for my death.

Ranimasi and Rajbala together took me to the hospital. After three months I recovered fully and came back home. I did not have a single *paisa* in my hand. ...I said, 'Ranimasi, I have lost my glamour; I am now thin and my limbs are dried up. My hair does not have the earlier lustre. Can I work in this line any more?' She explained to me 'For a whore, beauty is not the ultimate thing. Debauched men are not attracted by mere beauty. You will notice, very ugly whores earning more than the pretty ones. God only knows who seduces whom. When these lewd men roam around the dark allies of the pros' quarters, the love-god Cupid confuses them and blurs their vision. Ranimasi taught me a few tricks. How to drape the Sari, how to stand, how to speak and walk seductively; all things that attract men folk she showed me. 'Even if you are very sad, you should talk pleasantly with a smiling face to the client. Pretend to love him so much that he would not realize that it was false. If the lover was a drunkard, to please him you should hold the glass in such manners that he would not make out that you are only pretending to drink.' All this I learnt. The debauched men folk should be satisfied in whatever way it pleased them. Like this I learnt pretensions; and a new Manada was born in my place. I could sing well. My voice was quite sweet too ... this is an art that is very useful for a prostitute. Ranimasi kept a veteran tutor to teach me music. He said your "*Brahmasangeet*" (Religious Songs) or patriotic songs won't do here. You have to learn Hindi *ghazals*, light classical music. (*Khayal*/*Thumri*) etc. fit for these prostitutes' quarter. '*Keertans*' will also do'. Within 3/4 months, I showed substantial improvement. It took me some time to learn '*Keertans*'. Along with pretensions, I had to learn how to recognize people's characters. We had to discern by seeing their faces.⁵⁷

In the present day, the girls of the whore-colonies have to learn all these very same tricks; and in these the *masi* is their main coach.⁵⁸

Sex is such a thing that to get it completely, both the partner should have mental equation. If there is any parity in the thoughts of the two, then instead of getting pleasure it gives bitterness and from there it takes the shape of anger, conceit, worry and these become the reason for many uproars in their married life. It has been seen that despite having beautiful wife at home, someone tends to spend his time with a C-category prostitute. There is a proverb that says, having sex with the prostitutes is same like having meal in a used plate. In this regard, Srikarna has explained:

This is true that in course of time due to dealings with so many customers, the prostitutes become skilled in this trade and in this she defeats her rival, meaning the 'house-wives' very easily.

How a prostitute defeats a house wife, Srikarna has explained that with a famous Bengali proverb:

⁵⁷ Manada Devi, *Sikshita Patitar Atmacharit*, (autobiography in Bengali), Chirayat Prakashan, Kolkata, 2004, p 55-57

⁵⁸ Debrani Kar, *Kolkata's Nagamati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995. . p.71

It is said about the girls that come what may, a woman will digest everything but she will not speak up (*Book Phatey Tabu Mukh Phate Na*) – and due to this 'not speaking' many a times they are unable to understand what her husband wants and this is why she fails to fulfill the husband's need. Lets us elaborate this. Sex is a game of two and in this both the partner should be equally involved. Normally, in most of the cases, the husband always calls for this and wives follow the same. Slowly the husband loses interest and also due to same act everyday, the wives also get bored out of this. If in this case, a woman, for a change, calls for this then it creates a new height of excitement and enjoy. And top of that if she says, 'fuck me hard, ...', then no wonder it will have tremendous pleasure for both of them. The one who can call their husband for this act with ease, they are lucky. The one, who feels shy and cannot do this, normally their husbands are not satisfied. If this is one of the reason for getting dissatisfaction of the husband, then the second reason is that if for some reason, on one day due to early discharge of her husband the woman says, 'you Can not do' then only on this, the husband breaks down in pain. Whenever he sees his wife, he feels that pain - 'you Can not do' and he will not feel excitements in his genitals. The difference of a prostitute from normal women/wives is that, she is not only skilled in this; she also helps the man to get into normal sex-activity by acting and counseling. So she can understand what the man wants by just looking at his face or through expressions. This is the reason why a person who is shy away from his wife for sex, enjoys sex with a prostitute to the core. And if he is a permanent customer or a *babu*, then there is no problem, whenever he wants, whatever way he wants, his woman – the prostitute – is ready to serve him.⁵⁹

We have already discussed above the inclination of prostitutes towards education and habit of reading to larger extent during the early twentieth century. In this regard, the statement of Manada also throws immense glimpse on this aspect. Manada says:

I came to Rambagan and started reading. I told my *Babu* and bought a big cabinet for keeping books, filled it with Bengali and English literature. *Babu* was happy to see my thirst for knowledge. He used to buy for me monthly newsmagazine '*Prabashi*' and '*Bharatbarsha*'. Daily newspapers he brought from his office. I used to read them. With music, studies and the love of my *Babu*, my mind was somewhat settled for the time being.⁶⁰

Her extensive knowledge about Bengali literature, which included Sharat Chandra and Tagore's literature and the writings of other contemporary authors, become very much reflective in her discussion where she attempts to critically analyze the position of prostitute depicted in Bengali literature that was undergoing a major transition during the first half of the twentieth century, with cultivating an advance and different perception to this marginalize section in sharp contrast to that of nineteenth century. She further throws light upon the impact of this literary revolution on the young generation of that time period. Her view point is as follows:

It was a new era in the Bengali literary field – I would like to discuss it, as I felt it had some connection with the lives of prostitutes like me. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and his contemporary writers had written about prostitutes in their novels where their characters were depicted rather negatively. In novels like '*Krishnakanter Will*' and '*Chandrasekhar*' he

⁵⁹ Shrikarna, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003. p39-40

⁶⁰ Manada Devi, *Sikshita Patitar Atmacharit*, (autobiography of an educated prostitute), Chirayat Prakashan, Kolkata, Janury 2004, *Poush* 1410, p.60-61

has shown the ultimate consequence, the punishment and penitence of the life of the 'fallen women'. What was shown so far about prostitutes was to evoke hatred and disgust in the minds of readers – so that they would be afraid and ashamed to come into contact with such women. After that Rabindranath Tagore had shown the other side of those women's characters in a few of his novels, so that it evoked the readers' sympathy. But Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay, Naresh Sengupta and some other young authors exposed what Tagore had kept a little subtle and vague; that made prostitutes attractive to common people. They said that 'prostitutes may be sinners, but they are not devoid of human qualities. If some of them are religious, god fearing, kind-hearted and generous, then why should we hate them? The fault lies with society, not with the prostitutes.' All these literature and novels in particular aroused a strange emotion in young hearts. They read the love-story of '*Srikanta*' and started looking for women like Rajlakshmi. Reading '*Subho*', they searched for actresses like '*Subho-sangini*'. The Saraju of the play '*Paroparey*' made a character like Saraju their dream-girl. Seeing all this, and through my years of experience, I realized that the youth of Bengal were more and more attracted towards these sinful women.⁶¹



Nayana Sen Sex Worker of
Sonagachi Room No. 409
Telegraph, 22nd Aug, 2000

In the present time the character has changed in this context. Most of the prostitutes of the red-light areas are illiterate. They do not cultivate any sort of interest in this field. But few exceptions are also there. In this regard, the case of Nayana Sen, a prostitute of Sonagachhi red-light area, Room No. 409, can be cited. Nayana studies by day and earns her living by nights. But 18 year old Nayana

⁶¹ Ibid. p.61

has to hide her personal life from her friends in junior college. She was studying to clear her higher secondary exams and once the class she got over, every evening Nayona rushes from college to Room No. 409 of Sonagachi and entertained 5 customer till midnight before seating down to study. In her own words, "I can barely have a bath after rushing back from college, when the first visitor knocks on the door. ... None of friends in college knows. How can I tell them this what I do for a living? How will they understand? Their tuition fees are provided by their parents. My case is so different, she sobs.... I have already saved Rs. 15,000 in the last 8 months and if things go alright, I hope to get out of this hell hole in years time", she smiles.⁶²

But, it cannot be claimed that all prostitutes were inclined to the education and cultural discussion in the brothel world during the early twentieth century. It became very much explicit when Manada says;

I realise how someone's bad company lead one's life on the immoral path and causes degradation in her life. Gradually I started forgetting all the education/learning acquired in the school. The knowledge whatever I had gathered in literature, history etc. from *Mukulda* is now put on aside. The girls with whom I was associated, no one among them cultivated any interest in the academic or cultural discussion; rather they were more fond of the discussions like how many clients were entertained by whom, what was the conversation between them and their lovers (client/*babu*) and all other vulgar issues.... In the Red-light areas the libertine lover is called *babu*... These *babus* often caused the issue of conflict among the prostitutes. If someone's *babu* went to another prostitute then it would have caused a major tension between those two prostitutes which use to lead tremendous conflict and quarrelling among them. All prostitutes used to become a part of it. I was also not out of them. Listening to the abusive languages used here in the brothel life, by the passage of time, I was also accustomed to it.⁶³

This sort of quarrels is also visible in the brothel world in present time. Quarrels as well as black magic come in regarding getting more customers. Sometimes the situation reaches such a point that the girl is blamed for black magic over the whole house snatching away the subsistence of the other girls.⁶⁴

Usually in any household locality there are cots or benches kept on one or two bricks. But the rooms of red light area being extremely small, there is no place for a separate self to keep the food. For that reason, almost all sex workers keep their cots high on about four to five bricks and keep several items of the household, even food – rice and vegetables etc. under it.⁶⁵

⁶² Deepankar Ganguly, *Too High a Price for Tuition Fees*, The Telegraph, 22nd August, 2000.

⁶³ Manada Devi, *Sikshita Patitar Atmcharit*, (autobiography of an educated prostitute), Chirayat Prakashan, Kolkata, Janury 2004, Poush 1410. p.52

⁶⁴ Shrikarna, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003. p.16

⁶⁵ *Ibid.* p.65



“ঘরের মধ্যে ঘর”—জায়গার অভাবে সারা সংসার তক্তপোশের তলায়।

Rooms of red light area are extremely small, no place for a separate self to keep the food

(Source: Srikarna, Babuder Andarmahal Theke)

In the ‘red light-areas’ every morning starts with the loud call of ‘*Bottlewallas*’ (Buyers of empty bottles) followed by the ‘*Kantawallas*’. ‘*Kantawallas*’ sell ‘*Kanta*’ or fish-bones. The leftover bones and heads of large *Bhetki* fish are sold at a nominal cost by the big fish-markets to vendors. And these hawkers come here to sell them at a price of seven to eight rupees per kilogram. The girls love to chew tender fish bones cooked spicily along with their drinks. It was a delicious and cheap snack for drinkers. In this regard, Mrinal Kanti Dutta gives a nice description of these *Kantawallas* and their relation with the prostitutes in the red-light areas. He says,

Some ‘*Kantawallas*’ used to cheat and mix fish waste with ‘*Bhetki*’ bones. So girls had their favorite ‘*Kantawallas*’. They relied on their pet ones so much that they would not buy from any other vendor. So we had our favorite Haruda who sold this delicacy to the tenants of our building. Those days we did not come across such lavish parties thrown by rich men; and ‘fish fry’ had not become such a popular snack. Only on social occasions like a wedding or a naming ceremony would people eat fish fry. So when Haruda brought only bones instead of other fish or crabs, all used to buy from him. On some days, half of his fish bones would be bought by our single building. At Munshigunge of Khidirpur there was this house of one Maladi; she had a permanent Kantawalla named Rashid. Other days this boy Rashid would shout out loud ‘*Bhetki* fish bones for sale’.⁶⁶

In the red-light areas, prostitutes are found with different nature. Some possess humble, serious as well as depressive attitude. Some prefer loneliness and therefore, they prefer to be alone. They generally, show a tremendous apathy towards any sort of discussion related to their past lives. Some girls have very bright eyes and some feel very much proud of their royal stature. Some girls are not yet able to come out of the brightness of their teenage life. Some girls are quickie by nature and always try to interfere in all matters. These girls are known as the *gazette* of the red-light areas.

⁶⁶ Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005. p.143

On the contrary, some girls are quiet, patient and shy by their nature. But, according to their associates it is known that often one quiet girl becomes very much aggressive and loud at night after having three-four pegs of drink. Beauty and intelligence are two capitals which are possessed by many girls in the red-light areas. These girls are very much concern about their monetary as well as each matter of their lives. Few girls are found to be mental patient. The girls, who are big fatty, called '*mutki*' in the colloquial language, are no more on/in high demand in the sex-market. It is believed, that fat girls mostly lack proficiency in their sexual art and skills. The complexion of the prostitutes varies. Some girls are with extremely fare complexion, some are whitish but they have very bright eyes, girls with blue-eyes are also not missing here. But some girls are there who look really ugly. For this last category, the proficiency in the sexual art and skill is the only weapon to fight against all lacks and survive in the competition of the brothel world.⁶⁷ Seventy percent (70%) of the girls in this industry have a tremendous tendency of lying. That is why it is popularly said, in English, 'prostitutes are born liars.' Prostitutes are not habituated with lying among themselves with each other but they do not like to be exposed to the outsiders so soon and to do so, often they hide truth and put falls information/stories to the latter.

It cannot be denied that over curiosity of some people to know about their lives become one of the main reasons to generate complexities among their mind-setup. Some girls possess mental grudges towards the conventional society and therefore, whenever they get the chance to make the people fool, they do not restrain themselves do so by hiding the truth/telling lie. Due to be cheated a number of times in their lives they mostly fail to possess a faithful attitude towards the people of conventional society from where once they had been fallen. The so called *bhadra-samaj* are nothing but hypocrites in their eyes and this attitude might have caused their aggressive attitude with full of negativity towards the writer, journalist, social-workers etc. it is not much difficult to interact with the young girls but the aged prostitutes (Bengali and non-Bengali) are not easy to be accessed in this regard. According to them this base-less interaction is nothing more than waste of time. Besides that, they are always afraid of police, *bariwallah*, hoodlums etc., if through this kind of interaction, anything by-chance leak-out then they might face tremendous problems and tortures by the inmates of the brothel. The mental scare and tremendous lack of faith on general people become the main hindrance to their natural expressions and they retreat from being exposed, through insulting or avoiding people who approach them.⁶⁸ My interview with Lakshmi also reveals this aspect of the sex-workers, they generally do not tend to believe or trust anybody so easily. Furthermore, it was also observed that they have a fear about the outside world and reluctant in

⁶⁷ Debrani Kar, *Kolkatar Nagamati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995, (1401, *Maagh*). p.34-35

⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p.39

coming out in fear that they might be sold off. She said, "you people are scared of this brothel world, but, we too are scared of the world where you live. If I come along with you, will you sold me off....?"⁶⁹

'As the night goes up, the houses in the red-light areas also prepare themselves for the business. The Oriya pundits come to these areas during the evening for better business and in hope of their earnings. The sex-workers put all their efforts according their financial strata to make the atmosphere of their houses with fragrance of flower. And after this, they start waiting at their gate for customer. Even in the chilling night of winter or on a rainy occasion, many of these helpless women have to stay long for their customer. At times, the customer comes on their own to the sex-workers' room. As the night grows up, and the usual busy nature of the city start getting faded away, the sex-business in Sonagachhi, Harkata Goli, and Watgunje begins in its full fledged form at that time. Amidst darkness, the babus wearing *dhuti panjabi* or shirt-pant or at least wearing a *lungi*, start bargaining, especially for rates and select their partners for one-night stand. The sex-workers also get busy in this dealing of fixing the rate for entertaining customers. Even though the sex-workers expect to serve young men, but they can not refuse old men to be entertained. Whosoever comes, they have to be provided with service. Along with the babu-bibi, the local pan-vendor, the liquor seller and also the florist gets busy in this trade. After this first phase of this hectic dealing, the sex-workers start showing their skills of the sex business to the babus on the bed. Usually, a sex-worker has to satisfy at least four to six men in one night. The night passes as per its schedule. Amidst the mixed smell of puke, liquor and rotten flowers, the environment of the sex-worker's houses change dramatically over the night and in between in that filthy atmosphere, the sex-workers have to take knap to get relieved of their tiredness. On the other hand, the babus with their reddened eyes, dressed spotted with spittle of chewed betel and untidy hairs, return towards their homes. The preparation of another day starts with the beginning of a new dawn.⁷⁰

(b) Dress and Make-up:

The high-class prostitutes used to spend huge money on clothing, jewelry and cosmetics. The *baijis* used to wear splendid benaras silk saree fabricated with gold thread and gold ornaments on every possible part of the body. The dancing girls used to wear fine clothes which exhibited those parts of the body more clearly what they were intended to hide from clients' lustful sights. The modern prostitutes were very much fascinated by the fashion led by the educated girl in the society. This used to arise difficulties to distinguish a modern courtesan from high-class respectable girls just

⁶⁹ My observation based on the interview with Lakshmi. Lakshmi Das, Premchand Boral Street, Harkata red-light area, 73 No, House – Ground Floor. Approx Age – 45, Category –Independent Prostitute, Education – Illiterate.

⁷⁰ Debrani Kar, *Kolkatar Nagarnati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995, (1401, *Maagh*). p.42-43

from their external outlook. These women were not that much inclined to advertise their original identities. They were the aristocrats among the prostitutes. The bariwalli generally used to supply the prostitutes with the articles of dress on credit and through this means they could easily trap a woman in debt. The *bariwallis* sometimes used to lend their ornaments to the inmates to increase their attractiveness.



গহরজান

Gauharjaan

(Source: Beshya Sangeet – Baiji Sangeet)

The low class prostitutes mostly used rolled-gold ornaments because to afford gold jewelry was beyond their capacity. Some prostitutes used these artificial jewellerys just as safety against murderer though had possessed precious ornaments.⁷¹

There is also examples of those baijees, who themselves were big style icons. In those case women and girls of the conventional society used to get inspired with their style and largely imitated them. For gorgeous dress and make-up the famous baijee of early twentieth century, Gauharjaan, must be mentioned here. Her aristocracy, asthetic sense, make-up, jewellery everything was exclusively gorgeous that was the reflection of her taste and culture. She not only drew the attention among baiji community but also women belong to conventional family were got highly influenced by her style and choice during this time. Women of the respectable society used to order, dress, jewellery following the designs and style maintained by Gauharjaan. During the early twentieth century, the black and white and colour post card size photo of Gauharjaan was hugely sold in the market at one anna and two anna price respectively.⁷²

In today's world, the situation has remained almost same. The living condition, dress-up, make-up etc. all vary according to the class-structure of the prostitutes. The high-class of prostitutes can

⁷¹ S. N. Mukherjee, 'Prostitution in India', DasGupta & Co, Calcutta, 1936. p.253-254

⁷² Somnath Chakraborty, *Kolkatar Baiji Bilash*, Bookland Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1991. p.85-86

maintain themselves lavishly as they enjoy a sound economic condition. Let us take up the case of Rupa. According to her, during Puja time she earns eight to ten thousand rupees on a day (Rs.8, 000 to Rs.10, 000) but she needs to spend on herself for preparation before Puja. She has to buy fashionable dresses, cosmetics, visit parlour for hair cutting, facial, bleach etc.⁷³ 'Neelkamal', situated in Abinash Kabiraj Street of Sonagacchi area is a world-famous brothel; and it has a specialty of its own.



সোনগাছির সেই পৃথিবী বিখ্যাত বাড়ি 'নীলকমল'.

The world Famous building of Sonagachi – *Neelkamal*

(Source: Kolkatar Nagarnati)

'Neelkamal' has women coming from different linguistic zones. But very few are from Bengal. It is a five-storied building, has about 35-40 rooms, each well furnished and tastefully decorated. Each room is occupied by a single girl; there no sharing or shift system. Depending on the type of room, its rent varies between Rs.150 and Rs.500. None of these girls come down to the streets to catch clients. The middlemen do that job. These women are decent and polished in their demeanor, keep them fit and well-groomed. Most of them are free from diseases and select their clients with care and caution.⁷⁴ Prostitutes are generally seen to solicit standing in front of brothel by the side of road/by the side of the street.

⁷³ Shyamoli Bandyopadhyay, 'Pujoi Oder Rojgaar Dwigoon Ho', Sanbaad Protidin, Saturday, 9th October, 2004.

⁷⁴ Debrani Kar, *Kolkatar Nagarnati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995, (1401, *Maagh*). p.56-57



Prostitutes waiting for their clients at Sonagachhi in Calcutta. A Telegraph file picture

The Telegraph, 8th July, 1996

Prostitutes waiting for their clients at Sonagachhi in Calcutta

They generally take heavy make-up to look charming and attractive even in the dark shade. Most often prostitutes are seen to wait for clients till late night. The number of clients that they entertain varies day to day. Sometimes, even they do not find a single client. Though, with the advent of the darkness prostitutes begin soliciting but in some areas it has also been noticed that during day time, mainly at noon they stand in front of their house to get customers. According to my observations, prostitutes generally do not expose them too much while they solicit on the road. But, the nature of displaying themselves also varies from area to area (red-light area), e.g. prostitutes in the Sonagachhi (Nilmoni Mitra Street and other) are keen to put gaudy make-up and expose themselves.

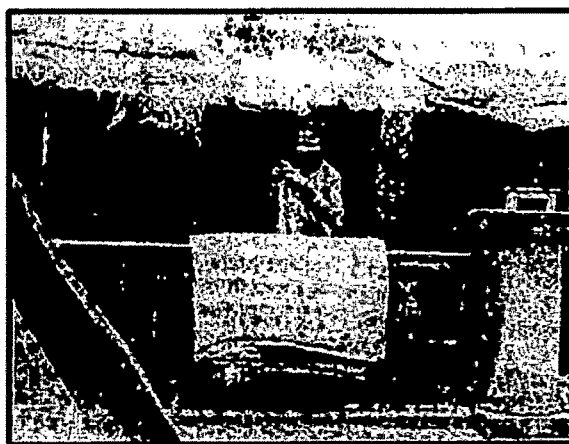


কাস্টমারের অপেক্ষায়! সোনাগাছিতে।

A prostitute waiting for her customer in Sonagachi

(Source: Jaunapallir Chalchitra)

But on the other hand, prostitutes in the Kalighat, Chetla and Bowbazar area are not seen to expose themselves too much and put descent make-up generally. Few of the girls of the in red-light area resembles with the house-wives. This class of prostitutes normally lives their life like wives and stays together with their fixed babus.



দিনের বেলায় সামান্য আবরণে লজ্জা নিদারণ

Covering herself with bare minimum clothes during the day time

(Source: Debrani Kar, Kolkatar Nagarnati)

In the red-light areas, the girls are mostly seen in less clothes during the noontime and in this case the scenario is just opposite for the housewives. Some wear only a petticoat and a blouse, some uses the same petticoat and tie it up right above their breast, and some uses only a 'nightie'. Usually, behind this tendency of their dress-up, a kind of depression works. Since everyday right from the evening until mid-night, they have to be in make-up, this is why they have a lackadaisical approach towards dress-up. Because of the tiredness and fatigue, they are so much depressed that it overshadows the normal shyness. Many of them do not hesitate to say, 'for what we will have shame, leaving behind all these things, we have come here.' However, apart from the mental bitterness, poverty also acts as a main reason behind their use of less clothes or attire.⁷⁵

The depressive character of prostitute and their apathy towards dress-up for themselves is also very much explicit in the statement of Lakshmi when she says, '*amar anek saari aachhe, kintu kichui pori naa. Kono kichui Bhalo lage na. Shudhui jwala.*' *Ekotha bole se booker dike haath dekhai which reflects her inside burden.*) I have lots of sarees, but I do not wear them. Nothing in this world attracts me, I find no interest in them, I have loads of pain – here.' She points towards her heart.⁷⁶

In Nabeen Chandra Baral Street there are no women working as *adhiya* or *chhukri*. The call girls here directly take rooms from the owners. The business girls here have to abide by some rules. The call girls here are not allowed to stand at the door wearing Salwar Kurtas on with petticoats tied over their breast. The customers here are from well-to-do backgrounds.⁷⁷

(c) Routine of Life:

The routine followed by prostitutes in their lifestyle was almost same throughout the year. They remained awake at night and went to sleep in daytime just in contrast to the conventional world life. With the approach of the evening prostitutes used to start finishing-up their make-up and dress. At nights, some prostitutes use to solicit standing on roadside or on verandah or sitting on the window for securing clients. But the high-class prostitutes never solicited openly. In this regard, they were mainly dependent on pimp, who used to bring clients to them. The poor women resorted to the streets. Some of them entertained succession of customers every night. With the advancement of night, the brothel area usually turned into a 'veritable' hell. In some room, the love song was going on, from another room, the sound or *ghoongroo* (the sound of bell) was coming, where a girl was dancing with *ghoongroo* tied round her anklets to the music of cheap *Harmonium* or *Saranggi* (a kind of Indian string instrument). With the rough voice, the drunken lover tried to follow prostitute and

⁷⁵ Ibid. p.40

⁷⁶ My observation based on the interview with Lakshmi. Lakshmi Das, Harkata Lane of Premchand Boral Street – 73 No, House – Ground Floor. Approx Age – 45, Category – F1, Independent Prostitute, Education – Illiterate.

⁷⁷ *Jaunapallir Chalchitra* (A Pen Picture of Brothels/Red-light areas), Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2001. p.60

noise created by visitors and girls being mad with liquor picturize the brothel world at night in Calcutta. The prostitutes used to be generally the late riser in the morning and had their bath in the morning. In Calcutta, many prostitutes used to go to the Ganges for having bath in the morning with a belief that the water of the Ganges could have washed their sins. But there used to be another motive behind it which was to secure clients.⁷⁸ In this context, the case of Jashodabala Dasi is very much relevant. Mrinal Kanti Dutta gives the description of the incident in his own word:

When I was about eight, the next room was occupied by one Jashodabala Dasi. Fair-complexioned and pretty Jashoda aunty used to wake up very early and go to the Kalighat temple with grains to feed the pigeons in the temple-ground. After the feeding, she would bathe in the Ganges, give alms to the beggars by way of rice and coins and come back. What surprised me was that even after the dip in the river Ganges, she would bathe again at home, scrubbing herself with soap and shampooing her hair. Then she would sit for her daily worship. ...When asked, she said that the muddy Ganges water spoilt her hair. So, she was conscious that the drain-like narrow and dirty tributary of river Ganges that flows by Kalighat was enough to spoil her looks. Then why bathe in the river? I asked. She explained that after the nights spent in sinful activities, she needed the purifying dip in the holy river.⁷⁹

In most of the brothel, old prostitutes generally used to cook food⁸⁰

The scenario with regard to this routine life has remained almost unchanged over the twentieth century. Though, the girls of the present days are not seen to go to the Ganges for having bath in the early morning but their day starts with having bath first and then they worship god which constitute the most essential part of the routine life of prostitutes. After this work is over, they start making arrangement for cooking and those who have children they look after them. Some girls take rest during the noon.⁸¹

(d). Amusements:

The prostitutes generally, have very little time for amusements. In the early twentieth century, they usually spent their leisure time in gossiping, in playing cards, *ludo*, *Golakdham* and some of them used to like have garden parties for which they generally persuaded their lovers to arrange, if possible.⁸² In the present day red-light areas also amusement of prostitutes are more or less same. Their mediums of spending leisure time comprise of playing card, *ludo* (*the game of snake and ladder*), and watching films in their free time. Watching movies is the most popular form of entertainment in some area, e.g in Khidirpur Doighata red-light area, Kalighat red-light area. Youngsters play cricket, marble balls, football, badminton, top etc. In some areas, sex-workers

⁷⁸ S. N. Mukherjee, 'Prostitution in India', DasGupta & Co, Calcutta, 1936. p.255-256

⁷⁹ Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansaiya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005. p.73

⁸⁰ S. N. Mukherjee, 'Prostitution in India', DasGupta & Co, Calcutta, 1936. p.257

⁸¹ Debrani Kar, *Kolkatar Nagarnati*, , Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995, (1401, *Maagh*). p.41-42

⁸² S. N. Mukherjee, *Prostitution in India*, DasGupta & Co, Calcutta, 1936. p.257

spend their leisure time by playing chess. The girls in the Gouri Shankar lane, Sonagachhi red-light area prefer to see Hindi films during their time of work or leisure. *Jatra* or theatre is not very popular among them. Almost all the houses have television. Some watch blue films in television in the night. Besides, during the festivals they rent video and see good films. The girls here mostly play cards and ludo. They play games like cricket, carom, football, badminton also. For children there are painting competitions as well as games of chess, breaking earthen pots, 'go as you like' and ball game competitions are organized. In Abinash Kabiraji Street of Sonagachhi, too, almost all the sex workers have television in their rooms now days. A lot of the customers see movies of their choices in the rooms of the sex workers by lending video. Some also see blue films in secret. Because, they might get caught if the police comes to know about it. There is in vogue among the sex workers of playing chess, ludo and cards. Children of the sex workers play games like cricket, football, Badminton etc.⁸³

(e) Age:

A girl between the age of 16 and 25 was in great demand in the early twentieth century sex-market. Due to the high demand of the girls of this age, the brothel owners also took interest to bring girls of this age to their brothels. There were also not dearths of girls of minor age in the brothels. Most of these girls were daughters of the prostitutes. Some girls were procured, stolen or their recruitments were done by their home. The minor prostitutes practiced their trade in those brothels mostly aged between 12 to 13 years. It was very much difficult to ascertain their correct ages as they used to be coached by their mothers or *bariwalli* to add 5 or 6 years more to their ages if it was necessary. Despite of legal measures executed to penalize brothel keepers, they kept minor girls in their houses. But, any legal measures executed in the early twentieth century almost failed to stop the flow of minor girls. The number of homes where such girls could be sent was too few to give shelter to those who were rescued. In the case of those minor girls looked older than their age were often taken before a Magistrate to make an affidavit mentioning that they desired to live the life of a prostitute.⁸⁴

The actual age for retirement of girls of this line is forty-five. They have to make whatever savings they can by then. After this they still have their bodies, their minds, even the strength to work but there are no more customers. As a result, no other way remains other than waiting for a customer for daily needs, giving the rent of the rooms and so on.⁸⁵ The main problems in the lives of women

⁸³ *Jaunapallir Chalchitra* (A Pen Picture of Brothels/Red-light areas), Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2001. p.68,70,74,84, 90,91,

⁸⁴ S. N. Mukherjee, *Prostitution in India*, DasGupta & Co, Calcutta, 1936. p.134

⁸⁵ Shrikarna, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003. p.83

in this industry began after 35 years. After spending more than 20 years in prostitution.⁸⁶ As youth and charm are the main capitals of a girl to survive in the sex-industry. Therefore, they have always a tendency of hiding their actual age and pretend to be young because with the growing age, a prostitute starts losing business. Clients always prefer to be entertained by young girls. The tenure of this profession is extremely short compared to that of other profession. Girls at the age of 14 to 15 initiate into this profession and from 30 onwards they start losing their grip and find it tough to survive in the sex market.⁸⁷ An aged prostitute, Lakshmi, nowadays is not getting customer regularly. In a bitter smile, along with the smoke of her biri, she said, '*Pai to 30 taka. Bojhen to, maal thobra hoye gele rate kome jaail!*'. ('I hardly get Rs.30. You know it, when you lose shape, your rate also decreases.')⁸⁸

Presently, the average age of the women of Kalighat red-light area, so goes, 25 percent between the age of 18 and 20 years 50 percent between 25 and 30 and 25 percent between 30 and 50 years (approximately). Approximately the average age of men in Rani Rasmoni Bazar area is between 18 and 60; and the age of women is in between 20 and 50. In Sonagachhi red-light area, the age limit of Chhukri class of sex workers is between 18/20 to 25/30 years. Those who are young and good looking and somewhat attractive fall in this category. Some sex workers belonging to third and fourth class are staying there by giving rent. But they have chhukri and adhiya customs also. The age limit of sex workers of this class is 20 to 30 years but still in this class there are sex workers of 30 to 50 years old. Presently there are 409 sex workers only in Avinash Kabiraj Street of Sonagachhi. This number keeps on getting up and down. Majority of the sex workers here are aged between 20 to 30 years. Malkins are a bit older. They are 35 to 70 years old. In Gouri Shankar lane of Sonagachhi, the age of sex-workers is more or less in between 20 to 45 years. The average age of the women residing in the Chetta red-light area is between twenty-two and fifty-five. Most of the flying sex-workers, who ply their trade in the Ultadanga area, are illiterate, abandoned by their husbands, husbands married again etc. They have 2-3 children. There is extreme poverty in their houses.⁸⁹ According to Debrani Kar, about 40% of the girls in Munshignj, Watgunj of Khidirpur comprise of young Nepali Girls. Five girls out of ten are minors.⁹⁰ The girls of various ages can be found out in other red-light areas.

⁸⁶ Societal Violence on Women and Children in Prostitution: A report by the National Commission for Women, 1995-96, National Commission For Women, Government of India, New Delhi. p.17

⁸⁷ Debrani Kar, *Kolkatar Nagarnati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995, (1401, *Maagh*). p.40

⁸⁸ Gautam Gupta, *Sansar Simante: Mahila Jaunakarmider Thake Ghar-Sansaar, Aache Swamir Matoi Kacher Manush. Se ki Janmo Janmantarer Bandhan?* Ananda Bazar Patrika, 28th August, 2004

⁸⁹ *Jaunapallir Chalchitra* (A Pen Picture of Brothels/Red-light areas), Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2001. p.64, 97, 79, 83-84, 89, 70, 98

⁹⁰ Debrani Kar, *Kolkatar Nagarnati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995, (1401, *Maagh*). p.60-61

(f) Rate:

The commercialized sex-workers are the capitalist product of British colonialism. Throughout the twentieth century and with the rise of globalization, gradually it has taken the form/shape of an industry. But, unlike in any other industry, the regulation of price is totally absent in the sex-industry; hence they do not have a fixed wages for their work. It varies according to the other variables/determinants that comprise age, class-structure, appearance etc. Demand of the clients is mainly regulated by these determinants. A British official record provides the information in this regard. It states:

The crisis for prostitution depends upon the class to which the prostitute belongs and varies from two annas to Rs.15 – Rs.20 per visit. To those who do not accept a double moral standard for men and women, who let moral principle and not expediency decide their attitude to the problem, and who fill the wrong done to a helpless child or women as keenly as that done to mother or sister of their, it seems wicked that there should be hundreds of Indian women in Calcutta who sell their virtue for an *anna* or two; and for that has to do whatever clients, often the worse for drink may wish. On the hand, the trade is associated with apartments beautifully furnished, fitted with electric lights and fans where payments has to be on a high scale. As with every marketable commodity, it is the demand that regulates the supply.⁹¹

There are four categories of prostitutes/sex-workers in the red-light areas. 'A' category girls, whose rate per customer, per shot is above hundred rupees. Those charging something between fifty-one rupees to hundred rupees are in the 'B' category. Those, whose rates are between thirty-one to fifty rupees per turn, are in the 'C' category. And the girls, who charge rupees twenty to thirty, belong to the 'D' category. Girls belong to the 'D' category are mostly found in the villages. It is needless to say that the rates depend on the age, figure and beauty of the girls. Working in the flesh trade for some time, these girls can fix their own rates. It is a common thing that an 'A' class woman comes down to 'C' category on losing physical charm with age.⁹²

In Doighata in Khidirpur red-light area, extremely intolerable poverty has been the main reason that drove the women to this place. Their rates vary between twenty rupees and two hundred rupees. Each worker faces four to five customers a day. In red-light area of Chetla, per day an average of fifty customers comes to the women of this area. Depending on the customer, they charge thirty rupees per 'shot' or 100 rupees per hour, and if a customer wants to stay over at night then the charge is Rupees 250 for the service. In the Tollygunje red-light area, in most of the cases misguidance and poverty are the major factors driving girls into this profession. The daily income of the women of this area varies between rupees 50 and rupees 500. In Lakharmath, the owners of the

⁹¹ *Prostitution(s) among Indians in Calcutta' : Conditions of Brothels in Bengal* : File p.14 B – 3 of 1917, progs. 14 – 19, July 1918. [Political Dept: Police Branch], Article page 69

⁹² Mrinalkanti, Dutt, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005, p.119

building belong to the well to do class. These well off group of people had directly let the houses to the sex workers. Those who had initially taken the houses have now become aged. All of them have now partitioned the rooms, in one half them they stays and the other half is given out to the young sex workers who have come later on. Through this process they earn even 1000/- to 1500/- per month. The first class sex-workers residing in Sonagachhi red-light area take Rs. 100/150/200 per shot from their customers. Their rate is 150-250 rupees per hour and 500 to 2000-3000 rupees per night. The Chhukri class of sex-workers takes 50 to 100 rupees per shot from their customers. They take Rs.100 to 150 per hour and if the customers stay through the night, they take 300 to 500 rupees from them. A lot of girls come from the suburbs in the name of work; they do their customers in Sonagachhi in the day time and get back home before night. They have to give a share of their income per customer to the landlords. These girls take Rs.30/40/50 to 70/80 per shot, Rs.50 to Rs.70 per hour and from Rs.100 to 200/250 per night from their customers. They take 4 to 5/6 customers per day. The sex workers of the Abinash Kabiraji Street of Sonagachhi red-light area get 4-5 customers per day. Ten years ago, the sex workers here used to take 25-50 rupees per shot, now they take 70/80 to 120/130 rupees. They take 350 to 400/500 rupees per hour and 500 to 1500/2500/3000 rupees per night. In the Gouri Shankar Lane, of Sonagachhi, on an average 3 to 4 customers come to one girl daily. Someday 7-8 customers might come. Someday the number of customers might be 1-2, someday not even that. The girls belonging to 'A' category take more than Rs.100 per shot. That number might go up to 120/150 or up to 300 rupees. The girls of this category take minimum of 600 rupees per hour; this rate can go up to 1000 rupees. They take 1500/2000 to even 5000 rupees per night. Most of them dance with Hindi film songs. The girls belonging to 'B' category take 50 to 100 per shot, 150 to 200/250 per hour and 300 to 400 rupees per night. The girls of 'C' category take 25/30/40/50 rupees per shot, 80 to 100 rupees per hour. They hardly get customers for whole night. For that, the 'C' category girls often have to take hourly basis customers even in the nights. In Masjid Bari Street of Sonagachhi, those who are known as Agrawali came from the various places of Uttarpradesh and Rajasthan. They used to roam and sing like gypsies. But after the records came into existence, their income as well as their popularity began to fall down. They started coming to prostitution for income and became known as Agrabali. Besides the girls who come from Bongaon and Murshidabad hoping to get a job due to familial unrest or for poverty or the girls who come in this profession willingly, according to the market of beauty they earn from 50 to 10000 per customer. Ultadanga is the centre for jobless girls to search and find work. These girls work as helpers to the masons in the construction projects. This is their profession. But these male workers get attracted to them. They use these girls to fulfill their physical desires. They stop giving the girl any work if she refuses, they do not even pay for her previous work. In this way the girls are forced to have sex with them in order to survive, unwillingly. The girls are not given any

extra money for this. Sex work is seen as a part of the work of a supplier. In some cases, the workers give them food or buy them something. In this way, the girls get associated with sex work. A girl has to become a sex worker though she went to work as a supplier. Some girls are seen to have turned against this. According to them, they have to work from 9am to 5pm as a supplier. In between, they have to work as a sex worker once or twice every day. They get 60 rupees in exchange of all these per day. Rather than this if they do only sex work with the customers, in that case it is possible for them to earn 150-200 rupees. They can earn more money in less time that way.⁹³

(g) Addiction:

The socio-economic and the political factors are some of the major determinants which largely design the lifestyle of the society. Naturally, these determinants also play a major role to cast as well as regulate the lifestyle and the inner-character of the brothel world. Goondas, anti-socials, *dalals*, procurers etc. constitute the integral part of the red-light areas, besides *mashi*, prostitutes themselves. The red-light areas are prone to every notorious act. Therefore, consumptions of drugs and addictives, gambling etc. are integral part of the brothel world. The sex-workers consumes drugs and alcohol to numb the pain and cope-up with their profession in one hand and on the other hand it is also capitalized as a source of earning to secure their future. The nexus that works in the red-light areas comprise of many others elements, belong to the conventional society (so called *bhadralok* society) out side the red-light areas e.g. political leaders, police, businessmen etc. But it cannot be ignored that hoodlums, anti-socials, *mashi*, *dalals* etc. who are the inmates of the red-light areas are intrinsically connected to this entire network which regulates the inner character of the brothel world. On one side, if one marginalized section is struggling to survive in the society against all odds and repulsion, on the other side another section (so called *bhadralok* people) is trying to make as much profit as possible at the cost of the vulnerable position of this ostracized community to make their life more luxurious. Despite being involved in such criminal activities people like police, political leader, businessmen etc. hailing from *bhadralok* society remain untouched of any kind of social stigma. But on the contrary, due to the involvement in such activities, the prostitutes and other inmates of the brothel world are not left out but get criminalized. It sharply reflects the existence of the double standards of morality in the society.

Gambling was a popular and common addiction, which use to go on in some of the brothels in early twentieth century. It is used to be played by visitors for money and the bariwallis made good profit out of this 'nefarious business'. Some of the prostitutes had an addiction for gambling and visiting

⁹³ *Jaunapallir Chalchitra* (A Pen Picture of Brothels/Red-light areas), Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2001. p.68-99

race-course with their 'paramours'.⁹⁴ A British official document of 1913 gives information regarding the strategy of survival of prostitutes in their old age. It is also informed that how prostitutes are involved in other activities outside the selling body with the motto of acquiring money or wealth as much as possible with in the short span of the profession of prostitution with the motto of securing future. Gambling and the sale of drink in brothel constituted two major sources for the income of prostitutes.

It is generally believed, and there is foundation for the belief, that many of the foreign women in the Indian market acquire, within a comparatively short period. Sufficient means to enable them to spend the rest of their short span of life in comfort. But it is not so generally known that gambling speculation and the sale of drink in brothel are contributing factors. Exactly how much drink profit is made cannot be computed, but the women have themselves admitted that it is a considerable source of income. The direct question was a few days ago, guardedly put to the keeper of one house who mournfully replied that the change of residence had cost her at least Rs 600 a month in drink profit alone. Some of those who have retired from "business" in Calcutta have been reported to do so with a capital expressed by five figures. While two at least left with an account to their credit running into six figures.⁹⁵

In this regard, another British official document of 1918 further states,

On the connection of commercialized Indian vice with the drink traffic much might be written. Drink is available in most of the brothels, or can be fetched, if desired. Drink stimulates immorality and usually plays a part in that promiscuous relation between man and woman that result in disease. It is believed that if illicit fails could be prevented in the brothels of Calcutta, the revenue of the Excise Department would severely affected. This can only be prevented by suppressing the brothel.⁹⁶

Manada looks at ramification of a prostitute's life and reflects at their inclination to various addictions like gambling, visiting the racecourse, consuming alcohol etc:

One day Kalidasi came to my house. Seeing her I could make out that she was in trouble. From her I gathered that her '*Bhatia*' *babu* had now become totally bankrupt after losing all his money in gambling on horseracing. His business was gone. Kalidasi was now tied to another Marwari *Babu*. But she had no money. She wanted to take five hundred rupees from me by pledging some gold ornaments.

Those who are in the habit of going to prostitutes have two main addictions – drinking and going to the races to gamble. It is heard that from horseracing, people earn thousands of rupees; but the money does not stay with them. The way they earn, the same way money vanishes. On the days of races there are great crowds at the brothels. Those who win want to spend the money and enjoy. And those who have lost all also go there to forget their sorrow.

⁹⁴ S. N. Mukherjee, *Prostitution in India*, DasGupta & Co, Calcutta, 1936. p.263

⁹⁵ Legislation to Suppress the importation of foreign women for prostitution and to punish the importers and other profiting thereby, file P.2A/22 of 1912, progs nos 18-31 Serial nos 3-16, February, 1913 [Political Dept.: Police Branch]

⁹⁶ *Prostitution(s) among Indians in Calcutta' : Conditions of Brothels in Bengal* : . File p.14 B – 3 of 1917, progs. 14 – 19, July 1918. [Political Dept: Police Branch], Article page 69

I had no money in my hand. So I took Kalidasi to a new woman named Ushabala. The ornaments she had brought were worth one thousand rupees approximately. So Ushabala agreed to give her five hundred rupees against the gold items.

Later I heard that Kalidasi had finished even that money on races and drinks. From her 'Bhatia' *Babu*, Kalidasi too got this habit of drinking and gambling. This was the beginning of her downfall. I also heard that she had a secret love affair with this Marwari youth even earlier. Hearing all this I lost all sympathy for her. She could never repay Ushabala's loan.⁹⁷

Addiction to drinks among prostitutes is manifest in one incident narrated by Mrinal Kanti Dutta. He says,

When I was ten or eleven, there was Bhola's mother whom we called Angur Masi living near our house. This Angur Masi used to get drunk for days on end. When she was sober she never touched liquor. But when her drinking spree started, she had no control. For ten to twelve days, she used to take native country liquor from the landlady. Then she came down to cheaper varieties of *cholai* or illicit liquor. She had the habit of sending her son Bhola to buy liquor, who soon became a professional supplier of drinks. He would charge his mother 2 rupees each time for bringing liquor (*maal*, as it is called in colloquial Bengali). Finally she would become totally broke and unable to pay the 'service charges' to her son, she would herself totter to the shanty selling illicit liquor, totally drunk. There she would get more drunk and fall unconscious the whole day. Finally after one more drink she would come back home at night.⁹⁸

In the red-light areas, fried fish, rice and grams dry fry etc. are used to have along with drinks.⁹⁹ The women of Tollygunje red-light area are addicted to anything starting from aigrette, alcohol, marijuana etc. other than heroine. Within the zone of Lakharmath, cheap pubs exist. This is the reason some of the sex workers are addicted to drinking and marijuana probably they want to get rid of their frustration and agony through this obsession. Some even have adapted the habit of smoking cigarettes and bidis/biris. In *Sonagachhi*, there are shops of indigenous liquor as well as unbound supply of unauthorized liquor in this area. There is no lack of supply of both indigenous and foreign liquors even in the midnight, if one gives money. Most of the sex workers are addicted to it. Except liquor all the other addictions such as *bhanga*, *ganja*, *paan* and *zarda*, *gutkha*, *biri*, cigarette are heavily used by the sex workers. Though, the area of *Avinash Kabiraji Street* in *Sonagachhi* does not have any licensed shop of liquor, *ganja* or *bhanga* but there is enough supply of all these addictives. Most of the sex workers in this area are addicted to various things. The sex workers are mostly addicted to cigarette, liquor, *paan*, *zarda* and *gutkha*. In the *Gouri Shankar Lane* of

⁹⁷ Manada Devi, *Sikshita Patitar Atmcharit*, (autobiography of an educated prostitute), Chirayat Prakashan, Kolkata, 2004. p.79

⁹⁸ Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005. p.81-82

⁹⁹ Shrikarna, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003. p.65-65; Mrinal Kanti Dutta described another incident, where a he has narrated the addiction alcohol in the sex-worker. 'Tapati loves to drink. For that reason I had bought a big bottle of Royal Stag whiskey from the liquor shop on my way to Tapati's place. I asked Tapati, do you have fried fish? No, dada I don't have any. The big smile on her face just after saying that made it clear to me that she has come to know that I had brought liquor for her. Quickly Tapati brought in a mug of water and glasses from the next room. She didn't have fried fish, so what? From the amidst scattered furniture of her room she brought a box from under her cot containing rice and grams dry fried.' Ibid.

Sonagachhi, shops of indigenous liquor are built here according to the demands of the customers in this red light area. There are secret shops of *Ganja* also. Different types of addictions can be observed among the sex workers. But mostly they are addicted to liquor, *panmasala*, *gutkha*, *talab* and cigarette. In *Masjid Bari Lane*, The girls take addictives like *Charas*, *ganja*, liquor everything to enjoy their lives.¹⁰⁰

According to Debrani Kar, 70% of the girls in the red-light area are addicted to alcohol. Many girls are seen to be drunken even during the day time. The alcoholic impact of consuming drinks might be effective as well helpful to them forget/overcome physical as well as mental pain for time being (sometimes they have to entertain 8/10 clients within a day). But, Debrani Kar claimed that the number of addicted girls was comparatively less in the red-light areas during 1995. The business of alcoholic drinks is a flourishing trade in Sonagachhi. Attached to almost all houses, there is a liquor-shop. The major liquor-supplier to Sonagachhi is one D.K.Saha. Drinks are bought from his shop and sold at all the houses through an outlet in the ground floor of each house. In case one purchases alcoholic drinks from outside the locality, one has to pay tips to this supplier. There is a common saying—in Sonagachhi, 'even the cork of a wine-bottle is traded'. It is proper to call the red light areas a huge store of illegal liquor and addictives. Very few girls, agents and *mashis* are free from the addiction of liquor here. It is easy to get liquor in all red light areas because of this heavy addiction towards liquor. A shop that sells cold drinks in the daytime, in the night that becomes a place for selling of tea and indigenous liquor. Open selling of heroine and hashish is not an abnormal scenario in the red light areas. Addictive business of crores of rupees is going on without any obstacle in the slums of the red light areas, which are situated, beside dock areas. O.C Mehta had to give his life because he protested against this. Unrestricted businesses of liquor and addictives have been going on in Sonagachhi and Harkata.¹⁰¹

In the red-light areas, there is a strong network between police, goondas, *mashi*, *dalal* and other inhabitants. The business of illicit liquor and other addictives are often been carried out with the help of political leaders and the organized network that works between police, goondas, *mashi*, *dalal* and other inmates. Therefore, the other vulnerable like clients, *babus*, prostitutes outside the network are often subjected to the exploitations. In this regard, the incident narrated by Mrinal Kanti Dutta throws immense glimpse on the nexus that works within the red-light areas which further regulates inner activities in the brothel world and indulge all kinds of criminal activities in these areas. He says:

¹⁰⁰ *Jaunapallir Chalchitra* (A Pen Picture of Brothels/Red-light areas), Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2001.p.71-91

¹⁰¹ Debrani Kar, *Kolkatar Nagamati*, , Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995, (1401, *Maagh*), p.41-84

It was probably the year 1993. I remember the day very well; it was 25th of December. On the Christmas evening, I sat over drinks with my friend Somnath in Utpala's room. Somnath was my childhood friend. That time I had been promoted to the post of supervisor of the project from a 'Male Peer Educator'. And my friend got a job in the Railways under the reserved quota for handicapped persons. We were into our fourth peg, when Pocha arrived. Somnath recognized him and whispered to me 'this is the guy who extorts money from visitors in this lane, is not he?' 'Yes' I said. But before I could continue, Pocha came up to Somnath and said, "See that day I did not know that you were uncle's friend, or I would not have bothered you. Please do not mind. What Somnath told me later was that the previous year during *Sheetala Puja*, Somnath had come to this area and visited one of the girls, Utpala and came out to enter the liquor shop, when he was accosted by this guy, Pocha. They had an argument. He demanded money as he was not a regular. 'Without even asking me he wrote down a receipt of 51 rupees, putting my name as Dada', continued Somnath. 'Though I knew it was meant to be a donation for the *Sheetala Puja*, I still asked— what donation? He got annoyed, and said, come to fuck and you Can not even read? I laughed and said, oh, to fuck, you need to be literate? Is that a rule in this locality? Now Pocha was a bit embarrassed and said, No it's for *Sheetala Puja*. Then I reminded him that from regulars they were not supposed to take more than a rupee; and that too, they were not supposed to force', Somnath carried on, 'I won't pay a single paisa, I said. Then he suddenly caught hold of my collar and shouted —won't you pay? He then asked his companion to call the police.' 'On seeing another man going out from the lane I asked, why did you spare him? Won't he pay? Still holding onto my collar Pocha replied—he is going out after a drink from the liquor shop.' 'I suddenly lost my temper and said in one breath, oh, if you have *maal* (=drink), its okay, but if you come to pour out *maal* (= material, meaning 'semen' here), you got to pay? What kind of system is this? After this, Pocha exploded, oh, you start lecturing now? And he gave me a few slaps and pushed me towards the mouth of the lane. After some altercations, Pocha and his hooligan friends snatched all the two-three hundred rupees I had, leaving me a bare 2.50 rupees to go home', Somnath ended.

It was surprising to me that at *Puja* times, local goons would not make collections from the customers at the liquor shops. From what I gathered from Pocha was that, in this area most of the liquor-shops are managed by local youths. Even though the shops are officially in the names of prostitutes or their *Babus*, the profits were actually shared by local boys, police and even small political leaders. So, the practice was not to extort money from regular customers during *Puja* festivals.

I learnt one more thing from Pocha—nowadays nobody comes to know the identity of the liquor-shop owner. If anyone is known to own an illicit liquor-shop, he would be arrested, beaten up or harassed by police. So, nobody would own up as the shopkeeper, but they work and manage the shops all the same, anonymously. Old employees or managers run these shops in place of the owners and nobody comes to know who the real owner is, who gives the shops on lease to the one who manages and collect shares as per agreement. Another remarkable thing is that, these managers do not directly take permission or pay bribe to the police or local political leaders to run the shops. They take loans from the local big brothers at exorbitant rates, like 120% per year or so. That too, the loan amount would not be small; it would be at least 40 to 50 thousand rupees, so that the interest alone earned by the local leaders and police would come to some 4000 to 5000 per month. In this roundabout manner, the police and the small-time political leaders become the owners of these illegal shops. And petty goons like Pocha are afraid to take money from all the customers.¹⁰²

¹⁰² Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005. p.105-108; Before 'Sonagachi project' started, this kind of blackmailing was the order of the day. The intricacies of that all

A newsreport of 1998 claimed that the sale of heroine in the open market was restricted to certain extent but the administration failed to curb the rising business of heroine in the Sonagachhi red-light area. The number of heroine addicted women was on rise in this area. During this year, the number of heroine addicted women was 12 to 13 in Sonagachhi and neighbouring areas. The poor sex-workers were so vulnerable to these addictions that many of them did not even hesitate to sell minimum possession to meet the cost heroine. Let's take up the case of 22 years old Shushila Gupta. Sushila had a meager income but she was trapped in the addiction of heroine such a way she had to sell her sweater, which she used to wear daily, at the cost of Rs.100 just to meet the expenses of heroine. Sushila's mother, Renu Gupta, was almost about to be bankrupt in order to provide Sushila, money continuously to meet the cost of her addiction. But later on, she was admitted to the mother Teresa's home, 'Shantidaan'. Though she recovered little bit being at home but with her return to the profession of prostitution in the red-light areas she got again trapped into the addiction of heroine.¹⁰³

The reason behind the prostitutes' addiction to drugs and alcohol is mainly because of their segregation from the society, the repeated physical and mental tortures, betrayals by their babu and clients and others, day-to-day hazards in their daily life, and setbacks from their family members despite their all out effort to help them. These all leads them to mental depression. To get out of this depression and to obtain mental relief, they slowly get addicted to alcohol and drugs.

Blind faith in people often brings misfortune in sex-workers' lives. Like independent tribal women they give themselves wholeheartedly to their lovers. Because of this they often lose all they have. Many times, out of frustration and disappointment they commit suicide. Those who succeed and die are freed from a life of pain. Those who live have to go through constant suffering – they work as servants or beg on the streets.¹⁰⁴

The life story of Lakshmi Masi shows this sadest part of the lives of prostitutes.

cannot be written in such a small place. Local big brothers, landladies, pimps, police, shop-keepers—all had one target for exploitation—the sex-worker. There were a few exceptions. With the help of those only, 'Sonagachhi Project' or 'Durbar' started its journey. And with the co operation of these people it is progressing towards its goal. Ibid. p.109; [Dada= Elder brother, local goon]

¹⁰³ Staff Reporter, *Sonagachhite Barche Heroiner Nesha*, Protidin, Calcutta, 14th February, 1998. The psychiatrist may claim that to get out of her mental stress, again and again Sushila was addicted to drugs. But the NGOs, who are trying their level best to provide these girl with social security and respect, those NGOs couldn't stop themselves from stating the entry of drugs as a 'bigger problem'. On the one hand these organizations are working non-stop to protect the girls from AIDS and on the other hand they are concerned with the increasing virulence of heroine. Few girls of the red-light area has stepped forward to resolve this problem. They are already working on the AIDS campaign with the support of the NGOs, now (1998) they have started (1998) mass awareness program in Sonagachhi to stop use of drugs and with the help of the medical bank, and they played an important role in rescuing women from use of drugs) Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Shrikama, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003. p.40-41

Due to too much emotional involvement in the relationship with *babu*, the sex-workers sometimes can not tolerate the depression if they get certain emotional setback from their *babus*. In this regard Sri Karno in his book, '*Babuder Andarmahal Theke*' has mentioned how *Jagamama's* (*babu's*) libertine character brought a tremendous emotional setback to *Lakshmi Mashi* (*bibi*). And out of sheer depression at one night she set herself on fire by pouring Kerosene oil on her body and attempted to commit suicide. But unfortunately, though she survived but her face was totally burnt and came to be known as *Mukhpuri* (with burnt face) *Lakshimashi*. So she had no choice but to retire from this trade as the only capital of the sex-trade, beauty was no more with her. But her *babu*, *Jagamama*, did not pay any attention to her (*Lakshimashi*) and easily moved to another sex-worker where he became again her (new sex-worker, *Manashidi*) *babu*. When Lakshmi went to her own house to live there, she was thrown out by her brother, who once was brought up and got settled in life at Lakshmi's earning. Her brother did not even hesitate to abuse her by calling '*rendi*'. Lakshmi masi's own house was also illegally captured by her brother. Shrikarna narrates the pathetic story of Lakshmi Masi:

... After coming out of the hospital she went to her own brother with a lot of hope; the brother whom she brought up was then a government-servant. But her only brother did not allow this sick person into his house. From the grilled balcony of the first floor of the house her brother and his wife shouted abuses and drove her out from the street.

Why she cannot live in her own house – she asked. Her gem of a brother replied, 'I know you paid for the land. You accumulated money for construction of the house—that too we know. But what I and my wife know is not evident in the papers of registration! There is no witness to prove that the house is yours', he smiled tauntingly. Before she could say anything, he used the trump card – 'If you try to tell people I will tell everybody that you are a whore.'

At last Lakshmasi realized that she had lost her best asset for the profession, her looks. Now to leave this line and settle down in her own house at the fag end of the life was also out of question. Taking advantage of her ignorance, her own brother had cheated her. From that day, out of shame she left our locality and went away elsewhere to work as a servant. Since that day, neither did she come to our area, nor did Jaga mama show any interest. Now, that Jaga is the *babu* of *Manasi-di*.¹⁰⁵

In order to meet the requirement of the demand of drugs, women are dependent upon the sex-work to meet their requirement of drugs and eventually, they are trapped to the supplier of these drugs. Though very small in number, this group needs special attention and viewpoint for this problem, who are mainly centered in Khozhikode and some parts of Northern Kerala (Paulson JWP) and in some of the north eastern states. In order to get them out of this addiction, they should be sent to de-

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. p.37-38

addiction centers. However, application of rigorous narcotics act and lodging them in a 'cramped prison cell' further criminalizes these women.¹⁰⁶

4.10. Superstitious:

The prostitutes have faith in various superstitions. Hence they practice various magical performances. Most of the superstitions of these whores revolve around the 'face', 'hair', 'eyes', 'anchal or the end of the sari', 'the threshold' or 'the days of the week. Though these are the main items, the sources of these beliefs are either their body, or the availability of customers.¹⁰⁷

(I) Superstitions around the Body:

The chief asset of a sex-worker is no doubt her body, which is the main attraction for the customer. If the body is not in shape, nobody will visit a prostitute. So, the girls here have to be tip-top in health and fitness, and use loud make up to look attractive. Some girls even stop nursing their babies after 2/3 months to keep their breasts in good shape. Along with this they have to take good care of health; any sickness or disease would make them unfit for the profession.¹⁰⁸

(II) Superstitions relating to Customers:

Superstitions related to clients are that prostitutes do not refuse the first customer of the day. It is believed that the first client is always auspicious; if they (prostitutes) refuse him (client), their (prostitute's) whole day will go to waste. In this connection, Mrinal Kanti Dutta has related an incident of his life:

The woman called Sushila masi, who lived in our locality was no finicky about cleanliness, that people were afraid to visit her...Even we hesitated to enter her house and went only when needed. ... One evening I came from office, and was as usual brushing my teeth with black powder called *gurakhu*, I noticed Sushila masi going out, locking her gate after her regular worship and going to stand outside for the evening. .. Barely after 2-3 minutes I saw her coming in with a man in shirt and trousers and a *gamchha* (=cheap and thin handloom towel commonly used in Bengal) tied around his waist. She entered the room with the man and locked it from inside. I was stunned. She who does not allow anyone to pass her in fear of dirtying her self, who does not accept even a glass of water from anybody, does not allow anyone to enter her room is finally taking in a man from the burning *ghat*! The tell-tale *gamchha* around his waist was an evidence that the man was directly coming from the 'Burning Ghat' (*Smashan*= crematorium of the Hindus)... after some time, when Sushila masi opened her door, I could not suppress my wonder any more and asked the man why the towel around his waist? He candidly said – a neighbor whom we called uncle has died

¹⁰⁶ Societal Violence on Women and Children in Prostitution: A report by the National Commission for Women, 1995-96, National Commission For Women, Government of India, New Delhi. p.18

¹⁰⁷ Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005, p.88

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.* p.89

and we have come to burn his body to the *Smashan*. After hearing this, I caught hold of Sushila masi and asked, 'If we enter your room, you wipe and clean your room so many times, now what will you do after this man has gone?' Sushila masi laughed in embarrassment and mumbled—'See, customer is *Lakshmi* (Goddess, symbol of wealth). We cannot refuse the first customer of the day. The moment I went out and stood, he came. The first client is auspicious; if I refuse him my whole day will go to waste.' While still talking to me, she took out the pillow case, bed sheet etc from her room and brought them out into the veranda for washing.¹⁰⁹

We find some examples related to superstitions prevalent among prostitutes from B. Joardar's writing, where *Anima* (prostitute) says:

We take camphor on a betel leaf, place it on the door-sill and then finally burn it. This protects us from evil omen. Generally, we do it when we suffer from disease, or really face very hard times. Sometimes when we do not get enough clients we also do it. We believe that this performance has got some magical values and we are quite sure of it that this would spoil the evil spirit and obviously would fetch a good number of clients.

Another respondent *Minoti* says:

During the dull days we wash the door-sill with *Gangajal* (water from the holy river Ganges) and burn a piece of paper on the same place. We think that surely this would be of much help in finding customers. Even in case of illness we also do the same.

There is a general belief among the prostitutes that fixing a horse-shoe (used nail) on the head of the door is very auspicious which helps to bring prosperity. Sometimes cloves are kept by the side of the door with the belief that it would spoil the evil spirit and definitely bring more clients and prosperity.¹¹⁰

Still today it can be seen in the red-light areas of Doighat in Khidirpur that Charms and mantras are quite popular. At times of crises, when the customers are less they believe in wearing a pack of burnt 'pan' leaves, in order to get red of the situation and increasing their income.¹¹¹ In red-light areas, if *chukri* prostitutes (which is considered as the fourth category in the class structure and they lead a life no less than a bonded labour) do not get customers, ink is spread on their faces to get out of the ill omen.¹¹²

The superstitions are practiced by the prostitutes of West Bengal in connection to *face, hair, eyes, days of the week, cloth-end* or the *threshold* etc. In their daily lives, the same types of beliefs are noticed by all the women. But some slight differences are noticed according to areas they belong to.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid. p.88-89

¹¹⁰ B. Joardar, *Prostitution In Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter-India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. p.117-18

¹¹¹ *Jaunapallir Chalchitra* (A Pen Picture of Brothels/Red-light areas), Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2001.p.68

¹¹² Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005. p.86

III) The **threshold** of a house, usually demarcated by a long piece of wood or cement at the entrance is considered to be sacred—almost equivalent to the 'fate' or fortune of the occupier. So nobody is allowed to sit on the threshold. If by mistake some neighbor or friend sits on it, the tenant who stays there gets very annoyed and politely asks the person to move out. If the person does not take it seriously or makes fun and keeps sitting obstinately on someone's threshold, the occupant of the house may really get mad and start abusing. It means, the person may never earn any more and it leads to the fear of sitting idle at home forever. After the 'bad omen' is removed from the place, the threshold is beaten thrice with a broom, holy Ganga water is sprinkled and incense sticks are burnt to purify the place.

IV) If the hair or the **end of the sari** of another woman touches one, it is believed that the person who got 'touched' will fall sick; or her inflow of customers will get a blow. To ward off this evil touch, the hair or the *sari-pallu* (the end of the sari that hangs on the shoulder) of the culprit is to be touched three times to the ground. If by any chance someone shows one eye to another, possibly while wiping or rubbing one's eye inadvertently, it is said that the person who has seen 'one-eye' will have serious enmity or quarrel with someone. So then, the girl who has committed the mistake would try to somehow cut the ill-effect by shutting both eyes and showing or by putting her hands on both the eyes and cutting of the bad effect. In this regard one incident narrated by Mrinal Kanti Dutta is very much relevant:

It was tooth & nails in literal sense! The opponents facing each other were Lila and Sachi-di. The battlefield was the entrance to our lane—the spot where our girls stand in the evenings wooing customers. ... I somehow stopped them and asked them to tell me what the matter was. After moments of silence Sachi di started-'see, as it is, because of these girls, old hags like me do not get customers; last evening I went to the shrine of Barthakur and spoke to the priest. He exorcised me completely and told me to keep safe distance from people until I get a customer. Nobody should touch me with their hair or even with the end of their clothes. This bitch, she went who knows where, and came back and passed me touching me with the end of her pigtails.'

Suddenly she turned towards Lila and burst out again-'what is her problem? Who does she think she is? Made a little money, huh? Can not you walk slowly? I would have given you way! Do not think your youth will last forever.'

Now it was Lila's turn. Glaring at her angrily, she said, 'see *Makar-Ma*, as it is our lane is narrow, and you are standing at the entrance. Did I do anything on purpose? While passing you, my hair might have just brushed you—we are not enemies, are we?' ... In vain, I tried to explain to Sachi di that touching one's hair cannot do any harm to her health, nor can it in any way stop her customers from coming. To her, Guru's (priest) words were final. She became sentimental, tears welling up in her eyes, she muttered, 'you young men of today, what would you know about this? Really for the last two days, I have no visitors; I do not how to pay the rent. Landlady has already sent reminders.' Sachi di was like my mother, she has seen me growing up; during my mother's illness in my childhood, she nursed me

like her own child. It pained me to see her plight. I held her two hands and asked her not to worry as long as I was there. I then gave her a 500 rupee note and told her she could return it later. I was also moved to tears. Lila slowly went back to her room.¹¹³

V) If there is fall in customers, then it is taken for granted that somebody's evil eyes has affected her business. It might also mean that someone has purposefully cast a black magic spell on her. To ward it off, on Saturdays and Tuesdays the girls hang a talisman made of lemon and green chillies strung together on their door frame. Some go to the *Sheetala* temple to offer worship and bring holy water; some call the priest and get the place purified with chants of prayers and sprinkling of holy water. Afterwards, the door is closed; the girls sprinkle the water on their heads, face and breasts.

VI) If one girl starts getting too many customers, then too there is trouble. Others would think that she has done some **black-magic** and has taken away customers from others. So then, they would do some voodoo as antidote. They would cut off a small piece from her sari secretly to give it to the *Tantrik* to do some black magic to hold back her customers. So the practice among these girls here is to slightly burn, cut or scorch one corner of a sari three times before wearing it. They say that it makes it black-magic-proof. If anyone notices burnt coal or ash on someone's doorway as black magic done by an enemy, the practice is to urinate on the ash. This cuts off the ill effect.¹¹⁴

VII) Mrinal Kanti Dutta also writes about another incident which reflects superstition belief of prostitutes in various charms like **feeding of burnt rice to catch thieves** and how it make prostitutes loser. He narrates:

When I was ten or eleven, there was Bholā's mother whom we called Angur Masi living near our house. This Angur Masi** used to get drunk for days on end. When she was sober she never touched liquor. But when her drinking spree started, she had no control. For ten to twelve days, she used to take native country liquor from the landlady. Then she came down to cheaper varieties of *cholai* or illicit liquor. She had the habit of sending her son Bholā to buy liquor, who soon became a professional supplier of drinks. He would charge his mother

¹¹³ Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005, p.79-81, 90.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. p.90-91; * *Makar-Ma, Makar-Baba*, these words may be unfamiliar to the outside world. But amongst residents of red-light area, these endearing calls were not uncommon. In red-light areas, if two girls become good friends, they try to make it permanent. They go through some rituals-- like going to the river Ganges together on the auspicious day in the month of Poush in winter, to take a holy dip and take a vow to remain friends forever. Those who have money, even go to the Gangasagar, the mouth of the river on the Bay of Bengal for this ritual. They utter the words, 'you are my Makar and I am yours' (Makar is some kind of a sea or river-god with a fishlike face). Moreover on festival times these friends exchange gifts of new clothes to make the bond stronger. In this regard, Mrinal kanti Duttaa once reminisced in his writings—"Once I saw our Parul-masi breaking down in tears because that year she could not afford to buy new clothes for her Makar Meera and her two daughters. It was when Meera came to visit her during Durga Puja festival. The more Meera tries to soothe her saying, 'It does not matter dear; what if you cannot give every year. You give next year etc the more it made Parul Masi sob inconsolably. That day she in her terrible sorrow for not being able to give a gift to her loved ones, she spent the whole morning crying, and went to bed without food. The reason Lila and Sachi di were so close is that Sachi di's daughter Khuki who was in class eight was very fond of Lila. So, to establish that innocent friendship between two girls, they became Makars to each other. Sachi became her Makar Ma and Sachi's Babu (patron/ client) automatically became the Makar Baba." Ibid. p.80-81; ** *Masi*=aunty, matron.

2 rupees each time for bringing liquor (*maal*^{***}, as it is called in colloquial Bengali). Finally she would become totally broke and unable to pay the 'service charges'[^] to her son, she would herself totter to the shanty selling illicit liquor, totally drunk. There she would get more drunk and fall unconscious the whole day. Finally after one more drink she would come back home at night ... Bhola was very fond of flying kites, and he was an expert in the art. One day, it was the seventh day of his mother's drinking season and thanks to a customer from the ship, there was some money in her cupboard. Now unemployed Bhola already had the habit of pilfering from her mother's fund. Now for buying his kites and accessories, he needed extra money and Angur Masi's drinking spell gave him ample opportunity to steal. One the seventh drunken day, Bhola stole 500 rupees. While leaving the house he was caught by a friend named Rabi. Confused Bhola, gave 200 to his friend and asked him to keep quiet and left.

In spite of her drunken state, loss of money did not get unnoticed by Angur Masi. Since some money was still left, she did not suspect any thief from outside. In her list of suspects were the old maid-servant, her own son and an old customer Panchu who used to stay and eat with her.

Exactly on the ninth day, Bhola's mother scrubbed herself, washed her hair and came to senses. After thorough search, nothing was found. She brought a sorcerer. As per the peculiar practice of those days, he gave a handful of burnt raw rice. All three suspects have to take a mouthful of that dry hard rice and chew. If the rice melts and comes out like frothy toothpaste, the suspect is saved, if it dries up the throat and clogs the mouth, (presumably due to nervousness, lack of saliva) the person is proved to be the thief. Now Bhola who was already prepared for this test, had kept some salt in his mouth. The powdered rice came out like foam as soon as he chewed it. Angur Masi was triumphant as her son's honesty was proved. Same thing happened to the bloke, Panchu, who was ready with enough saliva stored in his mouth. Poor old maid, just arrived from the village was not aware of the tricks. She was too old and had tooth problem. She chewed and chewed, her throat got clogged and gums bled. Poor lady was amply thrashed and thrown out from her service by Angur Masi.

After two days Bhola's friend Rabi came back and got the news. In a sudden overwhelming bout of sympathy for the old lady, he told everything to Angur Masi and gave back the 200 he still had. Even though, Bhola got a good beating, the damage was already done.¹¹⁵

VIII) The context of coming 'out at the gate':

Once the house front is done, or the cleaning of the room, washing with holy water, lighting incense sticks and *puja* or worship are over, the girls quietly go out of their rooms with their heads down. This is the most crucial time of the day. If by chance anybody comes on the way and the passage is blocked, or if someone calls from behind, the 'going out' will be halted. This is considered to bad

¹¹⁵ Ibid. p.81-86; *** *Maal*= liquor; ^In the 'Red light areas' everything calls for 'service charges'. From rice to liquor, whatever one wants to get a supply of, one has to pay separate service charge to one's maid servant. If any time the maid servant is not available, and one has to request someone else, he/she should either pay the charge, or give a share of the item obtained. Suppose, one fixed *Babu* of a girl who does the marketing for her, happens to get something from the market for another girl in the next room, she has to either pay him or give a share of the curry she cooked. Similarly if a man, on request, brings *maal* for a neighbor, he can expect a friendly offer of one or two pegs. Otherwise, some other day, for this free service the neighbor girl may have to suffer a torrent of abuses. So, when this is the order, Bhola was also not an exception. Only being the son of Angur Masi, he could not ask for money for bringing tea or vegetables; but if he was asked to get liquor or a bottle of coke, he would not budge without money. Main thing is, 'you will eat, drink and have fun, what would I get?' This is the psychology prevailing here. So, even a son would take money from his own mother. But there are exceptions. Some women would, on principle, desist from using their children for bringing drinks or other narcotics. Ibid.p.82

omen for the girl and may spoil the business of the entire day. Once a girl goes out smoothly and takes the normal place in front of the lane, she does a series of small rituals for good luck. She spits three times on the exact spot where she stands everyday, then she stamps thrice with her feet back and forth on the spot, and then again spits on her own palm and breaks her knuckles noisily. Then touches the spot where she spat, her hand touching her forehead and throat in a sign of worship to God with folded hands (*Namaskar*), and stands straight, ready for the evening. Suppose the particular girl gets a good number of customers that night, it would automatically mean that the first person she saw on 'coming out' that evening, was 'good omen' for her. She would try her best to see the same face everyday on coming out. Again, similarly some neighbor or shopkeeper may turn out to be 'bad omen' or 'unlucky' for the girl if on a certain day she does not get good business. Some of them give more importance to the first customer of the day, who might bring them good luck or good customer flow. They treat the lucky 'first customer' with due importance and try to woo him again, even sometimes at a lower rate.

IX) The customer has come and gone. Even after he goes, there are certain rituals to be practiced. The bed is dusted with a broom, the threshold beaten thrice with the broom. This would ward off any possible evil eye. If the customer happens to be 'unlucky' then too this would cut off the bad effect.

X) Regarding superstitions relating to the **days of the week**, it can be mentioned first that no sex-worker would take out any money from her room on a Thursday. On this day they do not withdraw money from the bank, nor do they pay to any debtor or even to the landlady. They would not even lend money on this day. Thursday is the day of *Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth. On this day they do not fry anything or eat any fried food, as such food displeases *Lakshmi*. And if Mother *Lakshmi* is displeased it means poverty, it means loss of business.

XI) Let us discuss the superstitions relating to the **Landlord or Landlady**. If there is more inflow of customers, it means more commission for the landlady, and more sale of liquor. So the landlord or the landlady as the case may be, in his or her own interest is eager to ward off any evil eye on the house. So, it was the practice to hang a tortoise-shell or a used broom at the front door of the house. Some Hindu owners would bring holy water from a Kali temple (the water after washing the chopper or large knife used at the sacrificial altar), and sprinkle all around the house. Similarly, Muslim owners would bring flowers and rose water from their shrine on Thursdays and purify the house. Now, in modern time, the new addition is, to hang a string of lemon and chilly at the doorway.

XII) Among the prostitutes of *Ghatal*, there is a practice. If any girl becomes pregnant, she does not disclose the fact to anyone up to the fourth or fifth month in fear of 'evil eye'. Somebody might use black magic to spoil her baby. As the time of delivery nears, she goes and gets a talisman from some black magician and wears it for safe delivery. The sole fear is that someone might harm the baby or spoil the delivery.

XIII) In earlier days sexual activities were considered to be bad or dirty. The proof can be seen in the practice of treating the customer as 'untouchable' once he finished and went out of the room of a prostitute. Even in some places there is a custom that, if by chance a customer while going out touches someone, that person has to purify herself or himself by taking a bath immediately. They consider the client of a prostitute unholy. He would not be clean until he takes a bath.¹¹⁶

Reasons behind Superstitions:

To analyze the reason behind all these beliefs and superstitions, we elements of **Tradition, Illiteracy and Uncertainty** are important.

I) Traditions and Illiteracy:

Let us discuss the traditions first. Traditions constitute generally acceptable norms. People follow these practices blindly by seeing their mothers and grandmothers or those elders whom they have seen before. These kinds of superstitions are not peculiar to sex-workers alone. Among people of various other professions, such irrational practices are also prevalent. Shop-keepers and other small businessmen also fall prey to such superstitions. These beliefs and unquestioned practices are continuing from generations. If it is attempted to delve into their root causes, one of the reasons would be ignorance. Most of the sex-workers are illiterate. So they easily believe whatever the priests, *tantriks*, black-magicians or even landlords tell them. They do not look deep into such ideas to verify if they were true or not. Because of this blind faith they incur terrible losses. If it is calculated, it can be seen that about 10% to 15% of their incomes are eaten up by this priestly class. For example, daily ablution with mantra costs 11.50 rupees. Mantra with oil ritual costs 25 rupees. To cure stomach disorder by supernatural method costs anything between 51 to 100 rupees; for ritual *Yagnas*, anything between 100 and 2500 rupees. On top of this, for every festival or *Puja*, the gurus are to be pleased with material gifts. A guru's unhappy sigh may cause endless misery to the disciple.

¹¹⁶ Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005, p.89-94

II) The uncertainties in the lives of Prostitutes/Sex-workers:

There is always an uncertainty lies in the lives of these prostitutes/sex-workers. Since the number of fixed customers is very low here, there is a constant tension about 'tomorrow'. Whenever there is a dearth of clients, the worries about landlady's rent, food for the child etc haunt a common prostitute every single day. One aspect is certain in the life of a whore. She can manage the landlady for a day or two. She and her child can survive on salt and rice for a few days. But the 'Babu', has to be fed properly. He is the king, who demands his pocket money for drinks and the plate of rice with his favorite dish of delicacy on the right time. Getting slaps and kicks for any omission is normal. He does not hesitate to throw the plate with the rice at her head at the slightest pretext.

All these tensions lead the women to seek out the cause for their misfortunes. Their ignorance about the larger social perspective drives them to the belief in the paranormal. They connect the absence of customer to the 'evil eye' of some rival .If she falls ill, she apprehends the black magic spell cast by some *gunin*. She fears that all her miseries are because somebody has given her 'medicine'. This is not any Homeo or Allopathic medicine. They believe that some magic herbs or roots are capable of bringing ill luck or disease. Some enemy might mix up a concoction of such 'medicine' into her food to damage her. These herbs go from the stomach to the intestines and are re-born to take root inside the body.¹¹⁷

The Role of Durbar

After 'Durbar Mahila Samanyay Committee' was formed, awareness programs are being conducted to explain to these girls that nobody can harm another through these black magic tricks. By cutting or burning the corner of the sari, or by dropping burnt coal on the doorstep, nobody can stop the inflow of customers. This is being done through regular seminars, personal guidance sessions or group discussions. They are being taught that customers come for good treatment and satisfaction. Along with gracious behavior, they should develop and use their acting skills for exciting the client gradually. Finally at a later stage, it should culminate into the sex act, in which both should eagerly participate. Before going for the final act, they should tactfully bring out the issue of using condom. Otherwise, if the client is asked to use a condom first, he might get irritated and leave the room. Every man likes an active partner. So a sex-worker should not just lie in bed like a dead body. She should learn to practice the various postures or '*kala*'(art) of the sex act, and in the end pretend to have a complete union by behaving as if she too got orgasm or the final satisfaction. This would please the client and he would surely visit again and again. Along with this, another matter is highlighted. No woman should cheat a customer. They should, under no circumstances, steal

¹¹⁷ Ibid.p.95-98

money from his pocket. Once a customer realizes that he has been swindled, he tells others who in turn, tell their friends. Finally the entire network of customers comes to know that a particular house in a particular lane has thieves among its girls. Then for the mischief of one, the entire locality earns a bad name.

In this regard, it would be interesting to know the role of Durbar to enlighten prostitutes and attempt to free them of all these superstitions and generate a sense of self-reliance among them in the words of Mrinal Kanti Dutta. He says:

Soon after we started the 'Sonagachhi Project' we noticed that the main reason behind their superstitious lifestyle was their illiteracy. When we started, that is, in 1992, the rate of illiteracy was 84.4%. Our main aim was to sow the seeds of education. We targeted as our peer-educators the local people and explained to them that, in order to become fellow teachers they have to first educate themselves. Only then they would be able to answer questions. We saw that the peer-sisters understood what we had to say. So as soon as they finished the work at the clinic, they would gather in the verandah or the room next to the clinic or in the field, to start their study class. They started with alphabet in '*Sahaj Path*', learning vowels and consonants, and then went on to story-telling class.

But the stories they heard were not fairy tales; they heard stories of awakening, of revolution. They, as a marginal exploited group of society, learnt to protest, to unite, to demand. The stories told to them went like this—who were the first to protest? Why did they protest? How were they tortured? How did they first unite and protest? Who taught them to revolt? How the protesters had to face dire consequences or even death? And still others carried on the revolution. Hearing these inspiring stories, the sisters glowed with interest and enthusiasm. They too, learnt to protest.

To make them aware of current affairs, along with other stories, reading the daily newspaper was a must. Our coordinator sisters used to read the news, and others would listen to the stories from all over the world with breathless awe. ...

Listening to the news on T.V. or radio was made compulsory. After these basic studies, we emphasized on learning to count, read numbers and keep accounts. These girls, dressed up in gaudy modern clothes, used to depend on others to know the bus numbers. Moreover when they asked the co passenger or the bus-conductor about their destination, it would arouse curiosity and embarrass the girls. So we started with numbers and then proceeded to addition, subtraction, division, multiplication and then to L.C.M & H.C.F. Like this many girls attained the equivalent of 5th or 6th standard. We conducted awareness programs with the help of '*Bigyan Mancha*' science organization and were able to remove their blind adherence to age-old customs to a certain extent. To make learning convenient for them, we published two books in their own colloquial tongue – '*Jauna Karmeeder A, Aa, Ka, Kha*' (Sex-workers' Alphabet) and '*Andolaner Katha*' (The Story of Revolution).¹¹⁸

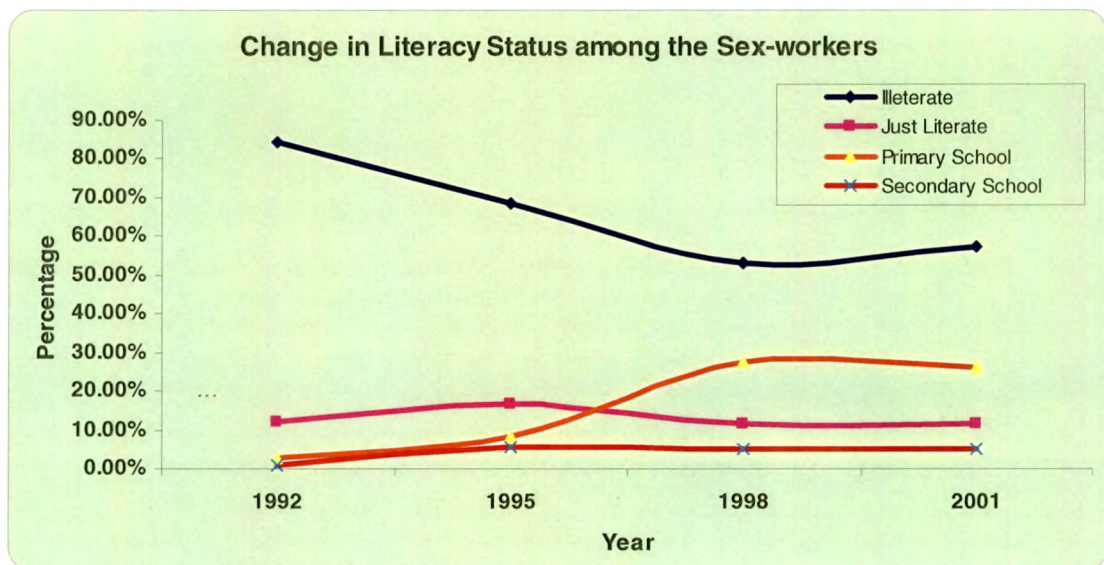
Even after all these efforts of explaining the real cause of misfortune, it cannot be said for sure whether there is any scarcity of devotees at the *Sheetala* shrine for taking magic medallions or talismans. But compared to the situation before, the number of such believers has surely come down. According to Mrinal Kanti, "along with awareness programs for these girls, strong steps need to be taken by the government against these occult practitioners; who use and prescribe obscure

¹¹⁸ Ibid. p.96-99

methods for curing disease or catching thieves etc. (Like *chal pora*, *Kulo pora*, *Nokh Darpan* etc) If the real culprits are not punished, the innocent and the gullible would be victimized and the miscreants will go Scot free.”¹¹⁹

Table: 4.10.A
Literacy Rate of Sex-workers in Sonagachhi¹²⁰

Literacy Rate of Sex-workers in Sonagachhi					
Year	Sample	Illeterate	Literate	Primary School	Secondary School
1992	442	84.40%	12.20%	2.60%	0.70%
1995	582	68.60%	17.00%	8.40%	5.70%
1998	506	53.30%	11.80%	27.50%	5.30%
2001	614	57.49%	11.56%	25.90%	5.05%



Source: Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansaty*, p.100.
 Durbar: A Brief Profile (Celebrating an era of Sonagachi: 1992 – 2004), p.19

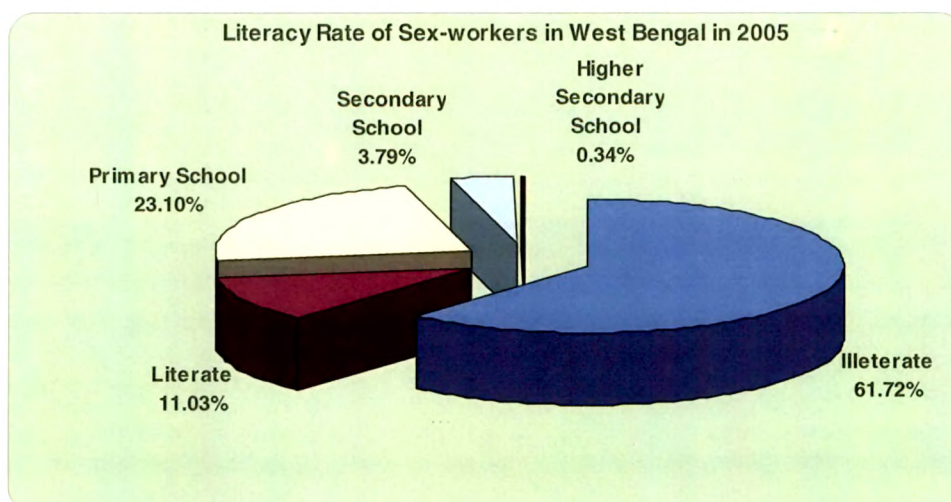
Table: 4.10.B
Literacy Rate of Sex-workers in West Bengal in 2005¹²¹
 Sample Size- 580

Literacy Rate of Sex-workers in West Bengal in 2005 Sample Size - 580		
Status	Number	Percentage (%)
Illeterate	358	61.72%
Literate	64	11.03%
Primary School	134	23.10%
Secondary School	22	3.79%
Higher Secondary School	2	0.34%
Total	580	100%

¹¹⁹ Ibid. p.99

¹²⁰ Ibid. p.100

¹²¹ Ibid. p.100



Source: *Mrinal Kanti Dutta, Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, p.100.

4.11. Aim:

Most of the prostitutes do not have definite aim for the future life. They are mostly concerned about their present life – their joy, sorrows, happiness, anxieties, and worries. Their apathy to have a plan for future life is caused by various reasons. It can be assumed that the disturbed lives of the prostitutes and social segregations stop them think about the future life which is full of uncertainties. The other factors are also there.

Usually no sex-worker can save for more than a month. After saving money for a month or so, invariably the news of her saving becomes known to all. As soon as the secret is out, either the *babu* or the landlady grabs her money. If the entire money does not vanish too soon, it is spent on drinks. The moment her landlady or employer comes to know of the extra money, she starts whimpering—‘please dear, I need the money very badly, I will return it to you next month’. If she shows reluctance, she may have to leave the house the very next day. Totally at the mercy of the *masi* or landlady, usually the girls do not displease the *masis*. Month after month passes, but the money does not come back; the girl is afraid to ask else she is thrown out of the house. Now if the *Babu* ever comes to know that the girl or his *Bibi* has saved some money, he would be in the seventh heaven. He would leave no stone unturned to get hold of this money earned by the poor girl. His excuses are like this: ‘I am in great trouble. If I Can not send this money immediately to the village, this land that I had got, will go out of my hands’ or, ‘If I cannot pay the LIC premium the entire money will be forfeited.’ Like this, by begging or pleading, he would somehow get hold of the money. While taking, he promises to pay her back double the amount and pretends that it is only a loan. But neither the double nor single amount ever comes back. For all these reasons, a sex-

worker rarely saves any money. She loses interest in no time. Mrinal Kanti Dutta says, "Month after month passes, she never gets back her hard-earned money. Therefore, they prefer to carry on their day to day existence; the rest is left to God." Some girls are more independent. They do not much care for the *babu*, nor do they have any landlady to pay. Then again, they have a tendency to spend their money on drinks at the slightest pretext. If they are sad, to drown their sorrow they drink. For example, Mrinal Kanti Dutta describes, 'a girl has earned for months to bring up her brother. She paid for his marriage. Then finally the same brother does not care to keep in touch. Does not allow her to his house and does not even invite her to his wedding. Out of dejection, she takes to drinking. She drinks during the day; she drinks at night. Days pass in drunken stupor until she finishes her entire savings and cannot pay for liquor any longer. So the money of a prostitute flies into thin air. It is eaten up by *masi*, by *babu* or on drinking.'¹²² According to B. Joardar, most of his respondents had remarked:

We are very much concerned about the present and do not think about the future which is in fact useless.

His research shows, ninety percent (90%) of the prostitutes (of the sample) did not have any definite aim for the future life. Five percent (5%) of the respondents (prostitutes) wished to be *mashi* or brothel keeper and the rest five percent (5%) expressed their desire to spend last life in the temple city *Kashi* in *Benaras* where it is easy for old women to get food by begging. More over, the orthodox Hindu's perception is it is more honorable to beg in the temple city than being a beggar somewhere else. In this regard, *Sabitri* alias *Barasabi* of *Naihati* red-light area remarked:

We have made enough sin, we need some penance. ... We must pass the last few days in peace. I wished to pass my last few days by worshipping mother *Annapurna's* feet (wife of lord *Shiva* or *Viswanatha* or *Vishweshwara*) at *Benaras*.

Joardar's research shows that only a 'negligible percentage' of the prostitutes bothered for their future lives.¹²³

But after foundation of '*Durbar*' in 1995, gradually some transformation occurred in the lives of some sex-workers. They are started being enlightened through *Durbar's* activities and their workshops. After foundation of '*USHA Co-operative*' sex-workers have started saving their money and purchasing land, constructing house with the money for future. Though these changes have become slowly prominent in last ten years. A sense of 'self-reliance' has been generated among sex-workers to a larger extent through various NGO's work and *Durbar's* movements for worker's right of sex-workers. But it cannot be claimed that all prostitutes have their definite aim for their

¹²² Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005. p.136-137

¹²³ B. Joardar, *Prostitution In Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter.India Publication, New Delhi, 1984p.121-122

future life. My personal communication with *Lakshmi* – a resident of No.73, Harkata Lane of Premchand Baral Street, reveals her indifference towards future life. *Lakshmi* remarked:

Ki Korbo bhabishyat er Katha Bhebe? Ki Hobe?

(What would I do about thinking of future? What is the use of bothering about future?).

Her this statement reveals her apathy towards future life which is full of uncertainty. *Lakshmi* has a fixed customer or *babu* who works in a Govt. Bank and is living with *Lakshmi* since last 25 years. He is married, having children. His son got married and gave birth to his grand-children. He bears up all the expenditure of *Lakshmi* and her one mentally disabled brother. Her *babu* visits his home in *Baruipur* every weekend and during each festival. But his family members are not aware of this relationship. According to *Lakshmi* her relationship with her *babu* is almost like a husband – wife. Her *babu* is very good by nature and totally devoted to her. Thus they are having a pleasant relationship. But *Lakshmi* does not hope for life-long relationship. She says,

He has not married me in traditional terms. He has a family, wife, kids and grand-children. Tomorrow he can go away. Will he be always with me for ever? Even if he goes, what can I do? Question was, whether it will hurt her or not? Her answer was, even if it hurts, what is the solution?

There is uncertainty in everything. Despite having a relationship of more than 25 years, *Lakshmi* is very much concerned about this uncertainty of the very relationship and is a realist to see that.¹²⁴ Thus no concrete plan or aim for future exists in the life of *Lakshmi*.

4.12. Old Age:

The time span of the profession in the sex-industry is very short. With the growing age losing physical charm gradually prostitutes begin losing business. It is needless to say that the rate of prostitutes depends on the age, figure and beauty of the girl. Working in the flesh-trade for sometime, these girls can fix their own rate. As body is the only capital in the sex industry, therefore, it is a common thing that an 'A' class woman comes down to 'C' category on losing physical charm with age.¹²⁵ The life and problems of prostitutes after the age of 35 years, generally after spending more than 20 years in the profession of prostitution is miserable picture beyond the 'pale of words and numbers'. In the old age, prostitutes are not only subjected to the destitution and are discarded but they are also over looked by the visions of most reformers and activists. Most of the old prostitutes have to live their life at mercy of others. They often subject to severe illness and seek alternative ways to live life. Begging and being dependent upon occasional clients are two

¹²⁴ Interview with *Lakshmi* Das, Harkata Lane of Premchand Baral Street, House No. 73, Ground Floor, age approximately 45 years, Education- illiterate, Class Category – Independent.

¹²⁵ *Mrinal Kanti Dutta, Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005. p.119

such alternatives to them. Few lucky prostitutes may survive being brothel keepers or managers in their old age.¹²⁶

The actual age for retirement of girls in this line is forty five. They have to make whatever savings they can by then. After this they still have their bodies, their minds, even the strength to work but there are no more customers. As a result no other way remains other than waiting for a customer for daily needs, giving the rent of the rooms and so on. Earlier everyone used to eat out of spending their savings or selling their jewelleries bit by bit. Now many of them get monthly interest from their own co-operative or small monthly savings schemes of the post office. Some straightway try to get into the business of money lending amongst the girls eating from the interests. But that has huge risks. The conditions of those who lose everything over the *babus* are the most dangerous. They have no other way than to beg or work as a maid-servant in people's houses.¹²⁷ These types of work generally comprise supervising and caring for children, cooking, cleaning for practicing sex-workers. Some even begin to get involved in small businesses, selling liquor, tea, *paan* or *bidi*. According to Rozario's report, 'most of the *paanwallis* and women beggars in Calcutta are ex-prostitutes'. She mentions that many of the old prostitutes go to the temple cities, like *Puri* and *Benaras* to spend their last lives over there. They believe that it would be easy to survive through begging alms in these temple cities. Fix *babus* are very much preferred by the old aged prostitutes as they pay money to their partners regularly. The sex-workers become dependent upon them very early as with the growing age, their income starts decreasing which makes them unable to bear their daily rent and failing to do so they would definitely lose their rooms. Losing room, a neighbour's verandah becomes the only shelter for them and a lucky few get some other shelters by their landladies.¹²⁸ A British official document of 1913 gives information regarding the strategy of survival of prostitutes in their old age. It is also informed that how prostitutes are involved in other activities outside the selling body with the motto of acquiring money or wealth as much as possible with in the short span of the profession of prostitution with the motto of securing future:

It is generally believed, and there is foundation for the belief, that many of the foreign women in the Indian market acquire, within a comparatively short period. Sufficient means to enable them to spend the rest of their short span of life in comfort. But it is not so generally known that gambling speculation and the sale of drink in brothel are contributing factors. Exactly how much drink profit is made cannot be computed, but the women have themselves admitted that it is a considerable source of income. The direct question was a few days ago, guardedly put to the keeper of one house who mournfully replied that the change of residence had cost her at least Rs 600 a month in drink profit alone. Some of

¹²⁶ Societal Violence on Women and Children in Prostitution: A report by the National Commission for Women, 1995-96, National Commission For Women, Government of India, New Delhi. p.17

¹²⁷ Shrikarna, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata p.76-80,83

¹²⁸ Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightholme, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta, Stree*, Kolkata, 2002. p.96-97

those who have retired from "business" in Calcutta have been reported to do so with a capital expressed by five figures. While two at least left with an account to their credit running into six figures.¹²⁹

Prostitutes are often cheated by their *masis*, *babus* and other elements. Let's take up the case of *Lakshmi*. Lakshmi used to keep her money in her *Mashi's* custody. On asking whether her *masi* has misappropriated her money or not? Her reply was, 'yes, that is very normal.' Which means that lot of her earnings was misappropriated by her *mashi*. From a known person to her, I got this information that she had bought a land which her *mashi* in 'tricks and tact' misappropriated. For these reasons, the phenomena of faith or trust hardly exists in the brothel world. The same feeling I got while interacting with *Lakshmi*. She has a *badhababu* or fixed customer with whom she is living in a husband-wife relationship since last 25 years. According to her, her *babu* is of kind nature and looks after her properly and bears all the expenditure. Though she believes her *babu* quite a lot but in dealing with monetary matter she is very much suspicious of everybody. That is why when her *babu* approached her to give the money to him so that he can deposit that money to the bank for safety, but she directly refused to do so. She did the same with her another client Debashish Bhattacharya when he advised the same and ready to help her out with regard to this matter. Lakshmi even does not find herself secured or comfortable with the saving money in the post office or Bank or in the Usha Co-operative. As being illiterate she finds all these quite troublesome.¹³⁰

Other profession provide the employees with a fair amount and gratuity or pension, etc. after retirement. But the prostitutes are always deprived in this matter. They never get a single rupee from the brothel keepers. According to Joardar's study most of the prostitutes did not prefer to save money in the post office or any local bank. When he advised them for saving money in those repositories concerned, most of them refused to do so and replied,

'Illa', we are very much concerned about the present and we do not bother for our future because we know our future. We are illiterate and this is why even if we wish to open one savings account in the post office or in the Bank we will have to face a lot of trouble.

Monika of Naihati red-light area remarked that she had closed the savings account in the local post office where her money used to be deposited frequently due to be illiterate because she used to face very difficulties in dealing with the matter alone. It was very difficult for her to find out a man known to the post master concerned for identifying her left thumb impression. She said,

¹²⁹ *Legislation to Suppress the Importation of Foreign Women for Prostitution and to Punish the Importers and other Profiting thereby*, File P.2A/22 of 1912, progs nos 18-31 Serial nos 3-16, February, 1913 [Political Dept.: Police Branch]

¹³⁰ Lakshmi Das, Premchand Boral Street of Harkata red-light area, 73 No. House – Ground Floor. Approx Age – 45, Category – F1, Independent Prostitute, Education – illiterate. And my personal talk with Debashish Bhattacharya (Engineer by profession).

Generally any male member of our brothel world used to go with me to the post office to withdraw the amount. For this, I had to pay him one rupee each time.

Moreover, those persons used to take out more money than what Monika wanted to withdraw. And it used to happen without her consent.¹³¹

There is an extreme alcoholic addiction found among large number of elderly prostitutes.¹³²

A vivid description of the living condition of the prostitutes in their old age is found in the work of S.N. Mukherjee, during early twentieth century. These descriptions stand very much similar to the living condition of old prostitutes in the present time with certain changes to some extent.

During the first phase of twentieth century, the prostitutes used to live a very hectic life and lived luxurious life without any plans and savings for future which definitely led them to the miserable condition in their old age. But it was not the case of all prostitutes. Most of the prostitutes lived life in financial crisis and due to the meager earnings, they used to be always in debt and most of the times were even unable to pay the rent. So with the growing old age and loss of beauty, no option could be left for them except begging or live on the mercy of the other people. The cunning and clever women among these prostitutes used to become *bariwalli* or brothel mistress in their old ages. A *bariwalli* used to be generally a retired prostitute. Some prostitute who had daughters they were fortunate enough because their rest of the life could easily be spent being dependent on the earning of their daughters. The prostitutes without any daughters usually adopted minor girl to secure their own future. In old age, these prostitutes being unable to carry out profession, usually worked as maid-servants, cook or acted as a procurers. Some of them resorted to the profession of *paanwallis* (betel-nut seller) which did not need much capital investment. But if nothing worked out then they had to beg on the street and rest of the life was led in dire poverty.¹³³

The following is a metaphoric description of an old prostitute turning into a 'paanwali' -- a betel-leaf seller.

*Jokhon pran chhilo praney koto moshla ditem paney ...
Ar ki amar shedin achhey chuner bhar shukaye gachhe
Talpokurer nam royechhe teer ubu job nai majhkaney||
Khoyer korey keya phule kandi boshi phuley phuley
Kromey ongo galo phuley molen bujhi atodiney ...
Jotone diye jowan dhoney peyechhilem toma dhoney
Akhon ei nobo jouboney hanchhey Modon ponchobaney*

¹³¹ B. Joardar, *Prostitution In Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter.India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. p.121

¹³² Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightolme, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta, Stree, Kolkata*, 2002. p.97

¹³³ S. N. Mukherjee, *Prostitution in India*, DasGupta & Co, Calcutta, 1936. p. 271-272

*Chhoto elach loye sukhey ditam jadu tomar mukhey
Akhon dakho na to cheye phirey odhinir paney||
Shishibhora korpur chhilo kopal kromey ubey galo
Lobongo biborno holo gondho hoyechhe zafraney||*

When I had life in me, how I used to spice up my *paan* *
Now my days are gone, the lime*-pot has dried up
It is only named a pond; the palm-lake has no water in the middle
I made catechu* from the keya flower
Now I cry-- my flowerlike body has bloated up ...
The spice I gave specially for you to get your heart my dear
Now at this age I'm struck by the Cupid's spear
The small cardamom * I would put in your mouth,
Now you do not even look at me your old flame
The camphor* kept in bottles evaporated with time
The clove* has discolored, the saffron* smells foul.¹³⁴

(*Lime, clove, catechu, camphor, cardamom, saffron etc. are names of '*paan*' ingredients to make a juicy and delicious betel leaf for chewing. All these words are used as metaphors to hint at various sensual connotations)

Prostitutes are always considered as a marginalized section of the society and therefore, they have always been refused a social acceptance. Their social segregation is extremely visible when a prostitute dies.¹³⁵ Death comes as the natural conclusion to all their sufferings. Only other prostitutes go with them in their last journey to the funeral pyre. At this point none of the *babus* come to any help. All these years during their entire life through their youth, the men of the richer class had no qualms about exploiting them to the utmost. But in the end, to perform the last rites, none of these men are found. The lighting of the funeral pyre, is a ritual performed by the nearest of kin of the deceased. The *babus*, whom the women served during their lives, never come to perform these last rites. So undoubtedly, death comes as a boon to these unfortunate women for whom suffering was a way of life. The flames of the crematorium emancipate them from the slow burnings in their daily lives of torture and dishonour.¹³⁶

Meghnad Gupta has portrayed the scene of the end of life of the prostitutes with full of sensitivity in *Rater Kolkata*:

At times we find a group of harlots carrying the dead body of one among them. They come to cremate the body. They come half-naked, wearing only a piece a cloth, fully drunk. In the darkness their call to the deity-- '*Horibol*' in their shrill voices breaks the silence of the night. One hapless soul has left the body and along with it a life of humiliation, torture and disease; there is no more signs of desire in that body that is being taken in its last journey. But her companions are least bothered with all this philosophy. The sight of the *burning-*

¹³⁴ Sudhir Chakroborty, (ed.) *Jounata O Samaskrutii* (A collection of Essays on Sexuality and Culture by eminent writers and intellectuals), Pustak Bipani, Kolkata, 2002. p.127

¹³⁵ S. N. Mukherjee, *Prostitution in India*, DasGupta & Co, Calcutta, 1936. p.272

¹³⁶ Debrani Kar, *Kolkatar Nagamati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995, (1401, *Maagh*). p.100

ghat (crematorium at the riverside) and the dead do not dishearten them in any way. In the frenzy of intoxication, they fight among themselves, shower abusive humour at their dead friend, or flirt with some men in the crematorium. It is an abnormal and inhuman sight.¹³⁷

This sight described by Meghnad Gupta is one among the many scenes of the nights of Calcutta. The researcher, even though has not personally seen the sight or felt the glow of fire of the *burning-ghat*, can very well feel the heat of the slow burning out of the life of a whore in the fag-end of her life.

According to National Commission for Women's Report, "paradoxically, the demand for 'rehabilitation and small alternate income' is maximum from this age group of women. National Commission for Women feels that these women should be given priority in the rehabilitation schemes existing for the women in prostitution."¹³⁸ In this regard, Indrani Sinha's opinion is, 'a proposed solution to the problem of elderly sex-workers who have no shelter or source of income is a home specifically for them. A quiet life of dependency in an institution is probably not the most appropriate solution, given that they have been used to leading independent lives. What might be more effective would be employment schemes so that the woman can be economically active as long as possible, savings and credit schemes, and provision of community care in old age.'¹³⁹

4.13. The Savings Habits of Prostitutes:

Most of the prostitutes lead life without having any definite aim or plan for the future. They are more concerned about their present life rather being bothered about the future which is full of uncertainty.¹⁴⁰

Usually no sex-worker can save for more than a month. After saving money for a month or so, invariably the news of her saving becomes known to all. As soon as the secret is out, either the *babu* or the landlady grabs her money. If the entire money does not vanish too soon, it is spent on drinks. The moment her landlady or employer comes to know of the extra money, she starts whimpering—'please dear, I need the money very badly, I will return it to you next month'. If she shows reluctance, she may have to leave the house the very next day. Totally at the mercy of the *masi* or landlady, usually the girls do not displease the *masis*. Month after month passes, but the

¹³⁷ Meghnad Gupta, *Rater Kolkata (Calcutta by Night)*, Pratik, Kolkata, 1923 (1st Publication), 1991, p.43

¹³⁸ Societal Violence on Women and Children in Prostitution: A report by the National Commission for Women, 1995-96, National Commission For Women, Government of India, New Delhi. p.17

¹³⁹ Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightholme, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta, Stree*, Kolkata, 2002, p.97-98

¹⁴⁰ B. Joardar, *Prostitution In Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter-India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. p.121

money does not come back; the girl is afraid to ask lest she is thrown out of the house. Now if the *Babu* ever comes to know that the girl or his *Bibi* has saved some money, he would be in the seventh heaven. He would leave no stone unturned to get hold of this money earned by the poor girl. His excuses are like this: 'I am in great trouble. If I Can not send this money immediately to the village, this land that I had got, will go out of my hands' or, 'If I cannot pay the LIC premium the entire money will be forfeited.' Like this, by begging or pleading, he would somehow get hold of the money. While taking he promises to pay her back double the amount and pretends that it is only a loan. But neither the double nor single amount ever comes back. For all these reasons, a sex-worker rarely saves any money. She loses interest in no time. The author says, "Month after month passes, she never gets back her hard-earned money. They carry on their day to day existence; the rest is left to God."

Some girls are more independent. They do not much care for the *babu*, nor do they have any landlady to pay. Then again, they have a tendency to spend their money on drinks at the slightest pretext. If they are sad, to drown their sorrow they drink. For example, the author describes, 'a girl has earned for months to bring up her brother. She paid for his marriage. Then finally the same brother does not care to keep in touch. Does not allow her to his house and does not even invite her to his wedding. Out of dejection, she takes to drinking. She drinks during the day; she drinks at night. Days pass in drunken stupor until she finishes her entire savings and cannot pay for liquor any longer'. So the money of a prostitute flies into thin air. It is eaten up by *Masi*, by *Babu* or on drinking.¹⁴¹

Because of all these reasons the prostitutes are not found so much enthusiastic regarding the savings matter. They are more concern about their sorrows, happiness of their present lives. Women in this industry often bear the burden of debt. Most of the prostitutes fulfill their family responsibilities by sending money to the village. They have to take care of themselves too. So, at the end, despite a considerable earning capacity, most of the sex-workers face financial problem and fail to manage savings. It is very easy to take loans in all the red-light areas, which are also an 'indispensable system' in the red-light areas. So, prostitutes are often subjected to exploitations of money lenders and other elements (*mashis*, landlord, traders etc.) with regard to this matter. Before starting of the 'Sonagachi Project' (1992) there were two types of economic exploitation going on (1) *Dadon* which includes three types of money-lenders (a) *Kistiwallahs* (b) *Goldsmith* or local *Jewelers* (pawn brokers) and (c) *The Chotawallahs*. The other was (2) '*Chit-funds*'.¹⁴² Though, after the establishment of *Durbar* (The NGO run by sex-workers) these types of money lending systems are

¹⁴¹ Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005, p.136-37.

¹⁴² Ibid. p.133

not that much prevalent in the Red-light areas but cannot be claimed that they are totally uprooted. The detail about these money lenders have been discussed under the sub-section called 'Money lenders' in the section 'Dynamics of the Operation System' under the chapter 2 entitled 'Empirical Reality'.

Usha Multipurpose Co-operative Society Ltd.

With the coming up of the NGO, *Durbar* (run by sex-workers) during 1993 the situation started to undergo a dramatic transformation. Soon after the Sonagachhi Project started, under the guidance of the *All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health* (AIH & PH), the combined demand of these social victims reached to them. It was approached by the sex-workers to them for somehow stopping the business of these exploiters. First it was planned to approach the banks and request them for co operation and somehow open bank accounts in these girls' names. After a few visits to the banks and talking to the Managers it was understood that they were not interested to open any account without a valid ration card. Then it was thought of L.I.C. But then if discontinued for some reason, it was very difficult to get back money from the L.I.C. Moreover, it was also realized that the mechanical, though systematic method of the Corporation would not suit these illiterate girls. *Durbar* was looking for something which would have flexibility as well as a personal touch of affection. From this requirement of personal touch and a sense of genuine sincerity, the idea of forming a co-operative evolved. It was assumed that this co operative would yield three benefits: (I) Firstly, since it would be formed by the sex-workers themselves, it would not only provide a safe place to keep their own money, (II) they would earn interest too. (III) Moreover, as the co operative would be their own, they would have a sense of personal involvement in it.

In the year 1994, the co operative was formed under the enthusiasm of Dr. Smarajit Jana*. First with six girls the co operative opened. For registering it as a society, it was named it 'Usha Co operative'. The very idea of opening a co operative by sex-workers gave the government co operative officers the creeps. The deep-rooted belief that prostitution was immoral made the idea seem ridiculous to them. But, after lots of efforts and continuous attempt to meet the officers and follow up the matter, finally with the help of Co-operative Minister Saral Deb during that time, in 1995, this 'Usha Cooperative' came into existence after the government amended the existing rules and the Co-operative department allowed the sex-workers to open a co-operative society of their own.



Usha Multipurpose Co-operative Society Limited

(Source: Durbar: A Brief Profile)

After getting acceptance from the ministry level, the other officers of the department also became enthusiastic. It was their idea to change the name. They suggested that in future, under the same registration, the girls could start some business venture. So the word 'multipurpose' was added. The full name of the co operative was 'Usha Multipurpose Co operative Society Ltd.'¹⁴³

In this co-operative system, 'Savings accounts', 'Fixed Deposits' and 'Monthly Income Scheme' have been opened. Moreover, there are 'recurring deposits' and 'daily collection schemes'. If any member needs loans, the society offered a loan up to 20000 rupees on a long term basis. At present (2005), the total number of members of this co operative has touched 7000. Not only that, today the yearly turnover of this co-operative is about 8.5 *crores* (85 million rupees), and its total assets is touching 3 *crores* (30 million rupees).

Other than savings and loan schemes, Usha co-operative has now started diversifying its activities into various other fields, like-marketing of condoms, fishery in Baruipur and general farming. It has also taken steps at starting some self-employment programme for the prostitutes who run out of business in old age. It has now made its own independent place in society. Moreover, in 2001, it was awarded the best co operative society by way of highest performance by women in the field of loan recovery. Once upon a time the various money-lenders like, *Chotawallas* and *Kistiwallas* used to exploit these girls, and they would run away from them. Now these sex-workers confidently resist their entry into the locality. They enlighten the newcomers and make awareness campaigns among women not to fall into the traps of these moneylenders. What is really to be appreciated is that these

¹⁴³ Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005', p.137-138. * Dr. Smarajit Jana – The Director of *Sonagachhi Project* under the guidance of *All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health (AIH & PH)*; This Usha Multipurpose Co operative Society Ltd. is the first cooperative society of the Sex-workers in Aisa – See for details, Staff Reporters, *Asiar Prothom Jaunakarmee Samabay*, *Samabay Sangbaad*, 16th September, 1995; Staff Reporter, *Samabay Gorlen Jaunakarmeera: Swikriti Samabay Daftarer*, Aaj, 24th June, 1995.

girls are now so conscious that they themselves made a rule that no one should unofficially lend money outside at a high rate of interest. Those who try to do so will not only be termed as filthy 'chotawallas', they would be considered as going against the interests of 'Durbar'.¹⁴⁴ Among various objectives, another was to secure the future of the children of sex-workers. Sex-workers desire their daughter not to come into the profession of prostitution and they think borrowing loan from Bank can secure their children's future. They think this step would surely offer the next generation the opportunity to live a healthy life.¹⁴⁵ With a deposit of Rs.7,000 collected from 50 members, the society came up in less than a month's time on June 22nd June, 1995. It had a clause on its membership which said '*membership of the society is open to female individuals above the age of 18, including sex-workers and ex-sex-workers as well as sympathizers, competent of contract and residing permanently within the area of membership.*'¹⁴⁶

¹⁴⁴ Ibid. p.139-40; Also See- Subhendu Maiti, *Samabay Samitee Gare Tullen Nishidhya Pallir Atmasachetan Basanta Senara* (to be trnd), Rajpath, 2nd August, 1995; Also See- Jatashankar Lahiri, *Kebol Barbonitader Niye Asiar Prothom Samabay Sonagachhite* (), Kanatar, 31st July, 1995. Also See - Dr. Smarajit Jana (ed.), 'Namaskar' (Patrika/Journal), Year 7, Volume 1, Durbar Prokashoni, January 2005. p.19-20; Also See – Ashish K. Biswas, *The Tellers of Sonagachhi: Women in the World's Oldest Profession get Financial Security with a Bank of their own in Bengal*, Outlook (magazine), 4th March, 2002.

¹⁴⁵ Staff Reporter, *Santander Aloy Pherate Samabay Gorten Jaunakarmeera*, Anonda Bazar Patrika, 18th August, 1996

¹⁴⁶ *Red-light blues for money lending mafia*, Hindustan Times, Calcutta, 6th July, 1995; A daily savings scheme of Usha Co-operative launched on 24th October, 1999, was aimed at the bottom rung of the sex-workers community, who charge less than Rs.50 per client. The number of such workers in Sonagachhi alone was around 20,000 in 1999. A person can make her deposit in amounts of Rs.5, 10 and 15 against which she will be handed coupons and a pass book. At the month end, the amount she has deposited will be credited to a separate savings account with the cooperative bank. The sex-worker will earn an interest of 7.5% against the minimum deposit of Rs.200. Cooperative members will undertake door to door visit to collect the deposit. According to Usha coordinator, Dwarikanath Basu Mallick, this move would also help make the cooperative economically self-sufficient instead of being dependent on overseas funding. Other schemes were also in the pipeline. One such was the *THRIFT DEPOSIT SCHEME*, which gives an interest of 10%. Mr. Mallick Said, 'This will help when the person is no longer in the profession. She can take loan against her deposits at a nominal rate.' According to M.K. Dutta (Director of the WHO – sponsored STD/HIV Intervention Programme in 1995), 'the sex-workers have realized the need to save for the rainy days.' – By correspondent, *Sex-workers' Cooperative to Launch Savings Scheme*, the Asian Age, 22nd October, 1999. See also Staff Reporter, *Prostitutes to Launch Savings Scheme*, the Statesman, Calcutta, 31st October, 1999; Staff Reporter, *Jaunakarmeeder Samabaye Duti Natun Prokolpa* (), Anonda Bazar Patrika, 1st November, 1999; A few hundred female voices sang 'We Shall Overcome' passionately in Unison as Parama Baine, a 20 year old sex-worker in the Sonagachhi area of North Calcutta, walked up to the dias to open a fixed deposit of Rs.30,000. She became the first member of the Usha Multipurpose Cooperative Society Ltd., a cooperative comprising solely of sex-workers, to open a fixed deposit with the society. The CPM Politburo Member, Biman Bose, said, 'it is another welcome move for self-development of the sex-workers. The money they save would be safe and can be used when they need it. Money circulation within the area will also increase.' According to Sadhana Mukherjee, an active member of the Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee (DMSC), 'this is another step towards self-reliance.' – Staff Reporter, *Sex-workers begin new schemes to save money*, the Times of India, Calcutta, 2nd November, 1999.

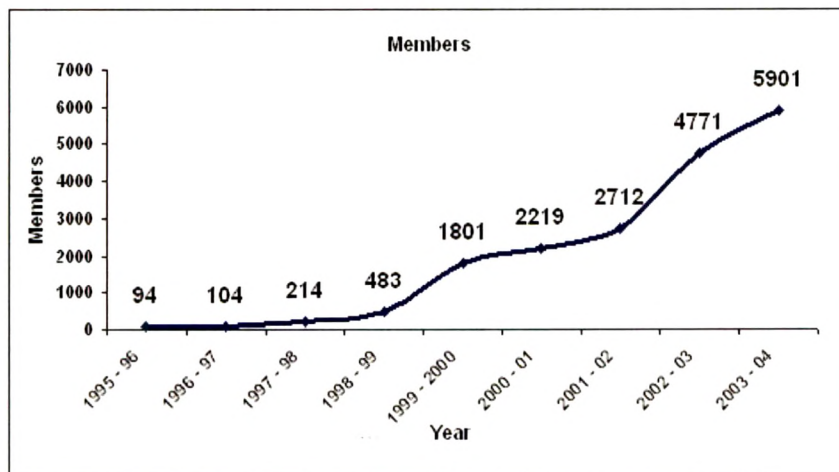
Table: 4.13.3A

Development of USHA Co-operative Society over the years									
Particulars	1995 - 96	1996 - 97	1997 - 98	1998 - 99	1999 - 2000	2000 - 01	2001 - 02	2002 - 03	2003 - 04
Working Capital (Rs. In Lakhs)	0.01	8.45	9.91	12.65	62.33	95.68	115.33	180.00	250.00
Turnover (Rs. In Lakhs)	3.00	15.00	17.50	20.00	40.00	150.00	180.00	350.00	525.00
Members	94	104	214	483	1801	2219	2712	4771	5901
Loan to Members (Rs. in Lakhs)	0.00	0.97	2.2	3.59	2.61	3.41	17.7	23.69	44.64

Table: 4.13.3B



Table: 4.13.3C



Source: Durbar: A Brief Profile, p.24; Audit & Audit Report of the Society (1995-96), Usha co-operative Multipurpose Stores Ltd; Presentation of the Organising Committee & Report of the Auditor for the Audit of Financial Year 1996-97, Second General Meeting, 18 July, 1997;

In 2004, the State Bank of India – the biggest commercial Bank in the country, encouraged sex-workers to open Savings Banks Account at its branches located in red-light areas. This one is a marketing exercise which doubles also social service. Instead of approaching the sex-workers directly, the bank staff are approaching Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) to act as the via-media. On 30th June, 2004, over 300 sex-workers opened their savings account at SBI's Jorasanko Branch in Kolkata, located at the heart of Sonagachhi, the largest and oldest red-light area housing over 30,000 registered sex-workers. Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee (DMSC) had recommended their names. According to the Branch Manager of the Jorasanko Branch, Subroto Roy, the concessions offered to the workers included relaxation in the proof of identity norms. For these reasons, 300 sex-workers had been waived of these 'stipulation' as they were already recommended by the NGO which already had an account with the branch. Financial relaxations included cheque-book facility with a minimum deposit of Rs.250 instead of the usual Rs.500.



রবিবার স্টেট ব্যাঙ্কের জোড়াসাঁকো শাখায় অ্যাকাউন্ট খুলতে যাবার কয়েক ঘণ্টা
এক বৈঠক। — অশোক মজুমদার

**Anandabazar Patrika, Kolkata,
Monday, 14th June, 2004**

Sex-worker opening Bank Account in Jorasanko Branch of SBI

In taking special initiative to interact with DMSC and getting these 300 accounts for the bank, the most credit goes to General Secretary of the Banks' Staff Association's, Ashok Dutta. He said, 'on the one hand, you can call it a social service. You can also say that this is an initiative by the SBI Employees to mobilize deposits.' According Ms. Sapna Gayen, the DMSC President of this time, 'right now, we have started this initiative only in the Sonagachhi area. In the next phase, we will take similar initiatives for sex-workers operating in other red-light areas.'¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁷ Sumanta Ray Chaudhury, *Bottom line: NGOs being roped in Special Concessions offered in Red-light areas: SBI Targets Sex-workers for Savings Accounts*, The Financial Express, 7th June, 2004; See- Staff Reporter, *State Bank Amanat Chalu 300 Jaunakarmeer* (), Aajkaal, 14th June, 2004; See- Staff Reporter, *Peshar Swikriti Diye Jaunakarmeeder Account Khulte Dilo State Bank*, Anonda Bazar Patrika, Kolkata, 14th June, 2004; See- Staff Reporter, *Pashe State Bank, Jaunakarmeer Parichoy diyei Account Khullen 300 Jon*, Sanbaad Protidin, 14th June 2004.



Sambad Pratidin, Monday, 14th June, 2004

Sex-workers interacting with Official of the State Bank of India (Jorasanko Branch)

Thus, sex-workers in Kolkata would no longer need to suppress information on their profession while opening Bank Account. Sex-workers have been forced till now to suppress their identity while opening bank accounts. In the profession column, they usually wrote 'house-wives or domestic-help', according to M.K. Dutta. SBI was planning similar campaigns in Mumbai and Delhi too. Sapna Gayen further said, 'sex-workers generally keep their savings at home or with a person they trust. By keeping the money in the bank, they can earn an interest as well.'¹⁴⁸

Table:4.13.A

Some Facts and finding¹⁴⁹

Sample Size – 580 (Multiple Answers)

What was the reason for Borrowing money earlier?		
Reasons	Number	Percentage (%)
For Social Functions (Annaprasan, Marriage, Shradh)	448	77.24%
To purchase clothes etc during Festivals (Puja, Id)	221	38.10%
To Support Babu	411	70.86%
For own sickness	73	12.59%
For the sickness of Relatives	167	28.79%
To provide advance of the room in the area	181	31.21%
To Purchase Land and House	133	22.93%

¹⁴⁸ Correspondent, *Pass Book and a Passport to Dignity for Sex-workers*, Hindustan Times, Kolkata, 14th June, 2004; See- Staff Reporter, *Rastrayatta Bank e ebar account Khullen Shantipurer Jaunakarmeera*, Anonda Bazar Patrika, Kolkata, 6th September, 2004.

¹⁴⁹ Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005. p.140-142

Table:4.13.B/C/D/E/F

On which occasion you have borrowed Money? Multiple Answers Sample Size - 480		
Reasons	Number	Percentage (%)
Child's Annaprasan	116	25.89%
Child's Marriage	83	18.53%
Marriage of Siblings	217	48.44%
On Parents' of Relatives last Rituals	49	10.94%
For occasions in Babus Family (Annaprasan, Marriage, <i>Shradh</i> ,	231	51.56%

What was the source of borrowing before the formation of Usha		
Source/Person	Number	Percentage (%)
Jewellery Shop (by modgaga of Gold)	463	79.83%
Kistiwallah	478	82.41%
Chotowallas	211	36.38%
Malkin	287	49.48%
Bank	0	0.00%

What is the source of borrowing Money now?		
Source/Person	Number	Percentage (%)
Usha	381	65.69%
Jewellery Shop (by modgaga of Gold)	137	23.62%
Kistiwallah	21	3.62%
Chotowallas	27	4.66%
Malkin	5	0.86%
Bank	0	0.00%

What was the place for investing Money before formation of Usha?		
Place for Deposit/Investment	Number	Percentage (%)
Jewellery Shop	263	45.34%
Chit-fund	387	66.72%
Bank	22	3.79%
Malkin	296	51.03%
In the clubs of the area	71	12.24%

What is the place for investing Money after the formation of Usha?		
Place for Deposit/Investment	Number	Percentage (%)
Usha	408	70.34%
Jewellery Shop	2	0.34%
Chit-fund	19	3.28%
Bank	169	29.14%
Malkin	47	8.10%
In the clubs of the area	11	1.90%

Source: Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, p.140-142

4.14. Sex-workers: In the Projects and Movements:

Just when the brothels were in extreme, pathetic condition, in 1986 there was a survey conducted in the Khidirpur brothels to test the presence of H.I.V. there. In that survey, a sex-worker named Tiklibai was first identified with H.I.V. positive in her blood sample. After Manipur and Tamil Nadu this was possibly the third case of H.I.V. in India. The news was flashed in all newspapers with elaborate details; Tiklibai was ostracized in her own locality. Lastly she was sent to Presidency jail. There too, she became an 'untouchable'. Nobody would touch her; they would throw her food to her. After a few days Tiklibai supposedly vanished from the jail. After this, during 1989 a group of people came to Kolkata from the World Health Organization. Their intention was to organize a project based on survey on the sex-workers' lifestyle along with their main job of investigating into the rate of H.I.V. infection and its spread. After a lot of discussions, in 1992, a health project was started by Dr. Smarajit Jana, professor of epidemiology of the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health in the oldest and largest brothel area Sonagachhi in Kolkata. The Health Project is known as the 'Sonagachhi Project'.¹⁵⁰

The aspect most noticeable in the very beginning of this project is that these sex-workers suffered from a terrible sense of guilt. In fact they felt that their profession was so low and detestable that they considered themselves to be sinners and even lower than thieves or robbers. Moreover, it was noticed that they had no respect for any kind of academic research work. Because they noticed earlier that from all those research projects the main beneficiaries were the researchers themselves. The women got nothing out of it. With respect to the above-mentioned attitudes of these prostitutes, the project based itself on the three 'R's. The three rules of 'R' were –'Reliance' or trust, 'Recognition' or acceptance and 'Respect' or honor. Those who work in this project have to follow these three rules. They trust on their opinions and take decisions according to that, they treat all sex-workers with respect and they try their best for recognition of their profession. The project started with three services:

1. Distributing free condoms in the brothel areas.
2. Free treatment of venereal diseases by opening clinics in the brothel areas.
3. Spreading awareness about HIV/AIDS through information, education and communication.¹⁵¹

'Who would execute the project?' – This became the question which was faced by Dr. Jana at the very outset of the project. Ignoring the various opinions of people Dr. Jana started the project

¹⁵⁰ Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005, p.169

¹⁵¹ Ibid.

keeping his faith and confidence on the prostitutes themselves and taking them as the main executioners. It was hoped that since HIV and venereal diseases were the professional hazard of these sex-workers, they would do best as peer educators, or teachers who, being in the profession, would educate others. Since they would feel the problem better than outsiders and could spread better awareness regarding health problems among their own peers. As expected, the prostitutes became conscious about their own problems and the rate of use of condoms rose considerably in the brothels. Side by side it was also noticed that more and more girls came forward to avail the health services. Earlier they used to go to state run hospitals with sexual diseases and invariably faced disrespect and hatred from the staff there. In 1992 a point prevalence survey was conducted in Sonagachhi where it was noticed that the rate of use of condoms was a meager 2.7%. They used condoms mainly to prevent getting pregnant. Though by 1994 the rate was 69.3%, there was active resistance from various quarters. The prostitutes were unable to say 'No' to three categories of people – namely Police, Goons and landlords. They used various threats and tortures to compel the women to have sex without protection. A workshop was arranged to discuss about this problem and to find out ways to meet the same. It was unanimously agreed upon that without active, joint efforts, it was not possible to resist this kind of harassment. To solve the problem, in other words to unite and strengthen the women towards a life free of harassment and torture, 'Durbar Mahila Samanyoy Committee' was formed on July 12, 1995.¹⁵²

In demand of workers' rights, Durbar raised their slogan – '*We earn our bread through hard work, we want recognition as workers*'. In this regard M.K.Dutta (son of a sex-worker) and active member of Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee (DMSC) expresses his view point which throws immense light upon the self-realization sex-workers under Durbar's movement.

We believe that without harming or hurting others, if we earn money through physical labour, we can be termed as workers. Workers can be divided into two groups – 1. Those who work to manufacture or produce commodities, 2. Those whose jobs are service oriented. Sexual need starts at a certain adolescent age. Due to the socio-economic condition of our country, many people cannot satisfy their sexual needs in time. So we satisfy these people in return of some money and send them home. From this point of view, if a doctor or a lawyer, by dint of his services can be called a friend of the Society, why not us?¹⁵³

Nowadays satisfactory participation is noticed among sex-workers in taking their own decisions on various issues as well as in running the project work. In most cases, they listen to the views of other workers, but while taking decision, they follow their own. Now in West Bengal, health clinics are run by sex-workers in 47 brothel areas and in 67 areas they have succeeded in making their own

¹⁵² Ibid. p.170-171

¹⁵³ Ibid. p.171-172

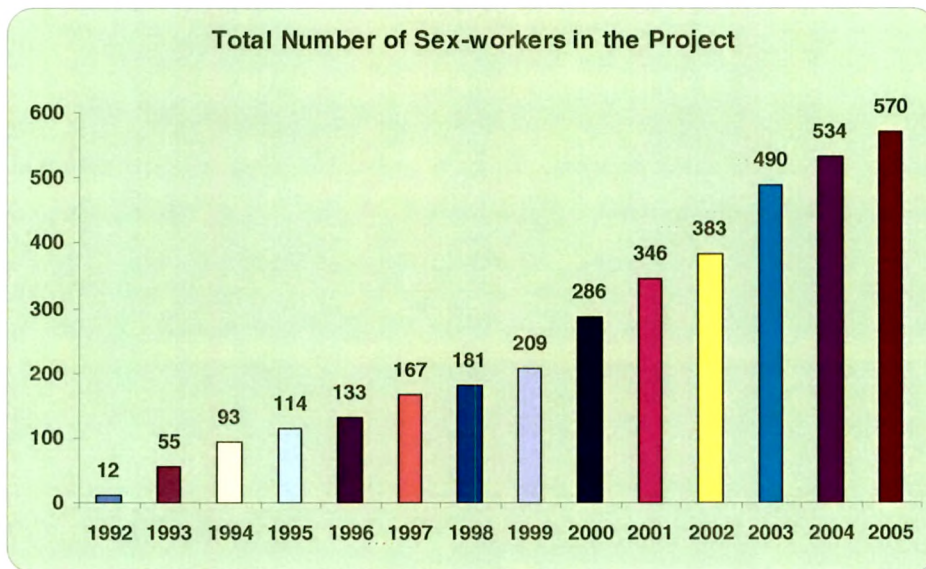
branch committees. In 1995, W.H.O. recognized this project as a 'Model Project'. This change is called a common and natural transformation, or the 'mass upheaval of a marginal community', it is not the result of the efforts of a handful of individuals, nor is it a sudden isolated upheaval. The project took shape through the active and sincere cooperation of a group of social thinkers and the vast community of sex-workers.¹⁵⁴

Till 2005 the total number of sex-workers involved in the Durbar Movement was 65,000 from all over Bengal. Through this movement, a sense of self-reliance has been infused among sex-workers to a larger extent. Assertion of rights became one of the major objectives of their entire struggle. The Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee was formed out of the Sex-workers' Health Awareness Project under the guidance of All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health (AIIH & PH) and their movement began under this project itself. Later on Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee took up the Sex-workers' Health Awareness Project under their own guidance. In this regard, M.K.Dutta has made the following observations:

There was a time when the so called civilized society involved the sex-workers in this project. Today, the scenario has just been reversed.¹⁵⁵

Table:4.14.A

Total Number of Sex-workers in the Project														
Year	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Number	12	55	93	114	133	167	181	209	286	346	383	490	534	570



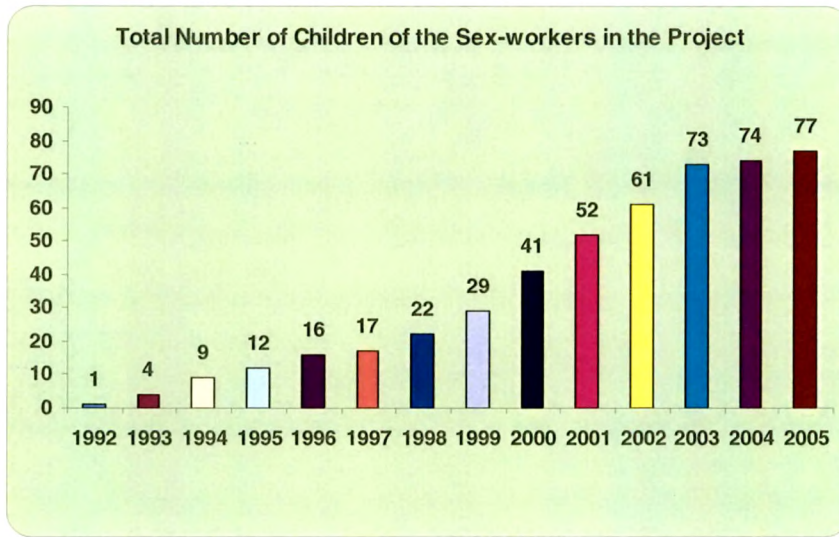
Source:Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya* , p.200.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid. p.175

¹⁵⁵ Ibid. p.174

Table: 4.14.B

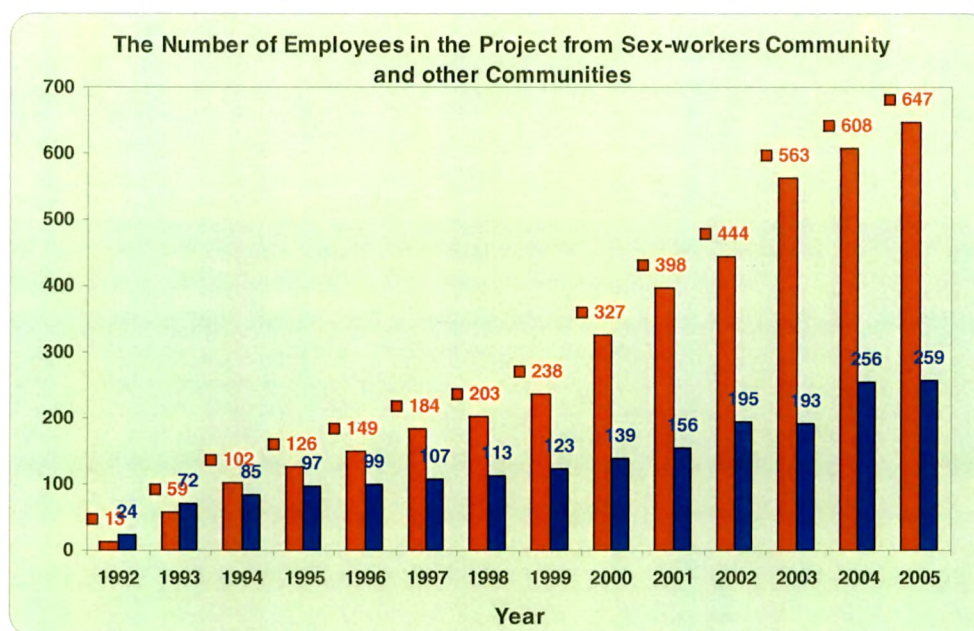
Total Number of Children of the Sex-workers in the Project														
Year	1992	1993	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005
Number	1	4	9	12	16	17	22	29	41	52	61	73	74	77



Source: Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, p.200.

Table: 4.14.C

Year	The Number of Employees in the Project from Sex-workers Community and other Community				
	Number			Percentage (%)	
	Sex-Worker's Community	Other Employees	Total	Sex-Worker's Community	Other Employees
1992	13	24	37	35.14%	64.86%
1993	59	72	131	45.04%	54.96%
1994	102	85	187	54.55%	45.45%
1995	126	97	223	56.50%	43.50%
1996	149	99	248	60.08%	39.92%
1997	184	107	291	63.23%	36.77%
1998	203	113	316	64.24%	35.76%
1999	238	123	361	65.93%	34.07%
2000	327	139	466	70.17%	29.83%
2001	398	156	554	71.84%	28.16%
2002	444	195	639	69.48%	30.52%
2003	563	193	756	74.47%	25.53%
2004	608	256	864	70.37%	29.63%
2005	647	259	906	71.41%	28.59%



Source: Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, p.200.

4.15. Self-Regulatory Board: Sex-workers' Fight against Trafficking

Before the Sonagachhi Project started or even after that many minor girls or women were forced to work as prostitutes (*Chhukris*). They were mainly seduced with false promises of love and marriage or brought with the assurance of getting employment. Later they were sold at a price of 5000 to 40,000 rupees to the owners. Mrinal Kanti Dutta says,

In 1995, when 'Durbar Mahila Samannoy Committee' was formed, it was noticed that there were frequent raids in the Sonagachhi area and girls were being picked up by the police. We went and spoke to the police and enquired, 'why are you arresting these women?' They replied that they were only arresting minor girls. We noticed that in the name of minors, they were picking up even young adults and dividing them into two groups. One – ordinary ones, two – good looking girls. The girls that were not good to look at were taken to the police station, amounts varying from 250 to 500 rupees were collected from each in the name of bail and they were allowed to go. The attractive ones were smuggled to Rescue Homes. There, they underwent various kinds of physical and mental torture, so that the girls would wish to escape. There was a nexus between brothel owners and pimps in that area. They arrived at the home as the girls' saviors. When they enquired if the girl was willing to run away, very obviously the answer would be in the affirmative. In fact she would cry to come out of that place. The rescuers bribed the Home authority something between 20,000 and 40,000 rupees to get the girl out, posing as relatives. The girl was given to understand that a much bigger amount of, say two to three hundred thousand rupees were spent to bring her out. The illiterate girls would believe this and promise to repay the amount somehow. The rate of interest in those days, as one can understand, would be very high. Then interest would accrue on interest too. Finally these girls would never be able to pay back, and become some sort of bonded laborers working for the brothel owners. Durbar believes that as in no profession children should be made to toil, for prostitution too, minors should not be allowed. We believe in establishing human rights. We are fighting for a long time to bring back human dignity and establish human rights for these sex-workers and their children.

Whoever it is – man, woman or child – if smuggled and illegally made to work – has no personal rights as a human being, he or she becomes a slave. Durbar protests against this. So, to solve all these problems, we first organized a statewide conference in the University Institute Hall in 1996, under the direction of Durbar Mahila Samannoy Committee. In this Conference some fourteen hundred sex-workers attended as delegates from all over West Bengal. It was decided in the conference that like regular organizations of lawyers or doctors, sex workers should also form an association – a self-ruled Board.¹⁵⁶ In the support of following the instances of lawyers and doctors, Mrinal Kanti says, Doctors and lawyers cannot come into the profession immediately after graduation. They have to get themselves registered in Medical Association and Bar Council respectively. Similarly, if any woman wishes to come into the profession, firstly she has to appear before the Board. Board will decide whether she is suitable for the job or not. Here only two criteria are judged – firstly, whether she is above eighteen or not. Secondly, even if she is an adult, whether she has come to join the profession on her own free will. If it is detected that a girl is still a minor or she has been compelled to come to this profession or has been seduced, then she is debarred from joining. We believe that if this rule is strictly maintained all over the world, trafficking for prostitution can be stopped.¹⁵⁷

At present to stop trafficking, two methods of operations are used all over the world. One is at the source, that is, the places from where children are being sent. Various NGOs are carrying out awareness programs to educate parents about the dangers of sending their small children to work. They are telling them not to send their minor children, they might be crippled for life to be used for begging and they might be sent to Arab Countries to ride on Camels. During Camel racing, small children are tied to the Camels' back; a fall might cause even death. Otherwise these children would be employed in small factories, shops, households or as laborers. And some might be absorbed into the sex trade. Side by side those NGOs are bringing the families of the victims under self-help groups and trying to improve their financial condition. Again some organizations are endeavoring to seal the international borders with the co-operation of Border Security Forces to stop trafficking. For example, there are five borders between Bangladesh and India. Suppose four borders are sealed. Then the fifth one would be used by smugglers. When that too is sealed, the traffickers will use waterways or hilly terrains to bring in children and women. That would mean added risk. But however they might be smuggled in, if they try to come to the sex trade, they would meet another 'border' which would mean double security. After being smuggled in, finally they would have to face the Board and get caught in their net. This is about international trafficking. Sometimes, girls travel from one state to another. For example, if a girl travels to Mumbai or Agra from Kolkata, or if a girl

¹⁵⁶ Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005. p.157-58; Police Raid: Since the prostitutes are non-government recognized, they are considered as non-registered. 'As a result whenever the policemen are in need of money or for some reasons there is dearth of cases in the police station, then they have an easy way. They meet up that demand by arresting prostitutes or their customers. Those who can give a bribe of one-hundred fifty (Rs.150) to two hundred rupees are set free in the name of bails. For those who can not give so, they are seat to court the next day with a pitty case that is in the name of street-trashes, being drunk on the road or peeing on the streets. They are given bails free of cost if the judge is good. If not, then they are fines rupees ten or at the most twenty.' - (Shrikarna, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*. p-76.)

¹⁵⁷ *ibid.* p.158

comes to Kolkata from Raipur or Bilaspur in Chhattisgarh, what then? Leave alone states, if a girl is smuggled from one area to another; like from remote villages of Sundarbans or Murshidabad to work at the brothels of Kolkata, who would resist and stop such trafficking? So Durbar demands that not only in West Bengal, all brothel areas throughout the world should have such Board to screen newcomers and work as borders to stop human trafficking altogether. About this, the author says –

Other than resisting human trafficking, it is the social duty of the Board to help in various developmental activities in their respective areas. For example, to look after the roads and drainage systems, to work for social wellbeing of the elderly and the children of sex-workers.¹⁵⁸

M.K.Dutta further states,

To maintain transparency, the Board should consist of 60% sex-workers and 40% social workers. Among social workers, there would be the councilor as the president of the Board when the area is under municipality. If it is in the village, the president should be a Panchayat member. Other than that the lawyers, doctors and social workers of the locality would be members of the Board. Like this, in 1996, we formed a self-ruled Board of Sex-workers in Rambagan, Sethbagan and Tollygunge of Kolkata and proved that this Board can work as a model for anti trafficking campaign.¹⁵⁹

In 1997, Durbar asked for Registration of the Society. But the government declined under the excuse of morality. The Government officials hesitantly said that doctors and lawyers possess moral characters. They can form Associations. And sex-workers supposedly lack moral background; therefore the government is not obliged to recognize their profession. Even though not recognized as a Board, Durbar did not sit idle. Till date Boards have been formed in 29 brothel areas of West Bengal. In 1992 it was found that 24.89% women came into this profession by compulsion or were minors. But now the percentage of such women is 1.23%. Between 1995 and June 2005, 324 girls who were wither minors or were brought against their will have been rescued. Moreover, this Board has helped in educating and giving vocational training to 65 children in Boarding Houses of 'Rahul Bidyaniketan' in Baruipur and 'Indubala Rescue Home' in Ultadanga. Side by side, 344 sex-workers in fifteen educational institutes and 722 children of prostitutes in 17 schools are getting formal and non-formal education. The writer Mrinal Kanti Dutta says about this:

Seeing our statistics, some people suspect that a major number of girls are still minors and express their opinions in meetings and seminars. We want to politely point out to them that if a girl of say 20-22 years dress up in short skirt and stands, she too looks like a small girl. If you ask why they have to dress like that, we have to say that it is a part of their job. To make themselves look young and attractive to the prospective customers, these girls dress like that. It is needless to say that unless they use make up and dress attractively to look young, no one would come as their clients. Even if they came, they would offer less money for elder women.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid. p.159-160

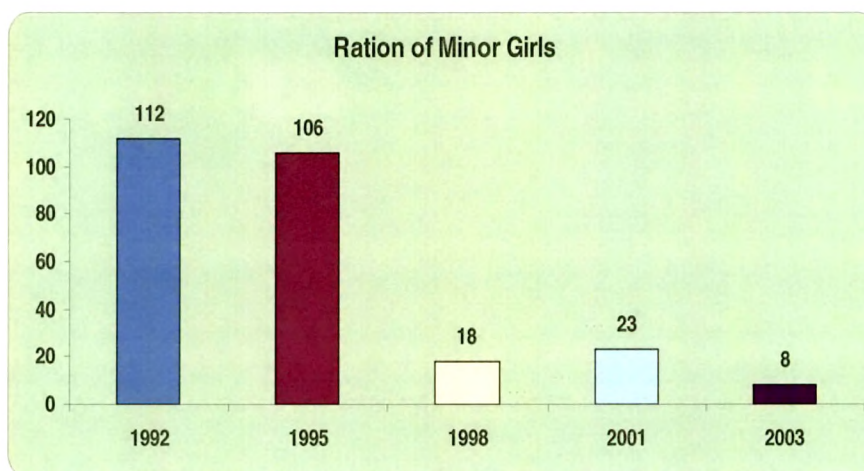
¹⁵⁹ Ibid. p.160

Some people even ask how do we catch a newcomer in this line. In reply I would say that when a new hawker comes to the station, how do the other hawkers come to know about it? This is similar; we get instant news about any new girl that might have come to the locality. Let me put on record that at present the percentage of minor girls in Sonagachhi is 3.50%. In spite of all our efforts, we agree that a few girls steal into the trade without coming to our notice. And you also have to agree that we are trying our best to reduce the number in the 28 areas where our Board has come into force.

In conclusion we have only one appeal. Ours is a unique and effective method in controlling women and child trafficking. If one talks about morality and tries to stop us from functioning, no improvement can be done to change the present state. So the state of affairs would remain in the same darkness and some NGOs will raise more funds under the excuse of a rising rate of trafficking and blame the sex-workers for their wicked ways and low moral character.¹⁶⁰

Table: 4.15.A

The rate at which the ratio of Minor girls (below 18 years of age) decreasing in the 29 areas where Board has been formed under the Sonagachhi Project			
Year	Sample Size	Minor Girls	Total %
1992	450	112	24.89%
1995	498	106	21.29%
1998	505	18	3.56%
2001	642	23	3.58%
2003	650	8	1.23%



Source: Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, p.161, Dr. Smarajit Jana (ed.), 'Namaskar' (Patrika/Journal), p.61

Table: 4.15.B

Total Rescued- A Snapshot											
Year	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	Total
Number of Board	3	3	3	3	3	3	19	27	28	28	28
Total Rescued	3	2	2	1	1	31	40	61	143	40	324

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. p.160-161

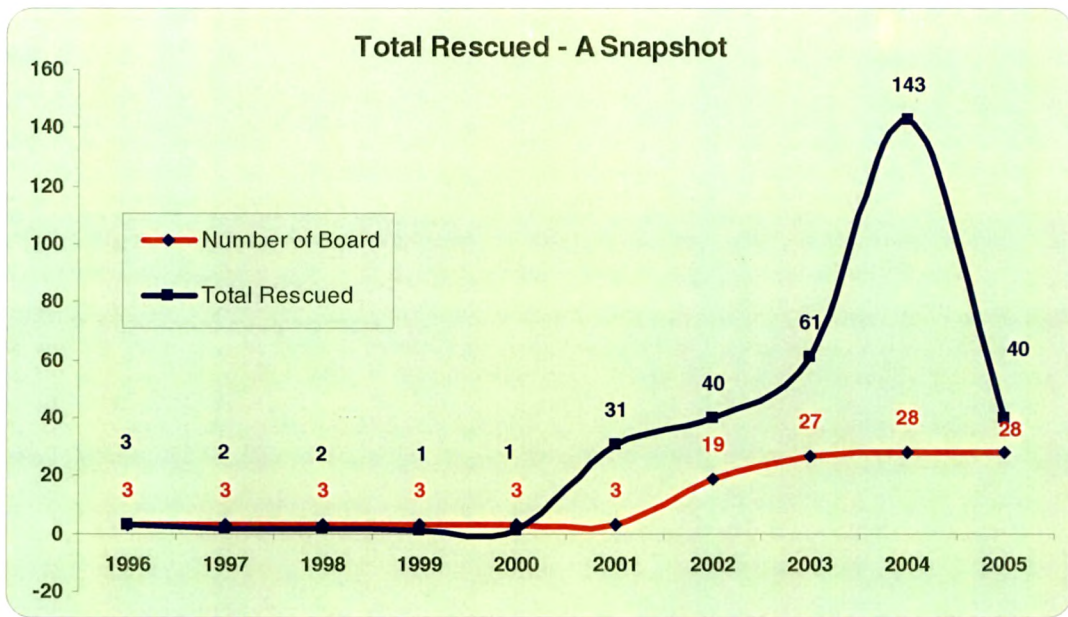
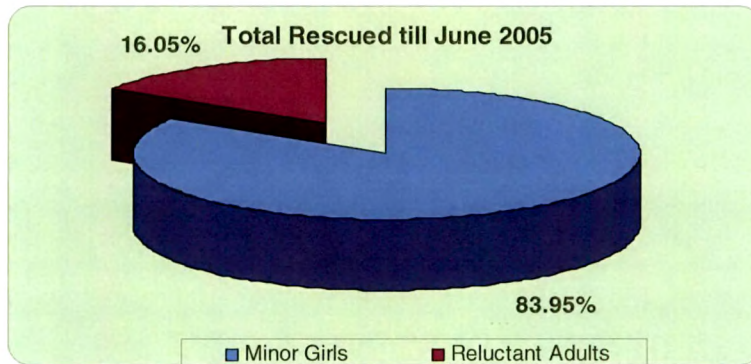


Table:4.15.C

Rescued	Number	Total %
Minor Girls	272	83.95%
Reluctant Adults	52	16.05%
Total	324	100.00%



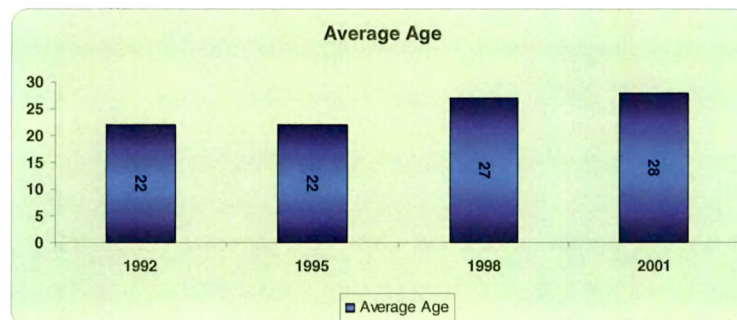
Source:Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansaty*, p.162

Table: 4.15.D

After Rescued	Number	Total %
Sent to Home	31	9.57%
Sent to own Residence	293	90.43%
Total	324	100.00%

Table:4.15.E

The rate at which the age of the Sex-workers increasing in the areas in the 28 areas where Board has been formed under the Sonagachhi Project		
Year	Sample Size	Average Age
1992	450	22
1995	498	22
1998	505	27
2001	642	28



Source:Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, p.162;
Dr. Smarajit Jana (ed.), 'Namaskar' (Patrika/Journal), p.61

Table: 4.15.H

The details about the work progress of Board and numerical representation of the number of Rescued Minor Girls and Reluctant Adult from different areas till January 2005

Sl #	Red-light Area	The Commencement of Board's	Year	Total Rescued
1	Sethbagan	5-June	1996	11
2	Tollygunje	18-July	1996	1
3	Rambagan	20-July	1996	32
4	Uluberia	9-July	2002	9
5	Kalighat	10-July	2002	4
6	Ghoradanga	12-July	2002	1
7	Domjur	15-July	2002	3
8	Khidirpur	18-July	2002	14
9	Rajgunje	20-July	2002	3
10	Durgapur	24-July	2002	9
11	Basirhat	25-July	2002	9
12	Sheoraphully	27-July	2002	8
13	Kalna	29-July	2002	1
14	Bowbazar	3-August	2002	33
15	Kanathi	12-August	2002	3
16	Asansol	17-August	2002	15
17	Dinhata	5-September	2002	5
18	Silliguri	10-September	2002	12
19	Coachbihar	24-October	2002	4
20	Chetla	24-April	2003	5
21	Lakermath	25-April	2003	1
22	Sonagachhi	29-August	2003	128
23	Shantipur	5-September	2003	1
24	Islampur	23-September	2003	2
25	Bandhaghat	28-September	2003	0
26	Bishnupur	21-November	2003	1
27	Titagarh	28-November	2003	2
28	Malda	30-March	2004	7
Total				324

Source: Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, p.163

4.16. Religious Practices in the Brothel World:

During the nineteenth and early twentieth century periodical *Lakshmi Puja* used to be performed in the houses of prostitutes. The religious fasts were also used to be observed by them. They often used to visit various temples and pilgrimages located at far away places. Worshipping the Hindu warrior god 'Kartik' and 'Swaraswati' (the goddess of learning and fine arts) were prevalent among prostitutes. Despite being segregated from the respectable society, these prostitutes are often seen

to try to maintain their religious and caste identities in the brothel world.¹⁶¹ In the rooms of the prostitutes of Calcutta red-light areas the printed image and the terracotta figures of god and goddesses – *Lakshmi, Kali, Krishna, Siva, Durga, Shitala, Swaraswati* are very common.¹⁶²

It has been observed that most of the prostitutes observe fast during *Sivaratri* (worshipping lord Siva). They practice this '*Sivaratri*' with a hope of getting a good husband. Though, it is not unknown to them that there is no such possibility in their present life. But there is always a hope behind practicing *Sivaratri* to get a good husband and peaceful life in the next birth. '*Kanika*' (a prostitute) said, 'we worship the lord Siva and observe fast on the day of the *Sivaratri* with a hope that in the next birth we may find a good husband like Siva and a peaceful life'.¹⁶³ In Sonagachhi, '*Sivaratri*' is practiced like a big festival. Prostitute irrespective of all the class, caste, religion observe fast on this day. But during the time of observing fast also they have to entertain clients/are not exempted of entertaining clients. Debrani Kar says the aim of this *puja* is to get a *bandha babu* (fixed client) like *Siva*. On the other hand in the masjid (mosque) of *Pir-Gazi* in Sonagachhi, all prostitutes irrespective of class, caste, and religion gather during the '*parab*' (festival) of Muslim for praying *Allah* and *Allah's* blessings.¹⁶⁴

Kartik is a Hindu fertility and warrior god. In early days the aim of worshipping *Kartik* or *Kartik Puja* was to get a healthy and handsome son like *Kartik*, because in those days large number of prostitute used to suffer from infertility, therefore, most of them could not give birth to child*. There is another view according to which prostitutes used to worship god *Kartik* with a hope of getting a handsome *babu* like *Kartik*.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶¹ B. Joardar, *Prostitution In Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter-India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. p.112.

¹⁶² Debrani Kar, *Kolkata Nagarnati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995. .p.97

¹⁶³ B. Joardar, *Prostitution In Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter-India Publication, New Delhi, 1984.p.113

¹⁶⁴ Debrani Kar, *Kolkata Nagarnati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995. .p.97

¹⁶⁵ Shrikarna, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003.p.29



During the present time also *Kartik puja* is considered to be big festival in the red-light areas of Calcutta. *Sabitri*, (prostitute) says:

We worship god *Kartik* just for enjoyment. A client should be brave, healthy, wealthy, handsome, nice and licentious like god *Kartik*. We think that by doing the *Kartik puja* we would be able to find a customer like *Kartik*. In fact, we have changed him into a god of ours own whose worship would fetch good, wealthy and cultured customers and obviously we have changed his image to look like babu of nineteenth century Bengal.¹⁶⁶

It can also be explained or seen in a different angle. According to Srikarna, 'after working continuously throughout the year these prostitutes arrange for the festivals in order to enjoy a little.'¹⁶⁷ But when the religious festival bring enjoyment and happiness to the people of society and is also considered as a source of enjoyment in the lives of prostitutes as well, on the contrary, sometimes they are even used as an exploitative machinery to subjugate prostitutes by bringing striking blow on their financial conditions. If any new girl joined the house, it was compulsory for her to do the Puja. If that was not possible – they chose a girl who was pretty, or who had more money or who did not have children and left a clay idol of '*Kartik*' in front of her doorstep at night. Someone quietly placed an idol on her threshold with a letter tied to its hand with a thread.

The letter would be like this:

Mother, I am roaming around for a place to stay. Nobody gave me place. If you allow, I would stay in your house.¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ B. Joardar, *Prostitution In Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter-India Publication, New Delhi, 1984.p.117; My soul gratitude would be acknowledged to the author B. Joardar as the statement of *Sabitri* (prostitute) has been taken from his book entitled *Prostitution In Historical and Modern Perspectives*, Inter-India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. *Sabitri* was old prostitutes who use to practice her trade at Chinsura in the district of Hoogly, 40kms off from Calcutta proper in the north-west.p.116-17

¹⁶⁷ Shrikarna, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003. p.29

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.* p.30

So the person who received this idol had to arrange for the Puja compulsorily. Not even the landlady would let her go – it meant bad omen and if not worshipped, the house might suffer from ill-luck. But despite all odds (financial inability to perform the puja) they perform the puja. Most of the prostitutes in the red-light area are god fearing, moreover illiteracy generates tremendous superstitions among them which largely might cost their blind belief in religion and another factor is the tremendous mental insecurity in the lives of the prostitutes make them much more dependant on the religion as a great/staunch support in their lives. And this weakness is always capitalized by the exploitative elements like hoodlums etc. The clients are the only source of income for the prostitutes. That is why, in any case, prostitutes try to please gods to keep the flow of the customers intact and business on. Therefore, they have got a tremendous mental attachment with their religion and religious belief. Let us take up Srikarna's observation in this regard:

It was a strange sight! In the morning I saw the girl who got the idol shouting abuses to the one who dropped the idol; arranging for puja meant expenses. The same girl in the evening was joining the merry-making and dancing all along the road to the Ganges to immerse the idol.¹⁶⁹

The normal day for *Kartik* Puja is on the last day of the month *Kartik* or the 17th of November in the English calendar. From the midnight of the 17th – the worship is done four times during the night at regular intervals. After each Puja or worship the offerings are kept aside and again fresh puja started with fresh fruits etc. After the last worship, the 'Yagna' and the 'aarti' (worshipping with lamp along with tinkling of bells in front of the God) were done. Those who cannot afford, of course do not do this four-part worship – they finish with one. But as a rule, once you start *Kartik* Puja, you have to do it three more times successively. The last puja is called *Kartik's Udjapan* where one has to put twin idols of *Kartik* and Ganesh (the elephant-headed God, who happens to be *Kartik's* brother). Once 'Udjapan' is done, usually no one would drop idol in front of the worshipper's house ever in the future. At the night of the Puja all would eat a vegetarian dish 'Khichri' (mix of rice and pulses). But liquor is compulsory. After food and drink whole night merry making would continue with dance and music along the drummers ('Dhulis') hired for the purpose. From morning large-scale cooking starts – with a huge clay oven made for the purpose in the open, lighted with firewood. Along with cooking, sipping of liquor continues. With the beat of 'Dhulis, girls swinging their hips and singing, it takes the look of a gala picnic.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. p.30-31



টুলিদের বাজনার তালে তালে কোমর দোলানোর সুযোগ সারা বছরে একবারই মেলে।

Sex-workers singing and dancing

(Source: Babuder Andarmahal Theke)

In the evening all this merry-making vanishes. Just as the mother sobs before her child leaves for good, *Kartik's* mother (worshipper) cries inconsolably from evening. Even though the poor girls spend a lot in this 'puja', it is also considered to be the only source of entertainment for the sex-workers. So *Kartik* remains the main festival of the locality.¹⁷⁰

On the day of *Kartik puja*, the business of prostitute is suspended for the day in honour of Lord *Kartik*. *Champa Sapui* of *Sonagachhi* said in this regard:

We place god above everything else, certainly above business and clients and money. So, this one day in the year we devote to the only god we really believe in.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. p.31-32



জেজা কার্তিক দিবে কার্তিকের উদ্‌যাপন।

Sex-worker worshipping god Kartik

(Source: Babuder Andarmahal Theke)

Champa Sapui was 28 years old and had already become aged by brothel standards. She had an occasional client but despite that fact she had already come across the taste of the loneliness and as the permanent acceptance is mostly absent in the profession of prostitution, therefore, Champa also came across the experience of the rejection, because rejection is inevitable in the sex-industry. Champa came to this profession at the age of 15, which was according to her 'the peak of my productivity'. By the growing age, once much in demand, Champabai started losing her business, which is a common fact in the lives of prostitutes and Champa was deserted by her old customer. She said expressing her grief:

My old babus have left me, my parents back at Sandeshkhali, in the North 24 Parganas have refused to take me in because I am a bad girl, they say. It is my money that sustains them, but that's besides the point.

Being thrown out by all the people, she became the true victim of the loneliness. Out of sheer loneliness now she just wanted a child because she felt that only a child could give her a sense of belonging. But doctor's report had declared that due to too much of sexual activities she had already got severe infections and infertility. After this report got declared, she turned herself to god and miracles. She asked Kartik for a son, as beautiful as the god himself. It was the main reason for performing Kartik puja. It was the third time that she was performing the puja with the hope of a child. In her own words:

If I still do not become pregnant, I will not do the puja next year.

'There are others at Sonagachhi, younger than Champa, who see in the god the spouse they will never get but will keep hoping for: A caring husbands, who will satisfy their desires but who will not

impregnate them, for pregnancy means temporary retirements from business. Who but Kartik, whom folklores describe as sterile, can fit the bill better? The prostitutes do not buy the images of Kartik themselves. The touts, who solicit client, on 'working' days, buy the images place them secretly in front of the woman's home in the dead of night, two or three days before the puja.' In the morning of the puja the images are taken by the women inside the home and the preparation for the puja begins. The alpona is drawn, flowers are bought and the papers are used to decorate the room. The 'devars' (touts who get the images are referred to as brother-in law as part of an old and welcome joke) are invited for the prosad and bhog. 'For a change, there is vegetarian fare in these quarters on Kartik puja. As part of the elaborate celebrations, there will be loud speaker blaring music to accompany beating of drums, arranged by the touts. It is a perfect puja scene, much like any other middle class joint family. ...these women are dressed in new saris, march in a line to take a bath in the ganges, before they start the puja.'¹⁷¹

During early times Swaraswati puja was one of the main puja practiced by prostitutes. Though in the present time the number of Swaraswati puja got reduced but still it is existing with its own significance. According to Hindu tradition, Swaraswati is a goddess of learning and fine arts. Thus 'she is associated with the courtesans for her being the presiding deity of sixty-four kalas (art) which they should learn'.¹⁷² As it was essential for baijis to cultivate skills/proficiency in the various art like dance, song etc. to entertain clients, therefore, Swaraswati puja or worshipping Swaraswati was widely practiced by them otherwise they had a fear of losing their skills in the art.¹⁷³ In early twentieth century Manada's statements also focused on the prevalence of performance of various rituals and the Swaraswati puja amongst prostitutes, when she said, 'I... practiced some rituals. Swaraswati Puja was one of them which were never missed by me.'¹⁷⁴ In the nights of Kartik and Swaraswati pujas, the prostitutes used to receive a handsome amount of tips from their babus (clients). During such pujas, the prostitutes used to invite most of the paramour and friends with a warm heart. Regarding the payment of tips, the *babus* in fact use to involve themselves in competition. If a *babu* offered rupees five, the other *babu* gave an offer of rupees ten, while another *babus* offer rupees twenty only. The more and more the competition was, the more and more was the earning of the prostitutes. Like the gentleman's house, there was no dearth of reception and arrangements of good dishes.¹⁷⁵ In the city of Calcutta, the number of pompous *Swaraswati puja*

¹⁷¹ Jhimli Mukherje, *Prostitutes to Celebrate Kartik Puja: A Day of Hope in City Brothels*, the Statesman, 16th November, 1993.

¹⁷² Shrikarna, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003. P.116

¹⁷³ Ibid. p.29

¹⁷⁴ Manada Devi, *Sikshita Patitar Atmcharit*, (autobiography of an educated prostitute), Chirayat Prakashan, Kolkata, 2004. p.82

¹⁷⁵ Meghnad Gupta, *Raater Kolkata*, p. 28-29. In this regard translation has been taken from B.Joardar, *Prostitution in nineteenth and twentieth Century Calcutta*. p.54-55.

was more in the brothel houses than in the *Grihastha bari* (house of gentry).¹⁷⁶ We find a different explanation of performing *Swaraswati puja* from the work of B. Joardar where *Arati* (prostitute) said: we worship as she is unmarried and happens to be of doubtful character. The same answer was given by many other prostitutes.¹⁷⁷

During the post independent era, the performance of *Shitala puja* increased in the red-light areas. It is said that soon after the independence some of the red-light areas suffered from chicken-pox. Though it had numerous medical reasons, but most of the female were unaware of the vaccination for this disease. The municipal corporation arranges vaccination every year but since the injection of this vaccination brings in fever and pain along with it, most of the girls refrained from taking this vaccination and they do not even allow their kids to have this vaccination. That is why the disease was very common in the red-light areas. In order to get rid of this disease they started worshipping goddess *Kanchakheko Shitala*. The aim of performing *Shitala puja* was to please goddess *Shitala*. Thus in course of time *Shitala puja* became an important festival in the red light areas of Calcutta. Another reason is that during the *Shitala puja*, one could take only vegetarian food and in breakfast and lunch, they generally eat '*panta rice*' (rice soaked in water). It is believed that having this food keeps the body cool; hence it reduces the possibility of chicken-pox. Apart from this, like in Kartik puja, during *Shitala puja* too, different kind of function takes place in the '*mandap*' (the place where the puja is performed). This includes kawali, song, dance, play etc. This is also one of the reasons for which *Shitala puja* has acquired popularity in the red-light areas.¹⁷⁸

There are several temples, mosques in almost all red-light areas of Calcutta. The famous Shitala temple of Harkata lane was constructed by the active cooperation of prostitutes of this red-light area. Kalighat temple is located in the Kalighat red-light area. There also we find several ancient temples in this red-light area. There are numerous temples and mosques situated in the red-light areas of Watgunge and Sonagachhi.¹⁷⁹

The religious festivals are often used as exploitative machinery by the hoodlums to subjugate prostitutes through the extortion of huge amount of subscriptions from them. Thus it can be said that 'religious beliefs' are exploited and 'religious festivals' are used as a tool by the anti-socials to exert power on this marginalised section. If any new girl comes in the area, whether she wants or not, she has to cater to the *dadas* of the locality. If she does not agree, she would be harassed in

¹⁷⁶ B. Joardar, *Prostitution in Nineteenth and early twentieth century Calcutta*, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi 1985. p. 41

¹⁷⁷ B. Joardar, *Prostitution In Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter-India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. p.116

¹⁷⁸ Shrikarna, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003.p.32

¹⁷⁹ Debrani Kar, *Kolkata Nagarnati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995. .p.97.

different ways. The goons would tease them, push or trip them while walking on the streets. They would drink and create nuisance in front of their houses, would handover a bill of an exorbitant amount during festivals. Finally the new girl has to come to terms with the local musclemen, or else she has to leave the place. If the girl pays a good amount at Kali Puja, there would be no respite; next comes Jagadhatri Puja. After that, there is Saraswati Puja, Id and a series of other festivals. Shivratri, Gajan, Brahma Puja, Durga Puja and above all Sheetala Puja are to name a few. Finally the girl would break down under pressure. If nothing else works, there is the last one—*Kartik* Puja, the biggest festival exclusively of the prostitutes' quarters. In the 'red light area' *Kartik* Puja is the festival of the sex-workers themselves, celebrating the worship of the God, *Kartik*. A trick is used by the local Dadas to force the unwilling girls. The previous night, an idol of the god *Kartik* is left at the doorstep of the marked building. Next morning it would be found lying at the entrance. Then the Masi or the landlady is pressurized to convince the girl that if Puja was not conducted, it would bring bad omen to the house. So, the girl has to make arrangements, which would mean an expenditure of at least eight to ten thousand rupees. This is just one form of harassment. Money is needed not only for the priest and the accessories, a number of musicians with drums (Dhak) and flutes has to be hired for a few days, their stay and food has to be arranged. Then there is the big party on the day after the Puja is over. In this party all the dadas are invited, and the main course in the menu would be Drinks. Among the other guests are family people, all the members of the house and those who help on the day of immersion of the god. So *Kartik* Puja meant expenditure of at least 8 – 10 thousand rupees. This is the conditions of new girls. Now let us see the plight of the old veterans. They also has the same treatment if they are upright, protested on some wrongs done, or refused to shell out the required amount of donations to the Dadas. If the harassment is too much, they will have to finally leave the locality.¹⁸⁰

Role of Durbar:

After the Sonagachhi project started, these dadas are approached and meetings and discussions are being arranged to explain to the Dadas that what they were doing is wrong. Similarly the girls are also being assured that they need not take anyone to their rooms against their will. If any problem is created, 'Durbar' would tackle the situation. Finally, the extortion of money by way of donation is under the strict vigil of 'Durbar'. Earlier while girls were forced to shell out 100 rupees, now they give any amount according to their own sweet will. But harassing customers by demanding money cannot be totally controlled. Once the boys of a club near Kalighat were extracting donation from people during Kali Puja; they were so powerful that nobody dared to protest. First the branch

¹⁸⁰ Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005. p.109-110

members of 'Durbar' went and protested. When that did not work, the central committee gave written complaint to the state government. For this reason the president of the organisation, 'Durbar', Ms. Ratna Debnath and the treasurer Ms. Jharna Ghosh were manhandled. Finally the matter was taken to serious heights. The police-station was 'gheraoed' and the news was broadcast over television. Then the culprits were arrested and the forcible extortion of donation came to an end. At present, in the red light area, the number of *Kartik* Pujas has increased. But there is no coercion and only pure fun and enjoyment. Earlier the girls were singled out and tricked into conducting the Puja and had to do it on compulsion. Now the members of 'Durbar' have explained to the girls, that Pujas are for enjoyment. Nobody can force you to do it. Nowadays, the girls collect one or two rupees from customers and add their own money and make it a joint venture. On this yearly occasion, the landladies too, willfully donate money and the people of the locality are invited to the feast.¹⁸¹ But with the rise of Durbar a tremendous opposition has been raised against all kinds of exploitations and this sort of extortions and that have also succeeded to certain extent. But it cannot be claimed that these sorts of exploitations have been totally uprooted from the red-light areas and the power of *gundas* or hoodlums is entirely brought under control. The nature of the exploitation carried by the hoodlums in this regard varies from one red-light area to another. If it is too much rampant in one red-light area, some other red-light areas may be having different scene in sharp contrast to the former.

Though prostitutes have been subjected to the public humiliation and segregation in the society it is important to mention here that the making of the image of goddess Durga is not considered proper until it is made of the clay which is collected from the 'earthen floor' near the 'threshold (*beshyadawara-mrittika*)' of the prostitute's house. The popular sayings behind this is that, the 'threshold' of the prostitute's house is the last point where the clay is purest since all the virtues were accumulated at this point which were 'shed by the men who lost them once they entered a prostitute's room! By turning her into an appendage to religious rites, the ingenious Bengali society made a religious virtue of a social necessity'.¹⁸²

Durga Puja, brings no relief to prostitutes as they have to entertain ten to twenty clients a night. This period of festival is one of the best season for their profession when they can earn as a lot. The irony is that, this puja is an amusement for the entire society and men flock to brothels for their enjoyment. But the prostitutes have to entertain them at the cost of their (prostitute's) own happiness and enjoyment. The hands with which they earn money in the darkness of night, in the

¹⁸¹ Ibid. p.110-112

¹⁸² Sumanta Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast*, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 2000. p.24

next morning with the same hand they pay homage to goddess *Durga*.¹⁸³ But, there is also exception in this case. Many prostitutes also celebrate Durga Puja besides entertaining clients in this season. Like all other localities of Kolkata, Sonagachhi also has its pandal during the Durga Puja. During this year sex-workers would be busier than usual, they would find time to visit the Devi to offer *pronami* and give *anjali*. Sadhana Mukherjee, a resident of the Sonagachhi said in this regard, 'we do visit neighbouring pandals. No one bars us from entering, but we can feel the under-current of tension. So we go to our own Puja Mandop for *anjali*' (paying homage). The one ritual that is never missed by the sex-workers is the *Sindur-Khela* on *Bijoya Dashami*. Tradition associates loss of virginity with marriage. This is what makes the sex-workers virtually 'married'. Shikha Das, a sex-worker from Sonagachhi said, "sex-workers perform *sindur-khela* and pray for the health and long life of their 'husbands'."¹⁸⁴ A child of sex-worker, 10 years old Bhola Sahu's statements largely focus on the religious mentality/belief of the prostitutes: 'Everybody in *Lalbatti* area is god-fearing. All the *mashis* have personal gods. We see so many debates over religion and god.'¹⁸⁵ During the puja prostitutes also buy new dresses for themselves and send gifts which comprise new dress and other things, to their families. The details of this have already been mentioned in the section entitled, 'Best Time and Season to Work'.

During 2002, in the month of August, members of Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee protested against an 'age-old' custom: 'using earth from the doorsteps of sex-workers', in Durga Puja, which constitute an integral part of the ritual of this festival and raised question to this custom. The ritual is considered as a means of showing disrespect to the community. The contemporary President of Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee (DMSC), Swapna Gayen said, 'we will not stop anyone from taking the piece of earth'. But according to her, DMSC would distribute leaflets and members would talk to those who practice the tradition. In this regard, she said, 'in the course of a discussion at a recent workshop, we felt it was a means of ostracizing us from the rest of society.'

¹⁸³ Debrani Kar, *Kolkatar Nagamati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1995. . p.98

¹⁸⁴ Priyanka Dam, Sex-workers' Children will enjoy themselves. 1999.

¹⁸⁵ Teena Baruah, *Sonagachhi's Kids open a Third eye, and You Discover a World*, The Indian Express - Express News line, New Delhi, 24th January, 2004.



AnandabazarPatrika, 28th Aug, 2002

Sex-workers protesting against an 'age-old' custom of using '*Beshyadwaramritika*' in Durga Puja

The Kalighat priest does not find anything 'derogatory' about the ritual. Rather, it recognizes that sex-workers have role in the festival. Historian Professor Sukumari Bhattacharjee has given the historical explanation to this tradition and finds this ritual as a symbol of empowering the prostitutes. She said, 'when the practice first evolved hundreds of years ago, it was never intended to be an insult to sex-workers. They were seen as symbols of fertility. Goddess Durga is also symbol fertility. But if prostitutes think that this is an insult to them then it should certainly be stopped.'¹⁸⁶ According to the scholars of Hindu literature and Religious Traditionalist, the ritual, an integral part of the puja, emphasizes the all encompassing nature of the festival and actually helps give honour and societal recognition to the sex-workers. However, dismissing the argument, president of DMSC, Swapna Gayen, reasons, "on the contrary, the practice stigmatizes us and enforces our ostracism from the society. It actually reinforces our demarcation as 'prostitutes'. What is the difference between the soil outside our homes and the soil of other homes? We do not want any kind of pity doled out by the society or that sort of false honour. We want due respect as human beings and as women." An indignation quite justified, if ones take into account the other common beliefs that the mud collected from outside the brothels doors is associated with pity and virtue, since that's where one leaves one's virtue and goodness while entering a brothel with only the vile and base instinct of

¹⁸⁶ Staff Reporter, *Sex-workers Oppose Durga Puja Ritual*, The Statesman, Kolkata, Thursday, 29th August, 2002; Staff Reporter: *Beshyalay ki Mitti Se Pratimaye Bananerpar Aitraaj Hai Baranganaoko*, Sanmaarg, Kolkata, Thursday, 29th August, 2002.

lust and desire. DMSC Treasurer, Roma Debnath says, "we're not dustbins, where men leave their virtues and indulge in sin. We give pleasure and happiness to men, who come to us. We also earn a living by serving people with our bodies. This custom demeans us by implying that we are dirty. What about the men who derives pleasure from our bodies? And does that mean when these men leave they can conveniently collect their goodness from outside our doors and go back as clean saints? When we are thriving to get legal recognition as workers, how can we allow such ritual to go on?" DMSC Secretary Angura Begum points out, "this practice is a manifestation of our male dominated society. It is an insult to womanhood based on men's classification of 'good' and 'bad'. We should unite and fight for our rights as human beings. It is high time, we protested." Luckily their protests had not gone waste either. Apart from bringing public awareness, some Durga Puja organizers had even agreed to do away with the ritual. The DMSC members, however, assert that their aim is not to wage a war against society: "we have only expressed reservations against the practice and have appealed to people to put an end to it. But we cannot stand guarding our doors or forcefully stop people from collecting the soil. Many age-old practices like *sati*, animal sacrifice, and child marriage have been stopped, owing to public awareness. If the people become sensitive to our problems, even this discriminatory ritual can be stopped." And going by the time-tested dictum, old order changeth giving place to the new, the DMSC members have perhaps fired the first salvo at the elimination of this discriminatory ritual by voicing their protest.¹⁸⁷

With the rise of sex-workers' movement gradually, some transformation has started being occurred in the ideological ground of the society and its social perception. The sex-worker's movement and raising protest against various social discriminations succeeded to leave an impact to certain extent on some people of the society. In the year of 2004, the '*Maitri Sangha Durga Puja Committee*' of North Calcutta and Shatadal club, Specialty of these two committees was to break the age old culture. They were able to eradicate the thin line between morality and immorality. The reason behind describing this point here is because both these two pujas take place in the northern Calcutta which is very close the red-light areas. The sex-workers from the Sonagachi red-light area throng this place during the puja. Though, they do it every single day, after the sun sets. But during the Durga puja, rushing to this place is like being in the light. But no body from Maitri Sangha of Darjee para or from Shatadal club of Sonagachi restricts the prostitutes from coming to this place. On the 64th anniversary year of Maitri Sangha in 2004, the theme was based on the resemblance of

¹⁸⁷ Kakoli Poddar, *Defying Discrimination?: Gender Bias*, Savya Society, November 2002. p.84; Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee – a forum of 60,000 sex-workers and their children, issued an appeal to Durga Puja organizers this Dusserra gone by to put an end to the ritual, which they argue is demeaning and insulting. Since its formation in 1997, DMSC has lived upto its name (Durbar, in Bengali means inexpressable) doing commendable work for the rights of sex-workers, waging successful battles for their health and financial upliftment and fighting against their exploitation and social discrimination.

Temple of Rajasthan and for Shatadal club on their 66th anniversary; their theme was based on the resemblance of Rajbari. But in both these puja, the entry for the sex-workers were approved. The sex-workers of Sonagachi give subscription according to their capability. On the day of Puja, they maintain fast and if required they also cut the fruits which would be offered to god, decorate the stage with flowers. They also offer prayers to the goddess. From the fair in Darjeepara's play ground to getting *prosaad* – these all are intrinsically attached to the lives of the sex-workers. Even during the immersion of the goddess of Darji para, the procession takes a round of the Sonagachi locality. But even after doing all these, it feels like, 'there is still darkness, and the barrier still exists'. When the sex-workers like Sapna, Sandhya, Champa hesitate to put vermilion in the forehead of the other house-wives, then they feel like why the sex-workers do not have a place in the puja of their own locality? When the likes of Anima, Sampa thinks whether the general public would participate if the sex-workers organize Durga Puja? Where as these same sex-workers organize Kartik Puja, Shitala Puja in their locality. There was a time when the making of the goddess was not possible without using the earth of the brothel areas. But, from 2003, with the support and endeavour of Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee, this tradition was closed in some areas. But with the arrival of *Sharadiya*, these all question mesmerize the soul of the sex-workers.¹⁸⁸ In 2004, *Baaishe Palli* (a local club of South Calcutta) *Saarbojanin* puja of the Bhavanipur Northern Park had thought of something new though not in their theme of the puja but in one of their attempt with regard to the inauguration of their puja. On the *Panchami day*, the members of the Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee, (an organization of the sex-workers) were supposed to inaugurate the puja of the *Baaishe Palli*. According to the members of the puja committee, 'if the earth of the brothel area can be used to make the goddess, why sex-workers cannot come to inaugurate the puja? Durga Puja means worshipping the power of women; and we are delighted on the inclusion and acceptance of these insulted, subjugated and neglected female workers on this occasion.'¹⁸⁹

The above incident is really the sign of the revolutionary transformation that is gradually occurring in the thought process of some section of people in the society. But it can never be denied or overshadowed that the prostitutes are till date considered more as ostracized community rather than as human beings and women. This aspect is very much evident from the fast hand testimonies which have already been used in the above writings. And from this psychology, a sense of self-reliance has been infused among them with the rise of sex-worker's movement which has further introduced voice to the sex-workers. Thus, sex-workers raise a few pertinent questions about continuing an obsolete, discriminatory practice. Which have already been mentioned above. But, in

¹⁸⁸ Madhuchhanda Chakroborty, *Oder O Nijaswa Puja Royechhe*, Bartamaan, Tuesday, 19th October, 2004.

¹⁸⁹ Staff Reporter, *Natun Bhabna*, Ananda Bazar Patrika, Kolkata, Monday, 18th October, 2004.

this regard, are we really able to give an answer to their questions? Raising voice against various social discriminations can also be considered as means to get incorporated or get closer to the mainstream society from where once they had been fallen.

Religion and Caste

The number of the Hindu prostitutes was much more dominant in the total population of prostitutes in Bengal. The *baijis* were mostly Mohamedans while the *keertanwallis* were Hindus. There was the preponderance of Hindu ordinary prostitutes over the number of the Muslim ordinary prostitutes. In the early twentieth century the main reason of this preponderance was that most of the Mohamedan prostitutes assumed Hindu names in fear of losing Hindu clients. Because, Hindu clients generally used to show reluctance in visiting Muslim prostitutes. But at the same time, the Muslim clients did not have such prejudice. Here it can be mentioned that the number of Hindu clients were numerically dominant, therefore, Muslim prostitutes could not be having the choice of their personal preferences and confined themselves to any kind of caste as well as religious prejudice. The preponderance of Hindu prostitutes over Muslim prostitutes could be reasoned; in another way that the Hindus were might be numerically dominant in the total population of contemporary Bengal during the first half of twentieth century. Assuming such Hindu names by Muslim prostitutes was very much common. As an example one case can be cited here. *Nrityakali* was a Muslim prostitute of Monirampur. But her name was in orthodox Hindu style. Her mother *Hemlata* had built a grave by the side of Monirampur road. The wife of a Pathan named *Baktar Ali* became a prostitute at Bangalipur and assumed the name of *Kusumkumari*, a Hindu name in/with its typical style.

Sunita Devi the beautiful Indian model of Jacob Epstein the sculptor assumed the name of a high caste Hindu woman. She had visited England first at the time of the British Empire exhibition at Wembley and was known as a Hindu. She was however, said to have told Mr. & Mrs. Epstein that she was Mrs. Armina Peerbhoy and had separated from her husband. So, she was not a Hindu and the Hindu name was apparently used 'to lend an air of mystery to her person'. The European and Anglo Indian girls were all christians. Some of the girls who had Indian customers had been known to take Hindu name with the word *Devi* which used to signify a Brahmin. They followed the example of the Anglo-Indian film girls who used to adopt Hindu names to make them attractive to 'Hindu cinema goers'. There were also Jewish prostitutes in Bowbazar locality of Calcutta. These women did not practice prostitution openly. The Japanese prostitutes used to follow their own religion.¹⁹⁰

¹⁹⁰ S. N. Mukherjee, *Prostitution in India*, DasGupta & Co, Calcutta, 1936. p.131-132

A report of Police Branch: Judicial Dept, 1903 states that during this year there were about 14,000 prostitutes in the town of Calcutta:¹⁹¹

Table: 4.16.A

Europeans (no Eng-women)	56
Asiatic Jewesses	30 to 40
Japanese	40
Natives	Rest Are
Judicial Dept: Police 1903	

A considerable amount of statistical information on the caste, race as well as religion wise distribution of prostitutes is procurable from the census from early 20th century and archival documents. In the census volume of 1901, the following figures for Calcutta town and suburbs are given:¹⁹²

Table: 4.16.B

Census:- 1901	
Total Number of prostitutes	18,352
Hindus	16,185
Muhammadans	2,027
Christians	55
Others	85

The Hindu prostitutes hailed from all the different castes of the Hindu community but the lower caste were numerically more dominant than the higher castes. The lower caste mostly comprised the weaver, washerman, the barbar, *Kaibartya* or tillar of the soil, goila or the milkman etc. and even the hari caste were also dominant in these low caste women than the higher castes like *Brahmin*, *Kayestha* or *Baidya*. In the census of India 1911, it has been found out that one fifth of the prostitutes of Calcutta were *Kaibartya* by caste. One out of every five, *Baishnab* females of Calcutta was a professional prostitutes. The one tenth of the total prostitutes were *Kayesthya* by caste. It appears from the census that Hindus formed 90% of the total number of prostitutes. The prostitutes

¹⁹¹ *Strengthening the Law of Checking*, File No. P2A-10(1-2), proce.-1-3, August 1903 [Judicial Dept: Police Branch]

¹⁹² *Prostitution(s) Among Indian in Calcutta": condition of brothel in Bengal*, File P.14B-3 of 1917, progs. 14-19, July 1918, [Political Dept: Police Branch]. IV p.67.

in the city of Calcutta mainly comprised 2,962 Kaibartya, 1770 Baishnabs, 1408 Kayesthya, 844 Sadgopes and 803 Muslim Sikhs.¹⁹³

Table: 4.16.C

Caste-wise Distribution of Prostitutes in Calcutta Census of 1911		
Castes	Number	%
Kaibartya	2,962	38.04%
Baishnabs	1,770	22.73%
Kayesthyas	1,408	18.08%
Sadgopes	844	10.84%
Muslim Sikhs	803	10.31%
Total	7,787	100.00%

Source: From Census of India - 1911

In the census report of 1921 the number of Goanese prostitutes was 510 out of 2,995 public women. In 1936 also the Goanese prostitutes formed a dominant part of the public women in Bombay.

Among the European prostitutes, the dominant were English women, French women, Russians, Italians, Greeks and Austrians. The numbers of European prostitutes were found in the brothel were as follows:

Table: 4.16.D

Number of European Prostitutes in Brothels of Calcutta	
Total in Calcutta	41
French	25
Russians	10
Italians	1
Greeks	1
Austrians	1
Other nationality	3

Most of the European prostitutes were French women and Russians. In Calcutta the number of European prostitutes was larger than that given in the census. The number of women living in the known brothel was only 45. But there were numerous European women, mainly French – ex-prostitutes used to live as mistress of European Indian ‘nobles’. The number of European prostitutes used to get increased in every year during the season when ‘touring theatrical and opera parties’ from Europe and America used to visit the city – Calcutta. The dancing girls and artistes

¹⁹³ B. Joardar, *Prostitution in Nineteenth and early twentieth century Calcutta*, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi 1985. p.39-40

associated with these parties used to get engaged in/with the sex selling trade during their short time visit.¹⁹⁴

Division of prostitutes according to the religion clearly appeared from the census of 1931 (published in 1933):¹⁹⁵

Table: 4.16.E

Division of Prostitutes According to Religion:

SI. No.	Name of the Religion	Number of Prostitutes according to the religion	Population
1	Hindu	6,995	822,293
2	Mohammeden	302	311,155
3	Christian	86	17,484
4	Buddhists	27	3,021
5	Other (Jain, Parsee, Sikh, Jew, indefinite beliefs etc.)	30	12,781
Total		7,440	1,196,734

From an archival record it is known that the total number of prostitute in 1941 was about 43,510 in Bengal. Among them 31,214 were Hindus and 11,936 were Mohammedans.¹⁹⁶

Prostitutes are always considered as 'outcaste'. But one of the most curious fact about these prostitutes, was strict observation of the caste distinction in the matter of eating amongst themselves. A prostitute who used to entertain even a man belong to the lowest caste or even a Muslim client, would think it below her dignity to eat with a prostitute of lower caste than her. Prostitutes have always been religious and great devotee of the god. In the early twentieth century also the temples and pilgrimages were often visited by the prostitutes. In Calcutta, the prostitutes might be seen taking their bath in the ganges in early morning. They have a belief that not only the body would be purified with the water but it also purified the soul.¹⁹⁷

In the beginning of 20th century, a Hindu prostitute 'who was in the keeping of a Muslim' had been outcasted by her sisters. But gradually, this kind of caste rigidity among them was seen to get disappeared. The Hindu prostitute of city of Calcutta of suburbs used to 'perform periodical *Lakshmi* puja in their house... they (prostitute) would observe the religious fast and would go to temples and shrines and even on pilgrimages.'¹⁹⁸ Swaraswati, the goddess of learning and fine arts and Kartik, 'the god chivalry' were the favourite deities of the prostitutes during the early twentieth century too.

¹⁹⁴ Santosh. K. Mukherjee, *History of Prostitution in India*. Calcutta, 1936. p. 279-80

¹⁹⁵ S. N. Mukherjee, *Prostitution in India*, DasGupta & Co, Calcutta, 1936. p.132

¹⁹⁶ *Suggestion for licensing the prostitution*, File: P10P – 1/32, proce – 187-B, April, 1932. [Police Department]

¹⁹⁷ S. N. Mukherjee, *Prostitution in India*, DasGupta & Co, Calcutta, 1936. p.261-262

¹⁹⁸ B. Joardar, *Prostitution in Nineteenth and early twentieth century Calcutta*, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi 1985. p.40-41.

They were worshipped with great pomp and grandeurs. There was much rivalry frequently seen among the prostitutes and their *babus* or paramours over the celebration of these pujas and processions in honour of the images. S.N. Mukherjee said that, 'the worship of a prostitute is attended with pomp and splendours, but lack of sincerity and spiritual characters.'¹⁹⁹

In the rooms of the prostitutes, they used to worship the printed images and the terracotta figures of the goddess *Lakshmi, Kali and Shiva* very commonly. The image of lord Krishna and Durga were also worshipped by them. Some of the prostitutes even used to donate all the wealth to the god, temple for avoiding 'hell after death'.²⁰⁰

During the early twentieth century, the caste rigidity was not that much relaxed in the society and prostitutes also were not totally free from this caste rigidity. Though, gradually with the time it started disappearing but was not totally uprooted. The conservative mind-set with regard to the casteism as well as religion, present among the prostitutes in the early twentieth century is very much visible in their own voice:

The prostitutes who were getting monthly remuneration from their Muslim *babus*, and who's nick names are like Meher, Ananr, Saara, Shera, Aangur, Daalim, Saaki, Dula, Ayesa, Pokhraj etc. even if they are Hindu by birth, the officials have counted them as Muslims. Though these prostitutes accept money from their Muslim *babus* in sheer greed, but they still feel shy because of their attachment with Muslim *babus*.²⁰¹

Over the years the conservative attitude with regard to the casteism and religion has totally disappeared. In the present time, the communal attitude is found totally absent in the red-light areas. Prostitutes altogether participate in all festivals irrespective of class, caste and religious differences. And thus, while the conventional society is unable to come out of the clutches or narrowness of communal mentality and caste conservativeness totally, the prostitutes are getting united and sustaining relationship with harmony, that is significantly advocating the idea of '*unity in diversity*', in its true sense.

¹⁹⁹ S. N. Mukherjee, *Prostitution in India*, DasGupta & Co, Calcutta, 1936. p.262

²⁰⁰ B. Joardar, *Prostitution in Nineteenth and early twentieth century Calcutta*, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi 1985. p.41

²⁰¹ Sri Jatindra Mohan Dutta (Editor – All Bengal Census Board), *Bartaman Lokganana O Patita Sainaj* in 'Probasi' Journal, Baisakh 1348, Eng 1941. Editing – Ramananda Chattopadhyay. p.86

4.17. The Inter-relationship Between the Prostitutes and the Bariwallis/Brothel Keepers

Bariwallis/Mashi plays dominant role in the life of the prostitutes. Mashi does not only regulate the life of a prostitute being isolated in the red-light area but police, hoodlums, pimps every element is inter-linked to each other. With the help of this organized network mashi regulates the various dynamics of the exploitative mechanism to deal with the prostitutes. These aspects have been widely discussed in the section 2.3.3 - 'Bariwallis/Brothel Keepers' under 'Dynamics of the Operation System' in Chapter 2 entitled 'Empirical Reality'.

4.18. Condition of Children of Prostitutes in the Brothel World:

Sex-workers and Children: The Role of Motherhood:

People from conventional family have many identities, 'as family members, as friends, as colleagues, as consumers'. Only one aspect of the identity is not the only determinant with which general people are identified. But things with regard to this matter are totally different in the case of sex-workers. Sex-workers find themselves to be identified entirely/completely by their work to such an extent that other roles played by them like – as mother, as friend, as family member, as consumers etc. are often over-shadowed and even 'it becomes difficult to imagine them in any other role.' In a workshop held in the month of July during 1995 while discussing the procedures of dealings of law with prostitution organized by Sanlaap, participants (sex-workers), informed about their strong desire 'to be free of the label of sex-worker', so that their other roles get recognized 'instead of being for ever lost behind that all consuming label'. 'The stereotypes of sex-workers and mothers would have us believed that the two are mutually exclusive'. But despite these, most of the sex-workers do have children and play the role of 'skilled-parents'. A study of sex-workers in Calcutta revealed that 40% of sex-workers had children (AIH & PH, 1992) as sex-workers mostly play the role of being single parents, therefore, to nourish children sex-workers have to fulfill a lot of responsibilities. The decision of being parents taken by the sex-workers is always more challenging than it for the other women involved in other profession. Two major factors become main obstructions for the sex-workers to become mother. Firstly, sex-workers have to act as single parents. They have to fulfill the duties of both father and mother. On one hand, they are the 'bread-winner' and on the other hand, they have to care their children which is very much 'traditionally

feminine' character that is surely to be integral part of motherhood.²⁰² In this regard, the sex-worker's response is as follows:

'It is a major problem for us, we are single women headed house-holds, and child care consumes most of our energies and finances'.²⁰³

Secondly, the lives of the children of the sex-workers are largely determined by the norms of the sex-industry. They are strongly influenced by the stigma of the sex-industry and the ill-environment of the red-light area.²⁰⁴

Most of the sex-workers find their children as a representative of their hopes, dreams, new beginning of life. 'They also represent a way out, a link with main stream society, and an old-age free of charity.' Most of the sex-workers do not want their daughters to join the sex-trade. Though, society has pre-conceived notions in this regard it stands totally opposite to the real fact as mentioned above. Sex-workers want their daughters to be married off and desire them to live a stable married life.²⁰⁵ They always get very much anxious about the uncertain future of their children. The following statement of a sex-worker reveals this aspect:

The perpetuation of crimes upon our children and the forcing of our daughters in to sex-work is a major concern anxiety.²⁰⁶

The children of prostitutes are perceived by them 'as their own, the only human beings in this harsh existence' with whom a 'loving and trusting relationship' can be shared by the prostitutes. Their children are considered to be the only 'avenue of entering into a tangible human relationship that is genuine, meaningful and lasting.' Let's capture the expression of sex-worker in this regard in words of a woman belong to this sex-industry:

Men may come and go after using us, but it is my child who will be my only support... I shall therefore, not mind doing anything for proper upbringing of my child.²⁰⁷

Another expression of a sex-worker is found in this regard which throws immense light upon the desire of a sex-worker provide her children a bright future:

'Most of us are continuing this work for the sake of our children's education. We are interested to send our children to any good hostel or boarding school.'²⁰⁸

²⁰² Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightholme, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta, Stree*, Kolkata, 2002. p.100.

²⁰³ Societal Violence on Women and Children in Prostitution: A report by the National Commission for Women, 1995-96, National Commission For Women, Government of India, New Delhi. p.32.

²⁰⁴ Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightholme, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta, Stree*, Kolkata, 2002. p.100.

²⁰⁵ Ibid. p.102.

²⁰⁶ Societal Violence on Women and Children in Prostitution: A report by the National Commission for Women, 1995-96, National Commission For Women, Government of India, New Delhi. p.32.

²⁰⁷ Ibid. p.31.

²⁰⁸ Ibid. p.32.

According to a report by the National Commission for Women in 1995-96, more than 75% of the women in the sex-industry have children. But the ratio in this regard varies from Metropolitan cities to the more rural areas. Due to the presence or infections of 'Chronic Pelvic Inflammatory Disease', the fertility in the sex-workers is very low.²⁰⁹ The following table shows the distribution of prostitutes according to their having and not having children in the metropolitan cities of India on the basis of a study by Central Social Welfare Board.

Table: 4.18.A

Distribution of Prostitutes in accordance with their having or not having children²¹⁰

Sl. #	Response	Total	Citi-wise Details				Madras
			Bangalore	Bombay	Calcutta	Delhi	
1	Have Children	65.60	41.83	82.00	63.65	64.00	76.50
2	Don't have Children	33.70	58.17	17.00	36.35	36.00	21.00
3	No Response	0.70	-	1.00	-	-	2.50
	Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Prostitution in Metropolitan Cities in India - A Study by Central Social Welfare Board

Children trafficked for prostitution are always subjected to the extreme violence everyday. Children in the red-light area often experience mental trauma of watching their mothers being abused, raped, and beaten up. They are also sexually abused. They are left with no options but to move here and there, spend time on the streets at night or day while their mothers are plying the trade and being exploited. Some experience death in the form of AIDS, some experience their mother's death. Sometimes their other family members and friends also suffer from AIDS. Children of the red-light area and their families are always subjected to the police abuse, extortions, money lending and alcoholism. But despite all odd situations and bad experiences, they strongly desire to go to school, grow up and also dream of living in a nice house, securing a job and protect their mother.²¹¹ The children of the red-light face the social stigma and social seclusion most often. But despite this seclusion, they aspire to live a healthy life like other children in the society, which they surely deserve but unfortunately are denied by the *bhadralok* society. Despite all stigmas, sex-workers carry, the children always possess a sympathetic attitude towards them and rather inflicting punishment upon them, and they like to help the women to find out alternative avenues as their livelihood. Their expression is 'those who stand below the street lamps do not do it by choice. They have to do it to fill their stomach.'²¹²

²⁰⁹ Ibid. p.31.

²¹⁰ Ibid. (Prostitution in Metropolitan Cities in India - A Study by Central Social Welfare Board, compiled by K.K. Mukherjee and Deepa Das.)

²¹¹ *The Place Where we live is called A Red-light Area*, an Apne Aap Women Worldwide Project, Kolkata, 2005. p.7

²¹² Ibid. p.30.

Children of the red-light area are always concern about the living conditions of the women into the profession. They always possess a positive attitude towards them. While society and others stigmatize these women and consider them as a segregated community children shows sympathy and dream of giving them alternative avenues to survive. These thought have been rightly captured in the expression of 14 years old Milli, where she said, '²¹³

I live in a different kind of environment. It is called a 'red-light area'. It has this name because many women in this locality stand on the streets and prostitutes. But those who have to do such bad work are not bad themselves. However, if we talk to them, our parents and elders say that we will become as bad as them. But they are not bad at all. I feel bad because I live in this place. Even Tumpa, my close friend, calls this place 'bad'. She never comes to our house. She did not come on my birthday. There is nothing I can do. However, in spite of all these problems, I do not want to leave this place because it is our duty to make the locality better. Those who do this bad work, have to do it for a livelihood. They are not to be blamed because in many cases, they have been sold by their husbands or parents or friends. They live here year after year, subjected to different kinds of torture. They have nowhere to go, because no one will accept them as wives or mothers or sisters. We must come together to form an organization for this women so that they may learn handicrafts, tailoring and embroidery.²¹³

Another girl, Anjali, who is 16 years old said in this regard almost in the same way:

Our locality is called a 'red-light area' by people who do not live here. I am never embarrassed about the place I live in. I do not hesitate to divulge the name of the lane and the area I live in. Those who stands on the streets are also human beings. I do not hate them. I regularly interact with the girl who live in this 'line-house'. But they say, 'do not talk to us'. 'Why?' I asked them. They reply, 'you live in a gentleman's house. You go to school. That's why we're asking you not to talk with us.' Then I tell them, 'Okay, so you do this. But how does it matters? You're also a human being like me. It's true that I go to school. But so what? You're a woman. I am want too. Only a woman can understand the pain of another woman. This is beyond the realization of any man'. Once I told them about other ways of earning a living. They seemed eager but said 'our husbands want us to earn money on a daily basis. If we take up any other job, we can have money only at the end of month. But that does not matter. We will speak to our husband anyway. We'll give you the answer tomorrow.' When I met them, the next day, they said that their husbands had bitten them up on hearing of their plans to quit prostitution. Such being the condition, what could I do on my own? As a girl, I could well understand the pain these women have to endure. Despite a number of set-back I have had some success as well. I have been able to teach many of them to spell and write their names. One of the woman came to me to learn to read and write. I was in class four at that time. I told myself that even if I Can not be a proper teacher, I can at least them spellings. Only one of them came to me to take lessons. Now she has left this area. After sometime, she returned to meet me. I told her, 'I hope you did not not mind taking advice from a little girl like me.' She said, 'not in the least. It is because of you that I'm now working as an attendant in a hospital. At least I could leave this line.' Perhaps no one will believe me, but this is true incident. It is not a story, but a fact.²¹⁴

²¹³ Ibid. p.45

²¹⁴ Ibid. p.44

The above narration of Anjali reflects not only the concern of children about the living condition of sex-workers but their perception of sex-workers with humanitarian approach has also become very much prominent. While society shows apathy in taking up any venture for the upliftment of lives of the sex-workers, children do not hesitate to extend their support to make the lives of sex-workers better off and help them to get out of the sufferings of the life of prostitution. Despite the small age and little capacity of the children of red-light areas, this kind of attitude possessed by them and their attempt to implement the idea of supporting sex-workers for their upliftment into action truly demand the real appreciation.

Sex-workers fulfill the role of mothers raising their children in all odd situations without having access to the proper child care, space or amenities. They have no other way but to see helplessly, their children growing up in the 'un-hygienic and unsafe surroundings'. Children of the red-light areas are stigmatized without their faults but due to the only the fact that they are born to the mother who is a prostitute. For this reason, they are frequently denied schooling and neglected by the relatives. Because of the absence of childcare as sex-workers mostly discharge the duties of mother-father, both, at a time, many children move on the streets and often they are vulnerable to the accidents and fall sick from their acquaintance with the filthy environment, dirt. It is often seen 'young children lying in the streets with pigs, or playing happily in areas dirty with animal and human excreta'. One of the red-light areas has a dirty canal running right through it and is flooded in the monsoon season and garbage and filth get dumped in the surrounding of it. As children of the red light areas roam on the streets, are often vulnerable to the accidents. A child, who met an accident, was run over on the street. His legs were broken and set-up was not properly done. Then he needed to undergo operation to reset them but his mother was afraid of sending him to the hospital. Rakesh was a small boy, just four year old and attached to his mother very much. He used to run in and out of her room while she entertained clients. Once he ran in and was not ready to leave his mother, though a client was present there and Rakesh was picked up by that client and 'hurled out'. His spinal cord got damaged and had been unable to walk since.

In 1994, some attention was drawn towards the children of the red-light areas, as they were perceived as most vulnerable to HIV/AIDS. The UNICEF/WHO studies stated that children in the red-light areas are most vulnerable to threat of HIV/AIDS. This study made the predictions that if the current trend continued then by the end of the decade, the rate of infection among Asians would exceed the rate at that time present among Africans. WHO (World Health Organization) during this year estimated that by the end of the decade, 10 million children would be alone in Africa; orphaned

or abandoned due to AIDS. 'Children born to an HIV-infected mother have a one in three chance of being born with the virus, and then an 80% chance of dying by the age of 5.' (UNICEF 1994)²¹⁵

Children in the Red-light Areas: Condition based on their Gender:

The conditions of young girls grown up in the red-light areas are specifically vulnerable to sexual abuses when they reach the age of puberty. A 13 years old girl had told Sanlaap (an NGO) her experiences with one of her mother's client who tried to rape her. Due to become sexually vulnerable at the age of their puberty, mostly mothers in this industry prefer to send them to other place and thus marriage at an early age becomes the easy solution to this. Due to having raised up in the ill and unsafe environment of red-light area, the girls often 'learn to relate to others, gain approval and attention by using their own sexuality, which increases their vulnerability to sexual exploitation.'²¹⁶ The girl child in the red-light area is always specially taken care of by her mother because 'desperation' and most often the compulsion/ 'force' become the main reason of driving/confining daughters of the prostitutes into the profession of prostitution. These children spend their early childhood with their mothers in the red-light area and then are sent to the relatives in their birth places where regularly an amount of money is being sent by her mother for the nourishment of her child. The number of children belonging to age group of 1-10 to years was over 75%.²¹⁷ To keep away from the ill environment of the red-light areas children are mostly sent away by their mothers. Usually their relatives, in many cases may be unaware of the profession of their mother. In such cases the mothers never expose their profession to their children. They cannot even see their children frequently. Some mothers send their children to residential schools or hostels. This is only possible for those mothers who live in a better financial condition or avail funding or a free placement through a charitable organization.²¹⁸

It was found in the 1988 study by the All Bengal Women's Union among Calcutta sex-workers that over 40% of the children were not the resident of their mother's house in the red-light areas. They were being nourished under the guidance of distant relatives, in hostels and some had not even visited to the red-light area when their mothers join the profession. It is very much clear from the

²¹⁵ Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightholme, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta, Stree*, Kolkata, 2002. p.103.104

²¹⁶ Ibid. p.104-105.

²¹⁷ Societal Violence on Women and Children in Prostitution: A report by the National Commission for Women, 1995-96, National Commission For Women, Government of India, New Delhi. p.31..

²¹⁸ Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightholme, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta, Stree*, Kolkata, 2002. p.108-109.

above survey that approximately 60% of the children were still raised in the red-light areas. The various types of child care available in the case of the children of the sex-workers is as follows:

Table: 4.18.B

Types of Child Care²¹⁹

1	Neighbour is paid to look after the child	10
2	Child Lives with guardian in home village	27
3	Child lives in School Hostels	6
4	Child (born during marriage) lives with husband's family	4
5	Lives in same premises as mothers, e.g. on a verandah or with a servant	42
	Total	89
(Of the 160 sex-workers interviewed, 71 had no children)		
Source: All Bengal Women's Union, 1988		

The information available from the survey by Development Dialogue stands slightly different in this regard. According to their explorations, more than 10% of the children did not live with their mothers. The survey was carried out in the red-light area of Bowbazar, Sethbagan, and Rambagan among 100 women. The total number of children was 104; out of which 93 lived with their mothers. The number of children living in the distant village/home village with their relatives were 8, 2 were in residential homes or hostels and 1 was away for work purpose. The children living in the home villages under the guidance of relatives used to be sent between Rs.20 to Rs.100 per month by their mothers for the nourishment of the children.²²⁰ But despite that also, in many cases, they fail to get their daughters rid of the bad impact of the environment. Mainly, her ways of responding to sex are extremely influenced by the red-light culture. Sanlaap met a 10 year old girl, whose mother was a sex-worker. She was sent to a residential home at an early age. But, she hardly could forget her experiences, when she was with her mother. As like many children, she used to masturbate and had a habit of touching herself quite openly. According to her statement to a counselor, she used to peep under mother's door and watched her mother doing this for client and from this, she learnt to copy her mother.²²¹ 18 years old, Deepak Mallick says, 'the moment people hear we are from the red-light area, they look down upon us. But that does not hurt us. It's more dangerous for our

²¹⁹ *Ibid.* p.129.

²²⁰ *Ibid.* p.109 (Dasgupta, S., M. Ghosh & A. Dasgupta. 1989-1990. *Rebati: A Survey*. Samyashakti 4 & 5: 232-243)

²²¹ *Ibid.* p.105

sisters.' Dolan Das recalls how a man attempted to sexually assault her. She says, 'it's dangerous for a girl to live in Sonagachhi. People take us all for sex-workers.'²²²

A minor girl of the Garbagan red-light area in Sheoraphully was raped for days after days with a life threat. Frightened by the threat, the girl not even told her mother (who was a sex-worker) about this incident. Since her mother was a sex-worker, the girl was born in the Garbagan red-light area in Sheoraphully. Both mother and the girl, used to reside in a rented room in the red-light area. A resident of that red-light area, Gopi, took advantage of her mother's absence and raped this minor girl and threatened her, 'I will kill you, if you dare to tell this to anyone.' The girl, frightened by this threat, kept the entire episode secret and the man took full advantage of this and used to rape her every now and then. Then, one day the girl fall severely sick and she suffered acute pain in the abdomen. After this, the girl was admitted to the clinic, which was available in the Garbagan red-light area for the sex-workers and in the clinic after thorough check-up, it was found out that she was being raped quite often repeatedly. But her sickness was not only because of these repeated rapes, she was already infected with venereal diseases. Gopi had terrible sexual diseases and due to the repeated intercourse with the minor girl, his diseases were also infected into the girl.²²³

If a mother works as a sex-worker or if she hails from brothel, according to law, under the Juvenile Justice Act, her child can be removed from her. This policy of the government and of many NGOs has been designed with the motive of providing the children of the sex-workers immense protection against the ill-environment of the red-light areas. To fulfill this purpose the children are generally taken away from that environment to somewhere else, mostly to a residential care. The motivation behind this move is clear that 'institutional care' separate the children from their families as their homes are located far away in order to make visit a tough task. Even their mothers are mostly restrained from meeting their children, as it is generally assumed that mother's visit may leave bad influence upon the children and they are simply not fit to be parent only because of their professions. However, this separation is not so easy for both the children and their mothers.²²⁴

The organizations, which are working with children professionally like UNICEF and Government's Schemes such as the Integrated Child Development Scheme* (ICDS) are totally absent in the red-light areas in dealing with the children of the sex-workers. Indrani Sinha has put her view points

²²² Teena Baruah, *Sonagachhi's Kids open a Third eye, and You Discover a World*, The Indian Express - Express News line, New Delhi, 24th January, 2004.

²²³ Gautam Bandyopadhyay, *Khuner Humki Diye Niyomita Dharshan Balikake*, Anonda Bazar Patrika (Dakhin Banga), 13th August, 2003.

²²⁴ Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightholme, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta, Stree*, Kolkata, 2002. p.109-110..

about the child care of sex-workers, the loopholes of the various NGO's activities dealing with the children of the red-light areas has also been pointed out. She has further put forward some suggestions on the interventions with regard to child care facilities for the upliftment and betterment of the/in living condition of the children of sex-workers. She observed:

Children of sex-workers have not been identified, as a category with specific needs and problems, there is an urgent need for information about appropriate ways of working with these children. Many NGOs that are working with the children need far more information and specialist help. More facilities in the red-light areas themselves would enable the children to remain with their mothers while offering them protection and an exposure to alternative lifestyles. Night shelters in the red-light areas would be an excellent alternative if only there was more space for accommodation. The existing system of using elderly women as paid child-minders could be strengthened and child care facilities set up by outsiders should definitely employ local, elderly women. By not doing so, these interventions could threaten the livelihoods of the existing child-minders. The way out in the long-run is not to create more homes where children are taken away from their mothers and siblings, but to create other options within the area itself, and to fight for their acceptance into local schools to enable them to live with self-respect and dignity. Some activists are calling for reservations for children of sex-workers in the hope that even though the first generation will probably be stigmatized future generation will be free from prejudice. They believe that reservation could enable a generation of children to be educated and employed so that they could stand on their own feet and fight the stigmatization by being successful role models. At present, however, children in the red-light areas must live with the ugly reality that they are considered to be different from other children, that society is not ready to accept them. On the contrary, they are rejected because of the environment they live in. We have to remember that a red-light area is not just a place where men go to buy sex. It is a place where all generations live, where children study, play, and grow up. If we are serious about wanting to help these children we must advocate a fundamental shift in society's attitude to prostitution, and not just greater provision of protective homes where the children can only be temporarily sheltered.²²⁵

Children of the red-light area are always socially secluded and deprived of all opportunities in life. Society generally does not allow them to have an access to all the facilities which lead them to a healthy life. Most of the children cannot have good education in the red-light areas due to lack of guidance. At the most they can reach up to class seven or eight. There are two reasons behind this stop in studies. 1. Firstly, for most children after reaching the third or the fourth standard, on their classmates or teacher's find out that they are boys from red-light area or coming out from there, are immediately started being treated as untouchables in the class. And from that day they are shifted from the first to the last bench. Not being able to accept such blow most stop their school going at an early age.²²⁶ Let's take up the case of Parveen. She was admitted into school and her real identity was kept in secret by her mother. She attended the school until she was in class nine but

²²⁵ *Ibid.* p.110-111; * This is a pre-school programme, largely funded by UNICEF and implemented by the Government of India. Under this program, pre-school children are taught by the local women and children also receive health check-up as well as free meals. – *Ibid.* p.111

²²⁶ Shrikarna, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003. p.76-77

one day with her identity got disclosed, she started facing tremendous humiliation. She could bear the taunt of other students when they used to laugh at her but it became unbearable for her 'when one day a teacher looked at her and spat on the floor'. After experiencing this, she took the decision of leaving the school.²²⁷ Sometimes the children of the sex-workers are seen to be refused to get admission in school. If they get the admission, they frequently drop out because of constant ill-treatment and taunt they face from other students. *Munni*, a Nepalese girl of 8 years, expressed her feelings of growing up at home that in the red-light area:

I hate this place. I am never sent to school. I used to go to a school in this neighbourhood but soon they sent me away because I belong to this area. They called me a prostitute that I cried and cried and I did not go back. I hate all the male who come here. They squeeze me.²²⁸

The study of the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) claimed that the percentage of children completing secondary education was less than 1.57% in the cities and it was predicted that the percentage was much lower in the rural areas. This study further indicated that more than 35% children were admitted to the primary school. This indicates extremely, 'a very high drop-out rate before completion of primary schooling.' The number of children unable to get enrolled into schools was over a third. The number of male children in the city red-light areas is 'likely to be employed in various trades'. Most of the male child finds little opportunity for 'vocational or occupational training'.²²⁹ The following table shows the educational level of children of the red-light areas in metropolitan cities of India according to the study by Central Social Welfare Board.

Table: 4.18.C
Educational Level of Children²³⁰

Sl. #	Response	Total	Citi-wise Details		
			Bangalore	Calcutta	Delhi
1	Illiterate	39.28	31.87	31.60	54.38
2	Literate	1.48	-	4.45	-
3	Primary	35.46	21.71	49.75	34.88
4	Secondary	15.19	29.30	12.35	5.73
5	Higher Secondary	1.57	-	1.85	2.86
6	Above Higher Secondary	6.42	17.12	-	2.15
	Total	100.00	100.00	100.00	100.00

Source: Prostitution in Metropolitan Cities in India - A Study by Central Social Welfare Board

²²⁷ Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightholme, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta, Street, Kolkata*, 2002. p.105

²²⁸ *Ibid.* p.105.

²²⁹ Societal Violence on Women and Children in Prostitution: A report by the National Commission for Women, 1995-96, National Commission For Women, Government of India, New Delhi. p.31-32.

²³⁰ *Ibid.* p.32. (Prostitution in Metropolitan Cities in India - A Study by Central Social Welfare Board, compiled by K.K. Mukherjee and Deepa Das.)

Thus, the disclose of red-light area's children's identities to others mostly become the cause of their social expulsion. So, naturally this social stigma to which they are unfortunately attached, force them to leave the school. The same expression is captured in Srikarna's own statement about his childhood where he narrates:

I was in class six at that time. The class of Hemer sir, the English teacher of our school goes on from seven in the evening to nine. Although all students left by nine, I stayed back till ten with excuse like home-work or something else. Because, at any cost I have to enter my house, my locality at ten thirty in the night. This had two reasons. First, our house is in Kalighat. There the timings of customers are mainly from six in the evening to ten thirty. If someone from the school or some teacher gets to know that I stay in the red-light area, I will be immediately ostracized from the school. In fear of that I used to enter my locality after it got a bit empty or if there were police raids and everyone was running away in fear of them, I used to follow the police with my bag and go home.²³¹



অবিসংখ্যক বাচ্চু দত্ত

একটি প্রতিষ্ঠানের প্রধান নির্বাহী
যৌনকর্মীর সন্তান বাচ্চু দত্ত

Dainik Bhorer Kagoj, 18th Oct, 1999

Bachhu Dutta alias Mrinal Kanti Dutta

In this regard when Bachhu Dutta alias Mrinal Kanti Dutta was asked about his experiences in the college-school life, whether he has faced any opposition or humiliation (as he was the first one hailing from red-light area, who studied and reached up to college level. Later on, few other batches reached up to the college) or not, he replied:

Na, school'e temon kono samasya hoi ni. Samasya hoyechhilo college'e. College aamar sahapathira sedin jante parlo aami kaalighat red-light area'r chhele. Ek din amar ek sahapathi ese bollo, 'amake ekta meye dekhe de, ekta bhalo maal dekhe de' – eta amar kaache eto byatha lege chilo, tar par din theke aami aar college'e jai ni.

²³¹ Shrikarna, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003. p.76.

No, I did not face any problem in my school time. It was a problem when I was in college, my class mates came to know that I am from red-light area. One day one of my classmates told me, 'get me a good girl, a sexy one' – this hurt me so much that from that day onwards I haven't gone to college.²³²

As sex-workers, play the role of father and mother both they face various problems. To open a bank account, to apply for ration card, to seek admission to school, father's name was essential. Just visiting a government hospital meant filling in a form with the father's name. To fulfill this requirement, the mother would often lie or her present partner's name was to be used. But mentioning the partner's name instead of putting in father's name could create complicated situation later on. Gradually, due to the rising consciousness slowly the term 'guardian' was slowly being introduced to replace 'father' in some areas with the motto of topping this discriminatory attitude against 'single-parent families'. In 1988, a notice was sent by the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education to all schools ordering that the admission form should be changed from 'father's name' to 'Name of Father/Mother/Guardian'. It cannot be denied by schools by law to accept child admission; even they fail or become unable to provide the name of the father. This law was passed after Supreme Court was challenged by the Delhi sex-workers in 1992.²³³ Previously it was mandatory to admit kids to school with the father's name and that created several problems.²³⁴ In this regard one sex-worker said:

The problems range from the refusal of school heads to grant admission to our children. Further, we are unable to furnish names of a male guardian as usually demanded.'²³⁵

But presently it is not that much a compulsion to admit with the consent and name of the father after a judgment of the Supreme Court. If necessary, it is enough to give the name of the 'husband' or 'babu'. It is not mandatory anymore for the father to be physically present. But even a few years back, the pictures was completely the opposite. Then it was compulsory for the father to be

²³² Salam Azad, *Ekti Protishaner Prodhan Nirbahi: Jaunakarmeer Santan Bachhu Dutta*, Dainik Bhorer Kagoj, 18th October, 1999.

²³³ Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightholme, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta, Stree*, Kolkata, 2002. p.105-106

²³⁴ Shrikarna, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003. p.71

²³⁵ Societal Violence on Women and Children in Prostitution: A report by the National Commission for Women, 1995-96, National Commission For Women, Government of India, New Delhi. p.32; Bharatiya Patita Udhhar Sabha, appealed to the court for allowing the children of the sex-workers of different places to get admission without their father's identity. Statement of Khairati Lal Bhola, the President of the Bharatiya Patita Udhhar Sabha, goes, 'few years back these children were not allowed to get admission in the school. We have gone to the Supreme Court taking this matter and currently about 7½ lac children all over India have got admission in the school without their father's identity.' In 1988, Bharatiya Patita Udhhar Sabha appealed to the court in this matter. According to them, on the basis of availability father's identity this partiality is not accepted. This organization termed it illogical even asking whether the child's mother is a divorced or of a sex-worker at the time of admission in the school. After 5 years of Bharatiya Patita Uddhar Sabha's appeal, Supreme Court gave attention to this matter and in 1993, the highest court of India gave its verdict that at the time of admission in a school, either father's or mother's name can be used, only father's name is not mandatory. See Staff Reporter, Jaunakarmeeder Shishura Aaj'o Andhakar Jagat'er Basinda, Anonda Bazar Patrika, 25th October, 1996

physically present and sign in the admission registered as the guardian at the time of admission.²³⁶ Though by law, government schools are ordered to treat all applicants equally but it is most often a theoretical assumption, in practical situation children belong to the red-light areas are subjected to the discrimination with regard to the admission matter and therefore, are forced to lie and conceal their original identity. II. The other difficulties faced by the children are absence/lack of proper environment for pursuing studies. At their mother work till late night, therefore, children are not provided proper space, quiet environment to do studies, their homework properly, nor can they find peace to sleep in time every night. All these hampered the career of the child in studies.²³⁷ In this regard, the following statement of a sex-worker reveals the poor condition of children in the red-light areas:

Due to the late hours of work, children are not attended to. Children face acute problems when we are in custody after arrests.²³⁸

Another factor is lack of guidance. In dearth of the minimum guidance, many students end-up untimely.²³⁹ Most of the mothers in the red-light area are illiterate or 'neo-literate'. According to the All Bengal Women's Union (ABWU) this proportion is 80% and so 84% according to the AIH & PH study. Besides that, they are unable of resorted to their own limitations to support and understand the demands of the schooling of their children.²⁴⁰ In this regard, Srikarna (the son of sex-worker) has said:

Take my case. I came first in class three without a single teacher, third in class four and from class five I became an ordinary student. The truth is, I realized my weakness in English, Mathematics, and Science shortly after I reached a bit higher class. My baba's (father's) knowledge was also that far. Moreover, baba has come to have fun. Why will he teach? Ma was illiterate. No teacher from a proper locality enters here. Although some do, there is no one to see. After reaching class eight we are forced to bid good-bye to Ma Swaraswati (goddess of learning) for continuously being unable to our lessons.²⁴¹

The sex-workers' inability to provide education to their children can be realised from the statements of sex-workers which according them are major hindrance in their children's education:

Inability to meet costs or have access to scholarship, grants, or loans for the education of our children.

Another sex-worker says:

²³⁶ Shrikarna, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003. p.71

²³⁷ Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightholme, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta, Stree*, Kolkata, 2002. p.106

²³⁸ Societal Violence on Women and Children in Prostitution: A report by the National Commission for Women, 1995-96, National Commission For Women, Government of India, New Delhi. p.32

²³⁹ Shrikarna, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003. p.77

²⁴⁰ Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightholme, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta, Stree*, Kolkata, 2002. p.106

²⁴¹ Shrikarna, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003. p.77

Enforced migration and frequent mobility causes disruption in the schooling of the children, lack of recreation facilities prevents holistic development of our children.²⁴²

After giving up their studies, the boys, disgusted with the mothers curses, the Kaku's that is the mother's babu's taunts, start looking for jobs. But it goes without saying that in a country where the graduates and masters degree holder go unemployed, these seven eight pass outs do not stand a single chance. Although some boys work as apprentices in some factories, learn driving, these are just exceptions. As a result, most boys are forced to choose the second/dishonest path as a solution. That is gambling, selling liquor, betting etc. In addition, for those who are lucky, they become the pets of new girls by becoming their babus. In this regard, Srikarna has further shared his observations:

But I have seen, those of the red-light area who learn driving become successful drivers. The reason is, one must have two qualities to drive. They are: one to know driving and two is to have courage. I have seen many boys scared of taking out the cars on the road due to sheer lack of courage in spite of knowing how to drive. But the boys of this area become so fear less with beatings in their childhood that they feel a different kind of adventure in driving.

But the only few boys get the opportunity of learning to drive. After getting the license, most are forced to drop it not being able to set their hands on the steering well. But those who are bit fortunate, that is if their mother's babu is a driver or if is a bit of street-smart type then by virtue of his smartness he befriends the new babu and easily gets his hands set.²⁴³

The conditions of the girls are more pitiable. Even such roads are closed for them. In the society she is also considered as a sex-worker because her mother's identity is that of a 'Beshya' (prostitute). As a result, it becomes impossible to marry her off in some proper locality out of this area that is the red-light area. The parents of no proper family are interested to get their sons married to the girls here. As a result, they, kind of helplessly, are forced to do love marriages with the boys of the locality. Since their husbands' financial conditions are weak (meaning betting, gambling, selling liquor are their means of livelihood), these marriages do not stay for long. One, two, at the most three to four years is the maximum span of their married life. After this, there remains no other option than returning with the kid to the mother. They work for some days as

²⁴² Societal Violence on Women and Children in Prostitution: A report by the National Commission for Women, 1995-96, National Commission for Women, Government of India, New Delhi. p.32

²⁴³ Shrikarna, *Babuder Andarmahal Theke*, Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2003. p.77-78; Sons of the sex-workers mostly get involved in the sex-trade, 'either directly as pimps or as traffickers or more indirectly through working for political parties through local clubs, selling drugs or alcohols.' Youth belonging to the red-light area generally don't have much qualifications and contacts which is sometimes essential to secure jobs in formal sector. Many youths find manual work as their strategy for survival like – as mechanic in garages, in small industries, running tea-shops in the local area etc. In the red-light area, 'unemployment and underemployment are very grave'. Many of them don't have much to do except roam around and 'do odd jobs when those are available'. - *Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightholme, Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta*, Stree, Kolkata, 2002. p.107

maidservants in other's place; there they do not get the proper money even after working terribly hard. These girls have to hear words from their mother day and night. In the lack of a place to sleep, they have to make their beds in their mother's room. The problem that arises in this case is that the mother's babu cannot accept this and show anger and irritation. Because due to their girl their desire of having pleasure and enjoyment in the room remain unfulfilled. As a result, the girl loses patience listening to the satirical taunts, shouts pointing out their incapacity to work of the babus. Due to the crime of being born of a prostitute, against her wishes, circumstances force her to sacrifice herself. Inferiority complexes gradually develop in the boys leading to taking alcohol, smoking grass etc ending their lives early.²⁴⁴

Let us take up the life of Sabidi:

Since Sabidi's mother was a prostitute, she could not be married off in some proper family. There had been a secret effort to take to her to her maternal uncle's place to marry her off, but the moment her identity got revealed, her marriage broke off. Lastly what happens to the rest happened with her. To get rid of the bad name of a broken marriage she fell in the love with son of a neighbouring prostitute and then as usual got married in a Kali mandir. The husband had quite some fresh money on working in a liquor shop. Gambling, drinking, wasting money, even new girls every other day – nothing was left out. The problem arose when the police sealed the liquor joint. Now he started his whims on his wife. Life was somehow going on by working as a maid-servant although the man of the house had fallen for her twice, yet the main problem for Sabidi arose when her husband was detected having cirrhosis of liver. Going to the doctor and government hospital, recovering for a few days, again drinking in anger and pain – things continued this way for about a year. Then earning the name of taking her husband's life at the in – laws' place, returning to her mother for a few days having nowhere to stay and then as usual, starting to work again as a maid-servant. Sometimes, heart breaking taunts from her mother. Lastly, her mother's babus clearly said, 'I do not want to see your black face from tomorrow.' That very night she had gone to aunt Moina's room and sat down to take her make-up. But what if she sat down, the very first time that she had to open her clothes for her customer, she fainted. When she returned to consciousness she saw that customer without having done a thing to her was fanning her. From then on there were no more problems. From the next day with the scolding of Moina 'mashi' (aunt – heads/landladies of red-light areas) she became a professional prostitute.²⁴⁵

²⁴⁴ Ibid. p.78

²⁴⁵ Ibid. p.83-84; The actual number of daughters of sex-workers joining sex-trade as profession is very few. In the Sanlaap survey of 1994 on 6 out of 201 who stated their belonging to the mothers who were sex-workers constituted the main reason which drove them into the profession of prostitution. Most of the women joining sex-trade don't get into the profession in the straight way. They generally join the trade later on in their lives. Perhaps failed marriage or the monetary requirement to support their families generally drove a larger section of women into prostitution. Let's take up a case of a girl (daughter of a sex-worker) whose mother told Sanlaap that her daughter was always 'quite wayward' even though she was bright and went to school. After being failure to pass the exam a couple of times in school she left the school and got involved in affairs with men at the age of 13 and started being used for sex in lieu of small presents. She eloped with a boy from another neighbourhood at the age of 15. Her mother thought they might be married but she was not even allowed to enter the boy's so called *bhadralok* middle class family. After that, when she became pregnant very soon her lover deserted her. Later on, she returned to the red-light area and started managing to survive selling liquor. She was very bright character and 'street-wise' and didn't desire to join the sex-trade. Her relationship with her mother had deteriorated largely and her mother started encouraging her to join the sex-trade. Because her business of selling liquor was very much insecure as she had no license to sell alcohol and

Thus, the children of red-light areas are vulnerable to the sexual abuses and ill influences as they are grown up in the unhygienic and unsafe surroundings. Due to lack of proper childcare and other amenities, they are always deprived of healthy life and secured future. To analyze the living condition of the children in the red-light areas as a whole, some common similarities are always visible. Nevertheless, it cannot be denied that the phenomena of gender play a major role to determine the living condition of these children. In this context, the poem written by a 13 a year old girl Shikha carries the pain of vulnerability of a girl child in the red-light area. Which further indirectly points out to the brutality of men in the society. Kavita Bijakhmola of the social organization named, 'Deepalay' says in this regard, 'the situation has gone to a such a position that these children cant even believe that without any bad motive someone can think good for them:

*
*'Kholo darjaar pashe eka boshe thaki,
 Eke bare eka,
 Bare bare ghurpak khai ektai proshna, ke aami?
 Samaj er lolup drishti amai bujhte dei na
 Aami satti ke?
 Chhoto shishu naki nabo jaubona kono taruni?
 Sunechhi amaar o naki kichhu adhikar aachhe –
 Kono adhikar ki satti aachhe amaar?*

I sit beside the open door alone,
 Absolutely alone,
 Again and again I ask myself, who am I?
 The lustful eyes of this world does not let me know,
 Who I really am?
 Am I a small child or a youthful girl?
 I heard even I have some rights to claim—
 Do I really have any rights?²⁴⁶

Children of the sex-workers 'may be have been born out of previous marriages that broke down or out of previous relationship, current relationship or been fathered by clients. The absent, transitory or unknown figure of the father is usually not significant in the lives of the children.' To give a 'flexible' as well as 'transient' conception about the family children are mostly even send away from the red-light area to live in the hostels or with relatives. Sex-workers mostly play the role of single parents and face tremendous hardship, mostly without the support of their babus from whom they rarely secure financial stability or role of actual parents or domestic work. In Indian tradition, mothers and daughters are supposed to live together once the daughters get married. But sex-industry is very free from such norms. It is often observed that the most of the marriages of the

due to that her 'thek' of selling liquor could be close down at any time. - *Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightholme, Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta, Stree, Kolkata, 2002. p.106-107.*

²⁴⁶ Staff Reporter, *Jaunakarmeeder Shishura Aaj'o Andhakar Jagat'er Basinda*, Anonda Bazar Patrika, 25th October, 1996.

daughters of sex-workers do not last for long time and so they returns to their mother later on and try to give financial help to each other as women in the sex industry are the main 'breadwinners'. In the conventional society, while the male person of the family control the 'household budgets' and most leading person to make decisions in the house-hold matters and women are subscribed to do all the domestic works. These gender divisions of work are very much traditionally accepted in the Indian society. But in this regard, the scenario is entirely different in the sex-industry, where women are the main source of earning. Manage all the domestic work and at the same time, they provide financial support to their families too. Thus, the traditional gender divisions of works are not rigidly imposed on/in the sex-industry. There is one large red-light area in Calcutta, where men do the domestic work including cooking due to the extreme busy schedule of the women in this area. Here the women are always pre-occupied with the flock of high number of clients with which they left with no time for cooking and other domestic work. It is quite ironic that, 'in a society of their own, where the sex-workers and their daughters enjoy some amount of freedom and less restriction compared to conventional Indian society, they still prefers to be in the conventional/traditional family-set up, which they do not get. The sex-workers have seen the vulnerability and hypocrisy in the marriage system being the victim of the same, but they still feel their daughters will be secure in traditional marriages and to get their daughters married, they even pay dowries. But this middleclass mentality and thought process of the sex-workers get a blow when they come up of age and their babus deny to marry with them, when their children have to be send away and when with their growing age and trip up of their looks and money, their babus also start disappearing. The last option which is left to them is to find out new source of earning and make them dependent on their children, who are already deprived of opportunities in life.²⁴⁷

Old Age of the Sex-workers and the Role of their Children:

Sex-workers with their growing old age and losing earning capacity gradually become dependant upon their children in both financially as well as mentally. Their daughters and sons who provide them with shelters and security during their old age generally look after sex-workers. The family in the red-light area is only the family in India where their children do not throw out old people in their old age, which is the most insecure stage for them as they become totally helpless loosing their financial stability, but are looked after by their children. Let us take up the case of Meera. She was an aged prostitute, in her late 40's. She had been residing in the same red-light area for the last 22 years. She attempted to get out of the life of prostitution several times but each time she failed. She had left three times with different men but in every case, her relationship had broken down and

²⁴⁷ Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightolme, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta, Stree*, Kolkata, 2002. p.103.

she was left with no other way but returning to the red-light area. She had a daughter from her first marriage. She said, 'I have always wanted to live like a house-wife but my circumstances have betrayed me'. Meera's daughter was a very 'bright and gentle' girl. She was enrolled in a school and studied up to ninth standard but due to the ill treatments and taunts of students and office staffs, she had to live the school. Then she started completing her studies staying at a hostel. She had a dream of getting financially established so that she could help her mother financially. Meera was dependent upon a babu who had family and also visited Meera regularly and used to give her around Rs.300 a month. She lived in one small room. It had neither electricity nor running water. Meera set a high expectation of her daughter and used to wait for the day when she would be moved out with the help of her daughter.²⁴⁸

Aspiration, Expression and Concern: Sex-workers and their Children:

It has already been mentioned that sex-workers mostly send their children away specially girls after a certain age for their good upbringing. Like this, one child hailing from 'Kalighat red-light area' was sent by her mother to the 'home' of Sanlaap (NGO). Her mother sets a high expectation of her. She wants her daughter to complete education, work well, and become successful in life. The child also dream of getting established in her life and then help her mother to move out of the red-light area to other place where she would be able lead a better life. Let's hear the life and dream of this 14 years old girl in her own voice/words:

I came to this home as we live in a filthy place. The place is Kalighat. My father and mother stay there. My mother did not want me to stay in that environment. My mother says, 'if my life has been ruined, why will I bring my daughter into this.' This is why my mother has sent me to home. She wanted me to stand on my feet by taking education and training in handicrafts. I too want to fulfill my mother's dream. I will bring my mother in a healthy place after standing on my feet with education and training. But aunties advice me to study well first but I think I would not be able to study well as I cannot concentrate on my study. When I feel good, I try to study but after sometime I lose my concentration in study. I do not understand why I cannot concentrate on study. Everybody must be thinking, if I do not study, how I will become successful, I too think about this. But if I get training in some handicraft, will I not be able to stand on my feet by that? Can I not bring my mother out of that environment? Our home provides plenty of training in different handicrafts, out of that I will learn one such handicraft and will stand on my feet. At times, I do not feel to be at home and want to go to my home (Kalighat). I miss my father, mother, brother, sister and everyone back home. This is why I think of going back. But again I say to myself that I won't go. My mother has sent me here for my well beings then why I will go back? When I get into quarrels with the girls of the home, I feel like going back to home but again I rethink and say to myself that this quarrel is normal when there be people in group, this will happen. But why should I go, I will go only when I would learn some handicrafts. I have been into this home for the last six years, if I cannot do anything in this 6 years then what it is the

²⁴⁸ Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightholme, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta, Stree, Kolkata*, 2002. p.102

meaning of spending such long time here, this is why I have thought of learning something before I leave this home. If I cannot do well by studying, then I will stand on my feet by learning some handicrafts from here and then will bring my mother in a good place. I end my writing with this,²⁴⁹

Sex-workers are always labeled only by their profession and the other roles played by them are completely denied. Along with various other roles played by them, which is very much essential, the role of mother is ideally played by the sex-workers. They possess same emotional attachment and affection for their children which the mothers in the 'respectable society' possess towards their children. For the betterment of the lives of their children, sex-workers are ready to face all the hardship of life and sacrifice everything. As children are the only ray of hope in lives of sex-workers and it is the only genuine relationship, they consider in their dark lives of the brothel world. Sex-worker in the role of mother and her child's loving as well as sensitive attitude towards hwe mother has really been beautifully captured in the expression of the 14 years old child.

I get emotional when I think about my mother because she has left in my early childhood and I have grown up now, till date I have seen my mother once and have got plenty of love from her but now I do not know what is mother's love. I have loved my mother very much and she is in my soul. I respect and honour her very much. AMAR MAA AAMAR SABCHEYE PRIYO. But she has not given me any sort of pain in my childhood. I did not know what pain in life is. But when I came to this home, I understood what is pain and everything else. There have been days when even if I get out of her sight, she would go mad about me. I know what mother is. If I would not have my food on a day she would also not eat. I used to go places in her lap (KOL). My mother used to run places when I used fall sick. But I was happy with her. But the moment she has left, I have become mischievous. I was very good in study earlier, but now I Can not concentrate on my study. I am the only girl child of my mother this is why I used to get so much of love from my mother. I do not know where she is now but let me grow up a little, and then I will search her. I pray to god that wherever she is, please let her be in happiness. May almighty protect her!²⁵⁰

When a sex-worker mostly face social seclusion, humiliation in the society; in the same place they are always respected by their children who feels their pain with full of sensitivity and do not hesitate to elevate them to the most respectable position in life and shows respect for all her sacrifices in life. 10 years old, Tanushree Koyal's own poem on her 'mother' is the sharp reflection of that sensitivity of children towards their mother, where she desires to be born to the same mother again and again in her next birth.

Maa

*Hriday amar kande mago
Tomay Dakar chholey,
Tumi-i amay korle gothon*

²⁴⁹ Indrani Sinha & Nabarun Bhattacharya (ed), Tahader Katha: *Nijer Bhashar Nijer Katha (Their Story: In their Own Words)*, ABARBONITA – A Quarterly Journal Against the Sex-trade, (First Edition). Jan. Marh 2000. p.20.

²⁵⁰ Ibid. p.21.

Shokolei ta bole|
Lanchhana opoman sojhyo kore
Diley amay sukh,
Amay manush korbe bhebe
Pohale koto dukh|
Diley swargo marto, patal
Songe surjer kiron,
Jonmodata tumi-i amar ma
Korbo tomar smoron|
Tobuo ma kano tumi
Kando amon korey?
Jabo ami korte kaj
Tomar choron sporsho kore|
Tomar sneho bhalobasha
Rakhbo bokkho bhore,
Ashirbad tomar thakle mago
Bipod jabey shore|
Jani amay jete hobey
Akdi e prithibi chhere,
Mriyur porey ami jeno ma
Jonmo nei tomar ghorey|

Mother

My heart cries for you
 As I call you mother,
 You are my creator I know
 That's what I heard from others.
 Bearing pain and insult
 You gave me pleasure,
 To bring me up well
 You had to suffer.
 You gave me heaven and earth
 And the rays of the sun,
 You gave me birth
 I'll remember you forever.
 But still mother why do you cry
 Ma, why do you weep at all?
 I will go to work for you,
 With your blessings above all.
 Your love and care
 I'll cherish in my heart,
 If you give your blessings mother
 All dangers will go away.
 I know one day I'll have to go
 Leaving this life on earth,
 After death I wish mother,
 To be born again in your care.²⁵¹

²⁵¹ Tanusree Koyal, (10 years, Class VI, Uluberia), 'Ma' ('Mother') in Dr. Smarajit Jana (ed.), 'Namaskar' (Patrika/Journal), Year 7, Volume 1, Durbar Prokashoni, January 2005. p.46

A 'series of workshop for children' residing in the Kalighat and Sonagachhi red-light areas was organized by the 'Apne Aap Women Worldwide'. This workshop was very much successful to explore the thought process, understanding, self-perception, their perception towards prostitution and prostitutes etc. Violence, abuse, stigma, trafficking, HIV/AIDS, discrimination – these issues were also talked about. All this phenomena came out with full of expressions through their writing, drawing and conversations. 'An interactive advocacy and counseling project' with the children residing in the red-light areas was 'facilitated' by the 'Apne Aap Women Worldwide' to write books expressing their feelings, hopes and desires. 'A non-intrusive approach' was most successful to encourage the children to express themselves and 'reveal information'.²⁵²

Violence and the Children of the Sex-workers:

Violence is intrinsically attached to the profession of prostitution. Children of the red-light areas are constant victim to all sorts of violence. When in the above said workshop, children were asked to express their conception about violence, their drawn pictures mostly comprise 'graphic images of women being raped and beaten, of men being knifed or clubbed and of policemen with batons.' Their pictures were very much self-explanatory and undoubtedly exhibited violent experiences that they faced in their day-to-day life. 'Sadness' became very much reflective in their all drawings/pictures. In the workshop while talking about the prostitution with the children, it was found that 'sadness always appears somewhere in the picture. The children are saddened and perhaps more than anything burdened with keeping the big 'secret' that everyday women must be pressured into prostitution for the survival of their children and themselves.' 'All the children in the workshop, specially the girls, had grown up learning not to reveal where they live for fear it would affect everything, from their parent job, their choice of friends, to the school they were allowed to attend.'²⁵³

14 years old, Aradhana presents her feelings and experiences of violence prevalent in day-to-day life in the red-light area in her own words,

²⁵² *The Place Where we live is called A Red-light Area*, an Apne Aap Women Worldwide Project, Kolkata, 2005. p.14; "This 'advocacy project' is entitled: *The Place Where we live is called A Red-light Area*. This project got the support of 'West Bengal State AIDS Prevention & Control Society and developed by the children of Paschim Banga Krira O Janakalyan Parishad and Deepika Social Welfare Society, from the red-light areas of Kalighat and Sonagachhi in Kolkata. Apne Aap Women Worldwide runs five community centers in red-light areas and slums all over India to prevent the trafficking of women and children; It is a project articulated by children to: (A) End the demand for trafficked and prostituted children by making men read about the consequences of their demand; (B) End the stigma and the discrimination perpetrated against children from red-light areas; (C) Help adult policy makers develop interventions for children affected by trafficking for prostitution; This documentation is an attempt to capture the feelings of the children who have gone through many unmentionable psychological and social ordeals either because they were trafficked or because their mothers were trafficked. Sadly, the shadow of HIV and AIDS is looming large over these children now. Society should work together to protect these children and not turn away from them" - Ibid. p.7-9

²⁵³ Ibid. p.29

The people living in our locality have very bad manners. They are quarrelsome and use bad language. They never behave properly with any person... By people in our locality, we mean our neighbours. They pick up quarrels over trifles. They quarrel over water. They quarrel in the morning and they quarrel in the evening. If this is what our own neighbour are like how can we blame outsiders? My parents, brother, sister-in-law and every other member of the family quarrel with our neighbours all the time. If our own people behave like this, why should we blame our neighbour? Abuses, brawls, quarrels continue from morning till the night. I along with a few others, am always thinking of ways to put an end to these menace. But I do not know how to do it. If we go and ask them to stop, they will start fighting with us. They will use bad words and create trouble for us. But I do not like fights or quarrels. Not at all. Our next door neighbour are quarreling all the time. This disturbs the other neighbours. The ruckus prevents children in our neighbourhood home from doing their studies properly. I do not like to live in such an atmosphere. We should never quarrel among ourselves. We should share a good relationship with each other. But if no one wants to listen to us, how can we stop this quarrel mongering? How can we change this situation?²⁵⁴

"Today children are exploited in various ways all over the world – prostitution, pornography, forced labour in hazardous industries, domestic servitude, bonded labour, child soulders and petty crimes. Children are increasing being seen as marketable assets by many adults, sometimes even close relatives. Poverty, unemployment, utter desperation, and the demand for trafficked children drive this phenomenon. What is extremely worrying is that due to this violence, children are being increasingly impacted by HIV and AIDS. It is common knowledge that young people are trafficked into the sex-industry due to a myth that sex with children will cure the sexual offender of sexually transmitted infections or that children are largely free from sexual infections and therefore, less of an HIV and AIDS risk for the sexual offender. These children, already traumatized by the process of trafficking, are raped repeatedly and are extremely vulnerable to the threat of HIV and AIDS. ILO – IPEC has estimated that 15% of India's 2.3 million people in the sex-industry are children. It adds that to meet the demand of a growing sex industry even children from neighbouring countries like Bangladesh and Nepal are recruited. In fact, nearly 80% of those in the sex industry were minors when they were first pulled in."²⁵⁵

'Trafficking' in Children in the Red-light areas:

'Trafficking' in children is a very common phenomenon in the red-light areas. People dressed like policemen are often found to pick up children from the lanes of red-light areas. The girl children are extremely vulnerable to the trafficking and often kidnapped from the area and sent to 'a far away place like Delhi'. The workshop organized by Apne Aap Women Worldwide on the children of Kalighat and Sonagachhi red-light areas explored that children are very much accustomed to

²⁵⁴ Ibid. p31

²⁵⁵ Ibid. p.9

various kind of incidents of trafficking. They generally, do not have any sort of fear with regard to the trafficking. They informed that their mother and women of the area fight back the traffickers and chase them away with brooms. Children themselves generally possess sufficient knowledge about trafficking as well as they also have their own perception about the role of police as a protector of their life. In course of facing all kind of hardships in the day-to-day life, children learn to fight back against all odds in life and strengthen themselves, which aspire to live a colourful life with all brightness.²⁵⁶

14 years old *Manjula* shares her knowledge about the 'trafficking' and its prevalence in the red-light area in the following words,

By trafficking, I mean taking women and children away from their home for sale... When parents, and in most cases, uncles, take their daughters or nieces for a 'ride' and then hand them over to some other person for money, we call it trafficking.

'I'll tell you about an incident in my life. I used to go to my aunt's place to study. She often sent me to the local shop to fetch things for her. One day it was 12noon when I reached my aunt's place. She sent me to the shop. There was no one on the road. I was on my way back from the shop when suddenly a man emerged from a lane and lifted me up. I started screaming and kicking. That frightened him. He dropped me and fled. I had the scare of my life that day.'²⁵⁷

Anjali, a girl aged 16 years puts her own conceptions about 'trafficking' and her knowledge about the prevalence of it and its mechanism in the red-light areas and initiation of the victims into the prostitution, in her own words:

Trafficking, I think, is the act of secretly and forcibly moving little children, young boys and girls, from one country to another. Our locality is a red-light area. Most of the girls who get trafficked in to our locality are from Bangladesh. They have no idea about the place they have come to or the path they will be forced to walk. Their husbands bring them to this world of darkness. They do not understand the ways of this place. Their husbands rent a room here, purchase a few essential things for daily use, leave the girls there and go away. Sometimes they shares the same room with other girls of the locality. The new comers ask the experienced, 'what do you do for living?' The girls say, "We're 'sex-worker'. From now on, you'll also be a 'sex-worker'." The trafficked girls want to know the meaning of 'prostitution'. The girls try to make them understand, but it is often beyond their comprehensions. Then they start bringing men and do not allow these girls to leave their rooms lest they flee. They threaten the girls until they accept the fact that they are 'sex-workers'²⁵⁸

14 years old, *Mili* has shared her knowledge as well as experience in this regard in the following manner:

We live in a society where we hear of so many queer incidents. Both boys and girls get trafficked. Little children who do not even know the names of their parents are caught and

²⁵⁶ Ibid. p.18

²⁵⁷ Ibid. p.19

²⁵⁸ Ibid. p.22

trafficked. These children are then trained to become pick-pocket, tauts, thieves and robbers. The girls are sold outside the country. Family members like uncles, aunts, even parents, sell their children to foreign countries for a small amount of money. Some years ago, when the word 'trafficking' could be heard quite often, a girl in our locality called, *Mamoni* had a friend called *Pamela* who was involved in trafficking. *Pamela* lived with her aunt who trained her in this activity. One day *Pamela* came and asked *Mamoni* to go for a walk with her. *Mamoni* said, 'I must tell my father'. *Mamoni's* father *Oshthe* is one of my uncles. *Oshthe* uncle asked *Pamela*, 'where do you want to take her?' *Pamela* could not answer. People in our locality suspected *Pamela* of being involved in trafficking. My uncle asked for her telephone number. When *Pamela* gave it, he called up the number and spoke to her parents who said, '*Pamela* does not live here. She lives with her aunts.' Then *Oshthe* uncle insisted that *Pamela* take him to her aunt's place. *Pamela* had to agree. Uncle called a taxi and asked *Pamela* to hop in. On the way, *Pamela* suddenly asked the driver to stop and started shouting, 'Help! Help! Help! This man has raped me!' A crowd gathered. No one bothered to listen to what my uncle had to say but beat him up black and blue. But, anyway, *Mamoni* was saved from getting trafficked.²⁵⁹

From the above statements it has become very much clear that people from neighbours, friends, and other known people and even the family members are involved in the trafficking activities. It also reflects on the aftermath of being trafficked. The role of traffickers in dealing with the mechanism of trafficking has also been clearly informed in the above narration of *Mili*.

The information availed from 15 years old *Abhimanyu* is really shivering which expose the vulnerability of boys and girls living in the red-light areas who are the poor victim of trafficking, which shatters their lives, driving them into the most miserable condition:

A trafficker is a person who hands over boys and girls to other people in exchange of money. They have large factories in Delhi and America. These factories engage 5 and 6 years old boys and girls. They are so young that I doubt if they can spell their parent's names and addresses. Their sold again, when they are older. Young boys and girls are trafficked this way.²⁶⁰

According to children, there are people who come dressed like policemen and pick the children up from the red-light areas. The conversation between the children of the red-light areas and the facilitator of *Apne Aap Women Worldwide* organization was extremely informative which explores one of the most striking aspects of the trafficking and traffickers working in the red-light areas to a larger extent. The girl children are most vulnerable to such kind of activities as these traffickers mostly pick up the girl children from the various lanes of the red-light areas (Sonagachhi, Kalighat) and send them to Delhi. The girls trafficked in this way are mostly aged between 4½ to 15 years. These traffickers mostly take the chance to lift the children in the lonely areas/roads. Despite complain was lodged to the O.C at Bhatawala Police Station, they did not take any steps against it to prevent the children and said, 'We Can not help it. If they are using our dress and coming as

²⁵⁹ Ibid. p.23

²⁶⁰ Ibid. p.26.

policemen.' This incident spread fear among mothers (sex-workers) and their children and guardians became very much cautious to protect their children in this regard. Though, there were also some children who were not much scared to move alone despite these kinds of incident prevalent in the red-light areas. The conversation between the children and the facilitator were as follows.

Children: The police are taking all the Children. They have taken five of the children.

Facilitator: The Police?

Children: Yes. If Children go to Boxer Gully, they are picked up by the police. This is happening everyday.

Facilitator: Why?

Children: They are not the police, but they dress up like the police and pick up girl children from the gully. They take the children to Delhi. They hand over the children to other people.

Facilitator: Are you scared?

Seema: My mother is scared and all the mothers are sending the children to the village next Monday. I am also going to the village.

Facilitator: How old are the girls who are taken away?

Children: Between the ages of four-an-a-half and fifteen.

Facilitator: Do the police know?

Seema: The people of the area spoke to the O.C at Bhatawala Police Station. But he said, 'we can not help it if they are using our dress and coming as policemen.'

Facilitator: Are children now afraid to play outside?

Lopa: Earlier I used to go and drink tea from the shop but now I do not go. My mother goes.

Facilitator: How did you get here today?

Lopa: I came alone, I am not scare to come here.

Seema: Yesterday, too, the police came and picked up a few girls from Boxer Gully. The women of the area ran after the police with brooms.

Facilitator: When do they come?

Lopa: When the road is lonely. I roam here and there, so I see them quite often.

Seema: If someone is new, they pick them up.²⁶¹

The Role of Police: The perception of the Children:

The perception of children about the role of police to protect them against trafficking differs from person to person. According to someone, police played a protective role but on the contrary, some believe there is no use of relying on police on this matter. 13 years old, *Piyali* says:

²⁶¹ Ibid. p.32-33; India is a signatory to the UN Convention on 'The Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and the Exploitations of the Prostitution of Others' (2000), and the supplementary convention on the abolition of slavery, the slave trade and institution and practices of slavery... And yet, according to the National Human Rights Commission (India), Report 2004... 44.3% women were drawn into prostitution as children, 45.5% of the men who buy women in prostitution are married, 60% of the cases of trafficking go unreported as stated by police officers, 50 Million girls and women are missing from India's population, the result of systematic sex-based violence, The Indian government estimates 5.2 million people live with HIV/AIDS in India, India's explosive AIDS epidemic goes hand in hand with wide spread abuses against children who are affected by HIV/AIDS, please see A Report on Trafficking in Women and Children in India 2002-2003 Volume I, by National Human Rights Commission, Shankar Sen. (Coordinator), P. M. Nair-IPS (Principal Investigator - Researcher). <http://nhrc.nic.in/Publications/ReportOnTrafficking.pdf>

When I was in class V, there was a man who would regularly visit our school. When we called aunty, he escaped. When she got back to her work, the man appeared again. We told aunty about it. She informed the police. Following the incident, the police was posted at our school for a few days.²⁶²

But *Aradhana*, a girl aged 14 years possesses a negative perception towards the role of police. And she believes all the people of red-light areas to be united and lodge a complain in the court as a proper means to fight against this problem prevalent in the red-light areas. She also believes in appealing to the government in this regard as well.

I believe there is no use calling the police. Instead of helping the women they create all sorts of trouble for them. The only thing we can do is to unite all the people and lodge a complain in the court. We can also appeal to the government. Only then, we can close down this red-light area.²⁶³

Children in the Red-light areas and their Dreams:

Despite facing all hardship in life and being deprived of all opportunities, children of the red-light areas do not restrain themselves/retreat from dreaming of a beautiful life. Their dreams, thoughts all are the reflections of their positive outlook towards life. 18 years old, *Saiful* says,

I would like to build a house in my native place. There I will live with my parents – just the three of us. I can see it in my mind's eye... There is a pond. A person is taking bath in the pond. Another is carrying water in a peacher. There is a coconut tree with huts on either side of it. To girls on their way home are passing by the huts with loads of firewood on their head. There are many trees around my house. Birds are flying in the sky. The sun has just risen.²⁶⁴

14 years old, *Sunil's* dream is like this,

The place where I will settle down in the future is my native place in the Sundarbans. I wish I could build a house there and live with my parents and grandparents. There will be large trees with fruits. I will plant saplings in the garden in front of the house. Flowers will bloom. There will be a pond a little away from the house. It will be full of lotus leaves and flowers. Ducks will swim in it. Beside the pond, there will be coconut trees laden with fruits and date palms. In addition, I will have a few banana trees behind the house. There will also be a paddy field. There will a wide road in front of my house. I will have a parrot, a dog, and a mongoose at home. Birds will nest in the trees. A river will flow at a short distance from the house. Fishermen will catch fish. There will be trees along its banks.²⁶⁵

Another 14 years old girl *Meenakshi* has expresses her dream in her own words,

I wish to live in a house surrounded by trees on all sides. The place would be full of flowers – flowers in brilliant colours whichever way you look. My house would stand at the foot of a

²⁶² Ibid. p.33

²⁶³ Ibid. p.35

²⁶⁴ Ibid. p.48

²⁶⁵ Ibid. p.48

hill, by a spring. I would loose myself in the eternal beauty of nature. I wish to live very close to nature.²⁶⁶

The above three dreams reflect almost the same feelings; that is the strong desire to have a beautiful life in a beautiful house. Their descriptions center around the greenery, trees, river, sun, fruits, birds, flowers etc. – the natural beauties, which is the reflection of positivity with thrust on beauty, boldness, and desire to have a colourful life with its everlasting brightness.

HIV/AIDS Awareness and the Children of the red-light areas:

The workshop organized by Apne Aap Women's Worldwide on children in the red-light areas of Kalighat and Sonagachi also explored children's knowledge on HIV/AIDS. Their knowledge about HIV/AIDS was limited to its name only and they have absolutely no awareness on how it spreads and what are its consequences. Few of them thought it is an infectious disease. According to some of them, it was related to alcohol. Some of them related it to snake or amoeba when they were asked to describe about the virus. They all were very sure about the colour of the virus as red. One of the children, who were bright among them, had a working knowledge about the disease. One of them said, 'AIDS' can be of various kinds, 'If I am not careful, I may have AIDS. AIDS spreads through blood. No person can live long with AIDS. AIDS may be cured only if it is detected at an early stage. AIDS can spread in various ways. There are many rules about this. It is wise to obey these rules, because AIDS is a very bad disease.' But noticeably one common which all the children said is about the AIDS patient is that they should not left alone instead they should be looked after. Because of the fact, that they too are human being. But the ones whose parents had contracted this disease, their cases were tragic. Although, they have hate for their parents being infected to this disease but it was heart wrenching to see their love and pain for their parents and the fear of being orphaned by AIDS was always uppermost in their mind. 'My father has AIDS', said one of them. 'When I heard about it, I was very angry at my father. I suspected that he had been to some women in the red-light area. Now anyone in my family may get infected by my father. I know it has got through blood. But I really do wish that my father is cured as quickly as possible. I believe, that is it possible as it has been detected at very early stage. And if someone in my family or outside has this disease, I wish that he or she gets cured too.'²⁶⁷

13 years old, *Piyali* describes the condition of one of the boy in her locality. It shows how an AIDS infected person is started being neglected and considered socially outcast which make the life of an AIDS patient most miserable. But children generally possess a sympathetic as well as humanitarian

²⁶⁶ *Ibid.* p.49.

²⁶⁷ *The Place Where we live is called A Red-light Area*, an Apne Aap Women Worldwide Project, Kolkata, 2005. p.37

approach towards the person infected by AIDS. They mostly had the mentality to explore various means to fight against the disease and find out alternative ways to cure AIDS patients rather than considering them just outcasts and just remain/be indifferent to the situation in this regard. She says:

One of the boy in our locality had AIDS. No one knew about. The boy, too, did not know. We had a blood donation camp in our locality on the occasion of Kali Puja. The boy had gone there to donate blood. The doctors there examined his blood and refused to accept it. Then everyone came to know that he had AIDS. From that day, hardly any person has spoken to him. Most of the people avoid him. But there is one boy who did not stop talking to him. The mother of this boy and all the neighbours asked him not to do so. But the boy said, 'why should I not talk to him? Is not he a human being? If all of you behave in this way, how will he get cured? Please take him to the doctor and try to cure him.'²⁶⁸

14 years old, *Mili* says in this regard,

I live in an area where people buy prostituted sex. But I cannot say or do anything about it. If I tell them that they should not buy sex or at least use a condom when then do so, they start abusing me. I have told my mother and other women about the danger of AIDS. But they say, "how can we say, 'No'? How will we survive?" My family says I am "talking of things beyond my age." After I grow up, if I work for an organization, I want to use my work as a platform to stop men from buying sex. I wish to become a doctor and work for society. The men who buy prostituted sex must be made aware of the consequences of their desires and actions. After becoming a doctor, I will open a clinic in this area and spread awareness.²⁶⁹

Mili's statement throws immense glimpse on the vulnerable condition of women in to the prostitution where they do not have any rights to say 'no' to the customer refusing sex without condom. As customers are the only source of income for the prostitutes, therefore, they have to fulfill the demands of clients to keep the business always flourishing. Her statement also explores a very constructive as well as progressive thought process of child to deal with the problem of prostitution and the disease of HIV/AIDS. *Mili's* plans to work as an activist with an objective 'to stop men from buying sex' really uphold the idea 'elimination of prostitution' from the society forever. Her dream to become a doctor, work for the AIDS patients, and spread awareness is reflection of the constructive thoughts, which she inculcates within herself. Her entire expression, undoubtedly raises the question to the dominating role played by the men within the patriarchal structure of the society, which causes the subjugation of women at their ideological as well as professional levels

Children and Babus:

Babu always plays a major role to regulate the lives of their children. The detailed information about the role of babus of the sex-workers in the lives of their children has been provided under the

²⁶⁸ Ibid. p.38

²⁶⁹ Ibid. p.40

section, 'The interconnection between the children and the babu' in the chapter entitled 'Prostitutes and Clients'.

Role of NGOs and the Achievements of the Children of Sex-workers:

The children of the prostitutes are always deprived of all the opportunities, which restrain them to achieve a bright future. They are very much vulnerable to all ill influence, violence of the red-light areas and deprived of peaceful life, which has already been discussed earlier.

1995 onwards there was a revolutionary transition started being occurred in the lives of sex-workers. The rising voice of Durbar as well as All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health and other NGOs played a big role to infuse a sense of self-reliance among sex-workers of Calcutta, which made them able to dream of a healthy life for them and secured bright future for their children. During this, time/this time onwards they started claiming education for their children, job reservation for them and to build separate residential hostel for the children of sex-workers. Kalighat, the renowned red-light area of South Calcutta, played a major role in this venture taking initiatives for the upliftment of sex-worker's children. A social activist Bela Roy and Bachhu Dutta, alias Mrinal Kanti Dutta who was an active member of Durbar, played one of the leading roles in this regard. In 1995, memorandum was submitted to the OBC commission on this issue and received positive response from the commission. Bachhu said, 'the lifecycle of the prostitutes is such that their girl children are compelled to accept the profession of their mothers and becoming anti-socials are almost inevitable for their sons. A fight to get out of this cycle has started. The fight may go long. But it will continue. Till the time the sex-workers are not getting social security, this fight will not see its end.' According to the chairperson of the Women's Interlink Foundation (an NGO working in the red-light areas), Alok Mitra, the children of the sex-workers develop different reactions since they witness their mother's profession very closely. He informed that his organization has planned to build a hostel for the aged prostitutes and their son, although he expressed his concerns about the economic problem his organization is facing.²⁷⁰

The formation of Usha Co-Operative, which has already been mentioned in the section of savings habits of prostitutes, was one of the steps to enlighten the lives of sex-worker's children from all aspects. Among various objectives, another was to secure the future of the children of sex-workers. Sex-workers desire their daughters not to come into the profession of prostitution and they think borrowing loan from Bank can secure their children's future. They think this step would surely offer

²⁷⁰ Staff Reporter, *Santander Janya Surakhito Bhabishyat Chai Patitarao*, Protidin, 16th April, 1995.

the next generation the opportunity to live a healthy life. To talk about the formation of the Usha Multipurpose Co-operative Society Limited Sadhana Mukhopadhyay, Secretary of the Mahila Samannay Committee said, that was formed to prevent themselves and raise voice against all sorts of exploitation and extortion prevalent in the red-light areas through spreading a collective consciousness among the sex-workers of the red-light areas. She further said that 22 years back at the age of 12 years she was driven/forced in to the profession of prostitution. According to her, the minor girls are still forced in to this profession and subject to the ruthless exploitation. This tremendous exploitation leave no option for the teenage prostitutes but to commit suicide. The Mahila Samannay Committee was formed as a voice of sex-workers to fight against all these suppression in the lives of prostitutes. The Usha Multipurpose Co-operative Society Limited was considered to be the one progressive venture that took their movement one-step ahead and ensured a bright and healthy future to the lives of their children. The members of the Usha Multipurpose Co-operative Society Limited did not have reliance on the society to provide the children with all supports and opportunities to have a healthy life and re-incorporate them in the conventional society from where they have been outcast only because of being the children of the mothers, who are in to the profession of prostitution/prostitutes. Therefore, they themselves formed the Usha Multipurpose Co-operative Society Limited as a strong means to fight against all odds and give the children of sex-workers a secured future.²⁷¹

The sex-workers' busiest season of the business is Durga Puja. During this time a larger section of client, flock to the red-light areas than the usual time and leaves the sex-workers with little time for their children. But in the year of 1999, the scenario was a bit different as the Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee, a volutary forum of sex-workers in the Calcutta attempted to take some steps with a motto of bringing happiness in the lives of the children of the sex-workers during the festival. They decided to take time-off from their work and visit *pandal-hoping* with their children. Mala Singh, sex-worker of Khidirpore, said in this regard, 'normally, we can not spend much time with our children. I shall make an exception this time and take mine to the see the festivities.' On Maha-Ashtami (the third day of Durga Puja), cultural program was organised as a source of entertainment. Deepankar Das, a male sex-worker, used to run two dancing schools called *Rewaj* and *Basanti Children's Association*. Under his guidance, the children followed in their cultural endeavours. On the auspicious day the children would sing *agomoni* song. A number of programs were taken up by the sex-workers' forum. They decided to set-up medical camp at four places in the city during this year. According to Mrinal Kanti Dutta, director of the WHO sponsored STD/HIV

²⁷¹ Staff Reporter, *Santander Aloy Pherate Samabay Gorlen Jaunakarmeera*, Ananda Bazar Patrika, 18th August, 1996

program during that time, 'these camps will give free treatments to sex-workers, their children and clients for all diseases including STDs'.²⁷²

With the initiatives of Durbar and www.bengaliwriters.com, at least 20 children of the sex-workers under the guidance of their teacher, visited the 2003 Book Fair and they enjoyed a lot. They all were in between the age group 8 to 12 years. Durbar has 12 teaching institutes in entire Kolkata. The children of the sex-workers were learning photography, paintings and mainstream education in one of the institute of the Durbar, called 'Bera-Bhenge'. Jhumpa Singh, quickly captured some pictures of the Book-Fair. Sampa Dey, Ajemeri Khatun, Kiran Shaw, Shibu Hight did not hesitate to tell their life stories openly in the children's pavilion. Most of the children had their first preference to drawing books, jokes book and the books on Rabindranath's childhood. A professor of the Rabindra Bharati University bought books of Doyel publication for these children. The organizers were not sympathized with these children instead, they wanted to develop a sense of mental courage among them through this unusual step. The organizers would have been happier if the guild authority waived off the ticket amount for these children.²⁷³

It has already been discussed earlier that various NGOs has started taking progressive steps for the upliftment of the sex-workers and their children. *Rahul Vidya Niketan (RVN)* is a children home run by an NGO (Durbar) located at Baruipur Ramnagar. The main motto of this venture is to provide sex-workers with a better life and social security.



Children of the Rahul Vidya Niketan

(Source: Durbar: A Brief Profile)

This home was set-up on a 26-bigha plot in 2002. Most of the children of this home come from the Sonagachhi, one of the oldest red-light areas in India. They are aged between 5 to 12 years. The set-up of the *Rahul Vidya Niketan* had an unpleasant beginning. A group of local villagers,

²⁷² Priyanka Dam, *Sex-workers' Children will enjoy themselves*. 1999.

²⁷³ Staff Reporter, *Bera Bhenge*, Ananda Bazar Patrika, Monday, 17th February, 2003.

reportedly belonging to the ruling party, raised tremendous opposition against the establishment of this children's home, which became a major hindrance in this venture. The villagers blamed that the frequent visit by the mothers of these children, who are sex-workers, would 'pollute the purity' of the neighbourhood. Later on, the agitated villagers convinced and pacified by the initiatives taken by the District Magistrate (DM), Alapon Bandyopadhyay, who talked to the villagers directly. Soon after the interaction with DM, the protest was withdrawn. In this regard, Joydeb Sardar, 'the local CPI(M) *Anchal Prodhan*' stated, 'there was a disagreement among a group of *panchayat* members on this matter, and this home for the children of the sex-workers became a very sensitive issue for villagers.' He also said, that children of sex-workers are extremely vulnerable and always subjected to the social discriminations though they have also rights to aspire a healthy life like others. In this regard he said, 'society has to realize that these children are human too. As of now, there is very little connection between residents of the home and the local villagers. *Sunita Ranga*, a sex-worker, who's children, 8 years old *Priyanka* and 10 years old *Rahul*, are residents at the *Rahul Vidya Niketan*, said, 'the RVN provides social security. My children were humiliated while studying in a general school at *Ranaghat*.' The same expression is found in the statement of *Angura Begum*, who has been in the profession for the last 14 years. She said, 'every mother's duty is to educate her child. Without proper education, it is difficult to curve out a healthy living in today's society. This home provides my sons that education.' *Angura's* sons, 12 years old *Md. Wassir* and 10 years old *Md. Hassihul*, are the residents at RVN. The headmaster of the *Ramnagar Basic School*, *Md. Abdul Wahab Mondal* is very much optimistic about a bright future for these children, who are also students at the school. The 59 year old teacher said, 'society will definitely realize the merits of these children at some point of time.' In this regard, the supervisor of the RVN, *Rasama Bibi* said, 'there are 25 children living in the home at the moment. This is run by an NGO, and the mothers also contribute Rs.250 for each child.' The RVN also planned to introduce a computer training facility for the children.²⁷⁴

Though there are so many NGOs who are working for the upliftment of the sex-workers and their children through various ways but these progressive ventures of these NGOs are facing tremendous setback due to financial problems. This kind of problem was faced by *Alochhaya*, a library in the brothels of *Kanthi*. With the initiatives of the *Durbar Mahila Samiti*, this library was started in a room of Rs.1000 rent in the *Sreerupal Dhal* of *Kanthi*. The sex-workers of this area dreamt that this library will help imbibing the sense of education in their children. This library had about 2000 books. Among them, there were story books, the books for the beginners, even the books on sex-education also got place in this library. Once there was electricity but later it also went off due to lack of funds.

²⁷⁴ Pronob Kumar Das, *Gift of Home for sex-workers' Kids*, the Hindustan Times, Kolkata, 25th February, 2003.

Even the landlord also asked to vacate the house and the books were in a messy condition. The librarian was disappointed due to all these. He said, 'if we do not get financial support, we will have to close down this library.' The little Pampi or Biltu, who are regular readers in this library; according to them, '*we Can not read in the lamps powered by kerosene, we have read all the books at least two to three times.*' Due to all these, the number of reader also decreased. In 2004, the number decreased further due to the displacement of a part of room which fell down. Entire Sreeroopa's Dhal is scared thinking that one day this *Alochhaya* will loose its identity. In this regard, administration is also indifferent and due to its indifferences, the *Alochhaya Library – An enlightened progressive venture*, is on the verge of its ruin.²⁷⁵

During 1995, with the initiatives taken by the Christmas Cracker Charitable Trust, a Non-Governmental Organisation working in London, the handicrafts made by the children of the sex-workers of Mumbai comprising bag, dress and other various things were hugely sold off in the market of London. Two temporary shops were open during the month of Christmas in the entire London just to assure the sale of all the handicrafts made by those small children. The chairperson of that organization was Ram Gidumal.²⁷⁶

The children of the sex-workers are always considered socially outcast as their mothers. They are always victims of all kinds of exploitation, violations, and ill-treatments. Their lives are always threatened and vulnerable to the sufferings and tortures, which leave them in to the most miserable condition of life. The motherhood of sex-workers is always denied. Despite having all affections towards the children and fulfilling all responsibilities, they are refused to be accepted by the society in their other roles but they are just labeled by the only one identity that is 'sex-workers'. The incident of 1994 reflects the most vulnerable condition of the sex-workers and their children in our society. *Purnima*, a sex-worker and the mother of two children, went to a nearby shop along with her children to buy bread. There she was subjected to harsh abuses, which was flowing from every corner, and with a very short period of time, a huge crowd gathered there. After this, police also reached the place with in an unbelievable short time. Poomima was forcibly taken to the police station. When police was forcibly taking her to the police station, she saw that police was also taking her two children along with her. That was the last time she saw her children. After this, she could not trace her daughter any more. Her heartfelt screaming was enough to break the silence of night but no one extended a helping hand towards her. Because, she was the most inferior subject of the society – a 'sex-worker'. Purnima was a resident of notorious red-light area of Ajmer Gate in

²⁷⁵ Staff Reporter, *Jaunakarmeeder Ekmatra Library Bandho Howar Mukhe*, Dainik Statesman, Kolkata, Wednesday 7th July, 2004.

²⁷⁶ Staff Reporter, London, *Jaunakarmeeder Santander Upohar*, Ananda Bazar Patrika, 5th January 1995.

Delhi. Though, prostitution was the only strategy for survival for Purnima but like other mothers she also aspire and dreamt of giving a healthy future life to her children. But the incident of 1994, shattered her all dreams. After getting rid from the police custody, she kept on searching like mad for her two children. From the police she came to know that both her children were kept in an ashram. From the officials of the ashram, Purnima came to know that her daughter fled from the ashram a few days back and despite their all effort, they could not trace her. Purnima, alleged that in order to free her son from the ashram, she had to pay huge amount of money as bribe. The reason behind this entire episode, which Purnima faced, is because of her identity as a sex-worker and she had to face tremendous humiliation from all and she paid the price by losing her daughter. Actually, almost all of the 24 lac sex-workers face this kind of humiliation regularly and along with them, their children too are not left alone from this. In a survey of 1996, it was found that 52 lac children of the 24 lac sex-workers were not having identities of their fathers. All these 52 lac children had to undergo with physical as well as mental tortures.

A 13 years old girl, Shikha grew up under the care of Deepalay and her protest that was suppressed, that too started taking shape. The organization like Deepalay, undoubtedly deserve appreciation for their progressive ventures in this country. Another organization, named Bharatiya Patita Udhhar Sabha, appealed to the court for allowing the children of the sex-workers of different places to get admission without their father's identity. Statement of Khairati Lal Bhola, the President of the Bharatiya Patita Udhhar Sabha, goes, 'few years back these children were not allowed to get admission in the school. We have gone to the Supreme Court taking this matter and currently about 7½ lac children all over India have got admission in the school without their father's identity.' In 1988, Bharatiya Patita Udhhar Sabha appealed to the court in this matter. According to them, on the basis of availability father's identity this partiality is not accepted. This organization termed it illogical even asking whether the child's mother is a divorced or of a sex-worker at the time of admission in the school. After 5 years of Bharatiya Patita Uddhar Sabha's appeal, Supreme Court gave attention to this matter and in 1993, the highest court of India gave its verdict that at the time of admission in a school, either father's or mother's name can be used, only father's name is not mandatory. Like Bharatiya Patita Uddhar Sabha, Deepalay and many more NGOs are working in different part of the country. These organizations are working towards the rehabilitation of the sex-workers. In this matter, finally the government also started taking initiatives. In 1996, only in Delhi, there were about 22 homes/ashrams for the children of sex-workers. In these ashrams/homes, for the security of the children, their mother's were provided with an identity card, showing which they could visit their children in the ashram/homes once a year. And if someone from outside wished to visit, they would have to apply through Central Social Welfare Board. Though, there have different

measures taken by organization and governments, but the social narrowness has remained same. Because, till today, in our society a sex-worker is assessed only by/through her 'body'.²⁷⁷

Creative Aspects of the Children of the Sex-workers:

❖ Photography:

There are other attempts also taken by various organizations to explore the creative minds of the children of the sex-workers. Durbar has played one of the leading roles in this regard. In 2002, with the joint initiative taken by Durbar and two renowned photographers of Kolkata, an exhibition of photography done by the children of the sex-workers was organized in a non-governmental gallery of Kolkata. Taking more than 150 children of the sex-workers from the red-light areas of Tollygunje, Bowbazar, Khidirpore and Titagarh, this project was started this year (2002) from the Children's day. United Nation's children's fund, UNICEF provided financial aid for this one year project. The project was named, 'Out of Focus'. The age group of the children, who were provided training by the photographer, they were all under 13 years. They were provided with the primary training in photography by renowned photographer Shubhendu Chatterjee and Kushal Roy. They were taught about the parts of the camera to photography. This project created a huge excitement among the children. They literally started doing research on what they want to click, how they want to click and why they want to click. When a 12 years little boy of the Tollygunje red-light area was asked why he wants to take pictures, his prompt/ straight answer was, '*we want to show our pains and agonies*'. It was really not expected to have this kind of answer from a child of his age. The objective of this project was to create a thoughtful mind among the children through the environment surrounding them, about the society and making them aware of the nature. The difference of the picture taken by these children and by the other is that, their photography is very close to reality of life and they are very close to life, which canvasses happiness and sorrow, beauty and ugliness in a same frame. These children took almost 3500 photographs. Among those, the maximum were having their mothers. After their mother, the local Mandir and *upasanagars* got the next best attention from these children. They had even taken photographs of the animals in the zoo. Some of them had clicked the local tea shop and the *adda* around the shop. In the picture of their mothers, the mothers were seen busy in cooking, or in their leisure hour during the sunny afternoon the mothers were found busy combing their hairs with smiling face. The scene of enjoying the warmth of love and affection of mother being in her lap was also not missing from their photographs. This piece of photograph shows the daily routine of the sex-workers and also portrays their affection. Some of the photographs even astonished their instructors as well. According to them, '*the vision of*

²⁷⁷ Staff Reporter, *Jaunakarmeeder Shishura Aaj'o Andhakar Jagat'er Basinda*, Anada Bazar Patrika, 25th October, 1996.

these children from the red-light area are far different from the so called children of our society, they are very close to the life.' But they were different in themselves too. The way children from the red-light areas of Tollygunje and Bowbazar were performing, the children from the Titagarh red-light area were not picking the job so easily. The instructors related this gap directly to their monetary issues and the lack of avenues regarding their educations. The organizers of this photography exhibition expected that, they would be able to send at least one child jury in the exhibition of World Press Photography in 2003. But the credit goes to an US lady, who first initiated photography by the children of the red-light area. The lady photographer, named Jana Briski, first organized a workshop taking the children of the red-light area. For this, she took a rented room in the red-light area and stayed there for sometime in order to train the children in the art of photography.²⁷⁸

The British Council of Bangladesh in partnership with DRIK Picture Gallery had organized a photography exhibition entitled 'Making Child Rights Visible' as a part of the ongoing festival of photography *Chhobimela – II* from 25th to 30th November, 2002 at the British Council Auditorium. Mr. Carl Reuter, Director British Council inaugurated the exhibition. Eminent photographer Dr. Shahidul Alam, who was also the Festival Director of *Chhobimela – II*, spoke on the occasion.²⁷⁹ This was entirely unusual from the others as the complete exhibition was decorated with the

²⁷⁸ Mahesweta Bhattacharya, *Santander Camerai Jaunakarmee Mayera*, Ananda Bazar Patrika, 4th January, 2002; Staff Reporter: *Photographs*, The Telegraph: Metro Timeout, 4th March, 2002; Staff Reporter: *Photographs*, The Telegraph: Metro Timeout, 5th March, 2002; Staff Reporter: *Photographs*, The Telegraph: Metro Timeout, 6th March, 2002; Staff Reporter: Image of Innocence, The Telegraph: Metro Timeout, 7th March, 2002; Staff Reporter: *Photographs*, The Telegraph: Metro Timeout, 8th March, 2002; Staff Reporter: *Photographs*, The Telegraph: Metro Timeout, 9th March, 2002; 'I like the way they were sitting and gossiping', said Sampa Sharma, 13, pointing out a picture of all-women *adda*. Sampa was one of the 110 children who had been clicking away at 'life as we see it' for the past five months. All the children, aged between 8 and 15 years, were part of the UNICEF supported 'experimental' 15 month 'visual literacy campaign'. The program, covering the Sethbagan, Tollygunje, Bowbazar and Titagarh red-light areas, was framed by photo journalists Subhendu Chatterjee and Kushal Roy and was run by the Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee (DMSC). The objective was ambitious, to impart knowledge of child rights through the medium of photography and to provide a foundation for promising talents. Chatterjee felt, 'photography is one of the cheapest yet strongest means of visual expression, and it is time we considered it more than just a past time.' UNICEF had deviated from policy to fund the project that aims to show the kids that 'even they are an integral part of society'. The moment frozen on celluloid, with their PC-33 Pentax Cameras were on display at the weeklong *Shanti Utsab* held at Salt-Lake. Kushal Roy said in this regard, 'ranging from their mothers dealing with 'customers' to lighter moment of children at play, their photographs are as hard-hitting as their moving, giving us an insight in to what they are exposed to.' Asserting that the project was not about giving some marginalised children a crash course in photography, Chatterjee added that, 25 of the most talented would be taken for excursions where they could shoot-in 'new and challenging environs, as opposed to shooting in their own locality'. To give the camera-wielding kids a fighting chance, Chatterjee was preparing a ground for an exhibition abroad 'to raise money for their future use.' The Star magazine of Germany had already approached the organizers for publishing select photographs. Subhendu Chatterjee said in this regard, '*Chhobimela*, the popular bi-ennial photo exhibition of Bangladesh, will also showcase their work but what we are eagerly awaiting is communication from the World Press Photo to allow a few of the children to form part of their Children's Jury.' With UNICEF backing the cause and their new found skills with the camera giving kids something to smile about, the unique project was ready to fly on the wings of hope. – Sankar Sridhar, Light Through A Lense, Fruitfully, The Telegraph, 2nd April 2002; Staff Reporter, *Aaj Kaal Porshu: Chhobimela*, Bangla Bazar Patrika, Dhaka, Monday 25th November, 2002; Staff Reporter, *Dhakai Aaj: British Council*, Prothom Aalo, Dhaka, Monday 25th November, 2002; Staff Reporter, *Chhobimela*, The Daily Star, Dhaka, Monday 25th November, 2002.

²⁷⁹ Staff Reporter, *Photography Show on Child Right Begins Today at British Council*, The New Nation, Dhaka, Monday 25th November, 2002.

photography by the children of the sex-workers in India. Student of class VI, Ajoy Das expressed saying, '*I like photography. I want to spend my entire life clicking photos and want to become a renowned photographer.*' The workshop which organised by the sex-workers' organization, Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee along with the two photographers of Calcutta, Shubhendu Chatterjee and Kushal Roy in India to provide technical knowledge to the children of the sex-workers in the field of photography, photography of 18 such children of that workshop got place in this exhibition entitled 'Making Child Rights Visible', which was organised in the British Council of Bangladesh. These children are the resident of the Sethbagan, Kalighat, Tollygunje and Titagarh red-light areas of India. Contrary to the general expectation about the life of the sex-workers, the photography had different aspects. A few of 11 years old, Sunita Sen's picture portraying environment of her residential area in the Sethbagan got place in this. In one of the photographs by Somnath Das, a child was seen selling earth in the Kalighat road. Sambhu Das in his picture of an alcoholic, who was sleeping on the road, wrote 'after getting drunk and loosing their consciousness we often see people lay on the roads.'²⁸⁰ The photographs taken by these children had altogether different aspects, which were able to canvass the various parts of life. In short, the pictures captured by these children are always self-explanatory. In one of the photographs taken by Krishanu Dutta, a child was standing taking a *kasar* in his hand and the very next photograph was showing that the same child was helping his father in playing the drum. His father was a drummer and hence he used to be very busy during the puja time, thus during the puja time when all other children were having fun and enjoying the puja, this child had to help his father.

²⁸⁰ Staff Reporter, *Nishidhyapallir Shishuder Tola Alokchitra Prodorshani'r Udbodhan*, Ajker Kagoj, Dhaka, Tuesday 26th November, 2002. (Bengali era – 12th Agrahayan, 1409); See Staff Reporter: Photo Exhibition at British Council begins today, *The Independent*, Monday 25th November, 2002; See also Staff Reporter: British Council'e Bharatiya Patitader Santander tola Photography'r Prodorshani, *Doinik Inquilab*, Dhaka, Monday 25th November, 2002. (Bengali era- 11th Agrahayan, 1409); See Staff Reporter, *Antorjatic Alokchitra Prodorshani 'Chhobimela'*, *Dainik Sangram*, 23rd November, 2002; See also Staff Reporter, *Chhobimela II*, *Jugantar*, Sunday 24th November, 2002; See Staff Reporter, *British Council: Alok Chitra Prodorshani'r Udbodhan 11'Tai*, *Council Milnayoton'e*, *Ajker Kagoj*, Monday 25th November, 2002; See Staff Reporter, *British Council Hosts Photography Exhibition*, *the Financial Express*, Monday 25th November, 2002.

Life on the streets, through their lenses



A picture by Krishanu Dutta, one of the frames
at the Indian Museum exhibition
The Telegraph, 11th Dec, 2002

Since Krishanu himself also was a child, that might have helped him in understanding the pain of that child. In one of his other photographs, the photo of a child selling 'earth' sitting beside the Ganges was captured.

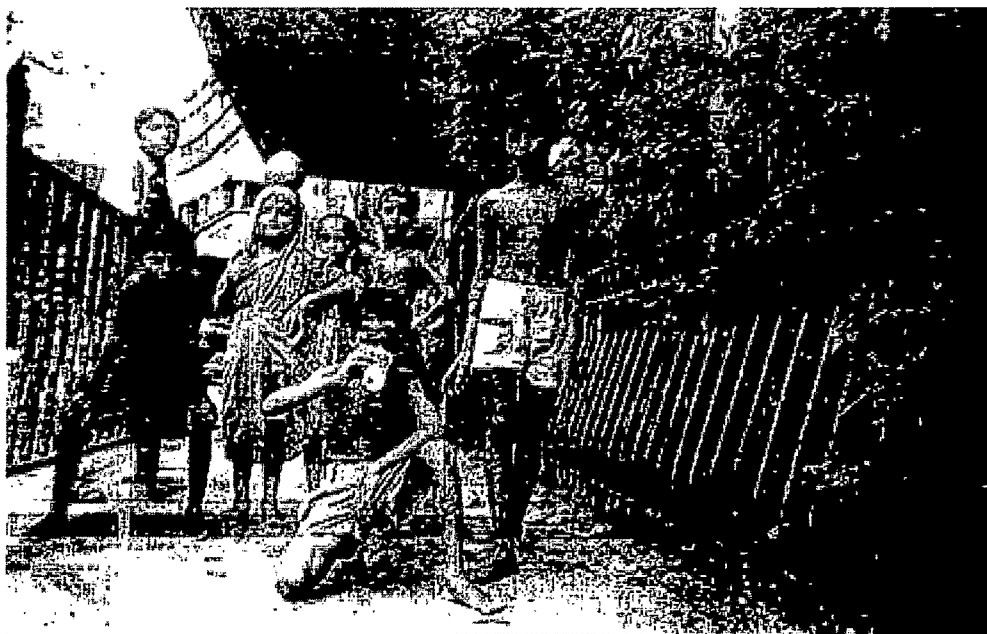


Uttarbanga Sambad, 16th December, 2002

Street Child: They are brought up in this way and deprived of their rights as a child

He had to sit there for selling 'earth' since the very early morning everyday. Another photo clicked by the child of the sex-workers shows the malimpact of the environment on these children of the red-light area. Photographer and instructor Kushal Roy said, "deep down in their heart, they have an inexpressible pain. They are neglected in our so called 'civilized' society. Which they Can not express. They have proved within one chance that they have immense power inside, they have the

attitudes to express themselves, and this is why their works are now getting appreciated internationally.²⁸¹



In a group of children that stand together, one is dressed as the trade while the other imitates the art of seduction by drinking alcohol. The photograph is by 12-year-old Avil Singh from Sethi Bagan.
The Asian Age, 1st Feb, 2004

In a joint initiative taken by UNICEF and Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee, from 9th to 13th December 2002, an exhibition of the photography by children of the sex-workers, entitled '*Life Through Their Lenses*', was organized in the Ashutosh Hall of Indian Museum.²⁸²

The photography liberated the mind of the sex-workers and changed the meaning of life for them. It provided them a 'new pair of eyes by broadening their mental horizon.' The photos clicked by the children of the sex-workers were to be showcased in UNICEF's 2003 calendar.

²⁸¹ Mamun Abdullah, *Shilpokala Academy'te Chhobimela: British Council'e Shishuder Alokchitra*, Prothom Aalo, Dhaka, Friday 29th November, 2002; Staff Reporter, Making Child Rights Visible: *Nishidhapallir Shishuder Chokhe Nijaswa Jagat*, Bhorer Kagoj, Dhaka, Tuesday, 26th November (Bengali era- 12th Agrahayan, 1409)

²⁸² Staff Reporter, *Jaunakarmeeder Santander Antorjaatik Swikriti*, Uttar Banga Sanbad, 16th December, 2002; Staff Reporter, *Alokchitra Prodorshani*, Ananda Bazar Patrika, 9th December, 2002; Staff Reporter, *Lense'er Chokhe*, *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, 11th December, 2002;



Asian Age, 27th July, 2002

The photography project for the children of the sex-workers of Calcutta was conducted by the Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee and funded by UNICEF. Project co-coordinators, photographer Subhendu Chatterjee and Kushal Roy said that it started with a view of making the children aware of their rights in 2002. According to Mr. Chatterjee, 'although we started with 110 children, many of them fell out on the way.' The 37 participants were taken to Shankarpur for a two-day field visit on 22nd July, 2002. In this regard, Mr. Chatterjee said, 'while the excursion was welcome break from life's monotony, it also gave them an opportunity to take snaps at their will. In their areas they are often discouraged to pursue photography as career'. He added, 'they have tied-up with Bangladeshi organization – Out of Focus, specializing in such project for marginal community children. A three member team, comprising Snigdha Zaman, Hamida Akhtar Dristi, and Rabeya Sarkar Reema has come to work with us.' The three Bangladeshi photographers considered working with these children as learning process for them. Snigdha Zaman said, 'working with them gives us fresh ideas'. Mr. Chatterjee said that photographs clicked by the children of sex-workers would be showcased in the UNICEF calendar along with other international publications and web sites. But he was bit worried about the funding problem, with regard to this matter he said, 'photography is expensive and without UNICEF funding, it will be impossible to continue. We'll try to get revenue from the sale of these photos but that won't be enough.'²⁸³

²⁸³ The Correspondent, Snaps to Appear in UNICEF's 2003 Calendar: A Photo Finish for Sex-workers' Children, The Asian Age, Calcutta, 27th July 2002; Staff Reporter, In Focus: Budding Lensemen with Butterfly Dreams, The Telegraph, Kolkata, Saturday 27th July, 2002.

The children of sex-workers are deprived of all opportunities and considered as ostracized community like their mother, sex-workers. Though, there is a slow but steady progress occurring for the upliftment of the children of sex-workers since the last decade of the twentieth century and attempt is being taken to change the perception of the society towards them through assimilating them with the mainstream society. The various NGOs with the collaboration of some of the foreign organization and some talented as well as social people's help, this venture is gradually heading towards a transformation stage with its all positive approach. But this struggle is long way to go, which became very much apparent with the role of Indian High Commission at Dhaka when they had refused to display photographs taken by children from Kolkata's red-light areas at the Indian Culture Center Gallery. The first secretary of the press and culture wing of the High Commission, Neeta Bhushan had initially agreed in this regard but later on the permission was withdrawn citing 'suspect credentials' of the children. Indian High Commission officials had a different view in this regard, *'we can allow works of only reputed photographers to be exhibited at the gallery.'* The representative of DRIK of the organizer of the second Chhobimela in Dhaka, were told so after the program schedule had been published and distributed. The photographers from India and Bangladesh were shocked with the attitude of Indian High Commission at Dhaka and had to make alternate arrangements. In this regard, the British Council Gallery was approached for displaying the photographs taken by the children of the sex-workers and secured their permission. The British Council Gallery agreed to host the week show of 45 photographs taken by 14 children. The photographs were selected from the works of sex-workers children who captured the life at the seaside while spending a weekend at Shankarpur. The photography workshop for the children was organized by a group of professional photographers in July 2002. The talent and creative genre of those children really impressed those photographers. Acclaimed photographer Raghu Rai had also appreciated their work and agreed to inaugurate an exhibition in Kolkata. In this regard photographer and social activist Subhendu Chatterjee said, *'the photographs reveal the latent talent in the unfortunate children. One child, Sunita Sen has already expressed her determination to take up photography.'* Sunita's works had been selected for the Dhaka photo festival. Mr. Chatterjee commented on the attitude of Indian High Commission with a critical approach, *'the attitude of High Commission Officials is disappointing. How can they differentiate between ordinary children and those of a sex-worker? Is not it enough that their works are good enough for an international exhibition?'*²⁸⁴

²⁸⁴ Subhra Niyogi, *Indian Mission sees Red over Kids Photos*, The Times of India, Kolkata, Thursday, 21st November, 2002.

During 2004 in the month of January, the photo exhibition of the children of sex-workers opened at Delhi Haat. The works of 100 child photographers were displayed in that exhibition. Those photographs reflected a different aspect of life in world focusing on the 'fears, beliefs, and ambitions.' The photo of Pappu Singh had shown a *masi* (*aunty*) taking a swig from a whiskey bottle while her husband smiles in to the camera. Another photograph showed a father cooking baby sitting while the mother entertains a client. 'Men lost in drunken stupor and prostitute on her last journey' comprised the theme of the photographs taken by children of sex-workers. The exhibition was entitled 'See It My Way' where the children of sex-workers aged between 8 to 12 years, hailing from Sonagachhi, one of the oldest red-light area of Kolkata and India, participated. It was a UNICEF funded project in association with Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. The start of this project occurred in 2001. The cameras were given to the children and they were asked to click the moments of their life. The photographers, Shubhendu Chatterjee and Kushal Roy, guided these children in this entire project. About this exhibition and the works of the children of Sonagachhi few lines are quoted here from the paper, Express Newslines, which beautifully expressed the nature of the photography done by these, marginalized children, "theirs is strange detachment in all the frames. Life is not easy at Sonagachhi. But seen through the lenses, it looks a lot more interesting. Pictures of god and goddesses feature prominently. 'Everybody in *Lalbatti* area is god-fearing', explains 10 years Bhola Sahu. 'All the *mashis* have personal gods. We see so many debates over religion and god.' One of the photograph shot by Kishor Das, shows a *mashi* whispering a secret prayer into Kartik's ears. Kartik, incidentally, is the most popular god at Sonagachhi and all the sex-workers worship him, hoping to get a good husband. Goodman too get VIP treatment in Songachhi." The kids of the red-light areas carry the name of their father, who are usually their mother's permanent client – called 'babu'. Despite living a struggling childhood and constantly facing hardship in life they do not retreat from dreaming of a bright as well as peaceful future life. Their ambitions range from being James Bond to being cop, 'Sachin Tendulkar'. The display was hosted at Kolkata, Silliguri, Darjeeling and Dhaka. These children had to undergo various obstacles to shoot pictures. In this regard a child said, 'a *mashi* did not want us to take her picture, so we gave Rs.2 and she posed.' Another child said, 'some *mashis* were apprehensive that we'll sell our picture abroad and their relatives might spot them.' 'Then there were those who struck funny poses the moment they saw us with the camera. They all think they're Madhuri Dixit', jokingly said Babu. There was also other trouble through which the children had to undergo. Their cameras were snatched away by the police and goondas also threatened them. Finally, they were given I-Cards issued by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation.²⁸⁵

²⁸⁵ Teena Baruah, *Sonagachhi's Kids open a Third eye, and You Discover a World*, The Indian Express - Express Newsline, New Delhi, 24th January, 2004.

Though this country has got its freedom, but even after this, there is no sign of social transformation. Even though everywhere it talks about the equal rights of man and woman but still everywhere, the women are subjected to tortures. In one hand where the unemployment has taken a horrible stand in the men, exactly on the other hand, the women are compelled by the situation to use their body for the shake of livelihood. Like the word *Sati*, *prostitute/patita* word is also absent in the masculine gender. Worthwhile, the daughters of the sex-workers are compelled to follow their mother's trade and the sons are turned into 'good for nothing' object for the society. Though during the end of the 20th century, i.e. from the decades of 90's, a transformation has been seen in the lives of the sex-workers and their children but 'there hasn't been a situation where one can say that these sex-workers and their children have got a place in the society and have got alternative livelihood.' But this notion is also correct that this trade cannot be uprooted from the society because till date there are no countries where this trade has been successfully uprooted. In recent time, these women are recognized by the name of 'sex-workers' instead of *beshya*, *prostitutes* or *brothel-girls*. This changed conception and revolution at least feels that this trade is much better than begging and also claims that they should also be sanctioned the rights like other wage earners. Though, in many countries of the world, the sex-workers have got this 'right', in our country it is still not accepted and to get this 'right', revolutions are going on, where the sex-workers from Calcutta have not only shown their courage, but they have come forward to lead from the front. Not only the sex-workers but also their children have got opportunity for education in due to the support of few NGOs. Once the girls are getting education, they are not following their mother's footsteps and the boys are also being able to get into legal livelihood. The way of acquiring education is also not that much smooth rather there are so many obstructions on its way. Following is an excerpt published on 17th April, 2004, in Bengali journal, *Desh* on the above subject, 'do we have to make an all together different school for the children of the sex-workers? Can not they sit along with the other children from the society? These children have not chosen their mother's womb before coming into this world. The NGOs are taking care of their primary education but once they grow up, they need to be sent to the higher school. Media informed that few schools are denying their admission in their schools. In some places, though they are getting admission but once their mothers' identities are disclosed, these children are removed from the school. Then where does the difference of today's world lie from that of Heera-Bulbul's time?'²⁸⁶

In 2004, with the initiative of organization named, *Chayani Kala Sangam*, a 'sit-&-draw' competition was held for the children of the sex-workers of the Abinash Kabiraji Street. The children of the sex-

²⁸⁶ *Sei Tradition Somane Cholechhe*, *Desh Patrika* (Bengali Journal), 17th April 2004.

workers are always neglected in our society and to encourage them, this competition was organized. The number of participants was 60. All of them were provided with painting apparatus and Tiffin-box as gift. The first, second, third and fourth place holders were honoured with a medal and a certificate. The subject of their painting had scenes from baul, the hills, the rivers, and house etc. This competition was able to bring a smile in the faces of the children. They had the dream of becoming a teacher; some wanted to become a doctor. Famous collage artist, Ashok Verma was the judge for this competition. The leader of '*Chayani Kala Sangam*', Lopamudra Mukhopadhyay announced few of their programmes for the calendar year and the coordinator of the Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee, Saswati Chakraborty extended their helping hand towards these programmes. For Ashok Chattopadhyay, Satyabrata Bose, Sanjoy Chakraborty, Gautam Dutta, Santosh Das and Abhinandan Mukherjee were the person in command behind the smooth functioning of this entire programme.²⁸⁷

❖ Literature:

The creative thrusts of the children of sex-workers also find their expressions in the literary field. Stories, poems etc. often constitute the medium of the expressions of their lives as well as various thought process along with imaginations. The following literary creations of the children of sex-workers throw immense glimpse on this aspect and psychological structures of the children of red-light areas can also be explored through these creative manifestations to a larger extent.

Poem:

Jitenbabu

Jitenbabu lokti bhalo
 Kintu bejay kure,
 Nak dakiye ghumoto she
 Kath phata roddure|
 Kajer kono naiko balai
 Sudhui kebol khawa,
 Amon onek din keteche
 Bhule gachhe nawa|
 Gorom kaler ak dupure
 Gachher niche boshe,
 Dekhte pelo gachh theke ak
 Am porio khoshe|
 Amti dekhe Jitenbabur
 Jibhe elo joi,
 Uthe giye kuriye nebe
 Tao chhilona bol|

²⁸⁷ Staff Reporter, Durbar-er Shishuder Niye Chayanir Protijogita, Saptahik Bartomaan, 10th July 2004.

Jitenbabu (Mr. Jiten)

Jitenbabu, a good man
 But very lazy was he,
 He used to go to sleep
 In the hot sun and snore
 Not a single work had he
 Only thing he did was eat,
 There were some days when
 He even forgot to bathe.
 One summer noon he sat
 Under a tree,
 Saw a mango falling,
 From the branch above him.
 He saw it, and liked it,
 His mouth began to water,
 But alas he had no strength
 To get up and pick the fruit.²⁸⁸

Porashona

Onke ami boddo kancha
 Shottore pai Chhoy,
 Porikkha dite boshle porei
 Jage mone bhoy|
 English likhi hiji biji
 Onko-o kori bhul,
 Porikkhar khata dekhlei
 Ma tanbe amar mathar chul|

Studies

I am very poor in Maths
 I get Six upon seventy,
 Whenever I sit for exam
 Fear comes creeping on me.
 In English I write only nonsense
 I make mistakes in sums,
 If mother happens to see my book,
 She'll pull me by the hair.²⁸⁹

A Life of light

On our path of life there are pains,
 On our journey to light, we find so many thorns.
 In our minds we have so many hopes,
 While walking the road of life, so many obstacles.
 Can we compare ourselves to the trees?
 They do their own work,

²⁸⁸Robin Chakraborty, 10 yrs, Class V, Uluberia, 'Jitenbabu' ('Mr. Jiten') in Dr. Smarajit Jana (ed.), 'Namaskar' (Patrika/Journal), Year 7, Volume 1, Durbar Prokashoni, January 2005. p.46

²⁸⁹Mangal Singh, 10 yrs, Class V, Kalighat, 'Parashona' ('Studies') in Dr. Smarajit Jana (ed.), 'Namaskar' (Patrika/Journal), Year 7, Volume 1, Durbar Prokashoni, January 2005. p.46.

We humans do not do that.
 In this world so many good men are in darkness.
 We want to do good work and we walk for it.
 We will walk the road of life.²⁹⁰

Stories

The Exorcist

One day I was going to play. Suddenly it started raining. I saw a small hut in front. I ran and entered the hut. As soon as I entered, the hut vanished. There was no hut. I came home and told my mother about the incident. Next morning we all started discussing the matter. We all went to the place where this incident 'took place', and found that there was a mango tree 'grown' there. We called the exorcist. He said, 'give me a nail? As soon as the exorcist touched the tree with the nail, strange sounds started coming out from the inside of the tree. Then he pierced the tree-trunk with the nail and some juice started oozing out from the tree. The exorcist said, 'you have nothing more to fear'. Saying this, he went back to his home. We too, returned home.²⁹¹

The following write-up of a daughter of a sex-worker beautifully captures the various dimensions of the life of a child belong to the red-light area. The self expression of this 14 years old girl reflects her agony, sufferings, social deprivation etc. on the one hand and on the other hand her strong desire to come out of all darkness of life and dream of a healthy life for herself along with her mother have also been explored. In this regard her writing also focus upon the role of NGO to enlighten the lives of the children of sex-workers. Aspiration of being economically self-sufficient undoubtedly highlights the mentality of a child of sex-worker with all its positive orientation, though a sense of little insecurity of that child about her future life is also not found absent.

From my childhood, I used to like study very much, in Kalighat where I am staying, I used to study there and I was very good in that. Everyone of my locality used to love me a lot. I do not know what happened my mother stop my education. Years after years gone by I was not studying. There was no one on our heads/as guardian when my father died. After death of my father, my mother became abnormal and I was broken seeing my condition. Later I came to normal slowly. One-day boys and girls from our locality went to a program organized by Sanlaap and I too went with them. In that function, I saw that many girls from Sanlaap performed dance in that function. I came to know that Sanlaap has a home in Baghajatin. Girls used to stay there in that home. In that home, they provide training on many things such as dancing, singing, education, and handicrafts. When I heard that they provide these all to girls then I also thought that I will be able to study again. For this, I, myself went to Sanlaap's office and spoke to the aunties there and registered myself there. I came here with lots of hope that I will again be able to study and one day will be successful and will help my mother. I came here with this hope. Then the aunties provided me admission in a school

²⁹⁰ Rolly Barui, 11 years, Class V, Rahul Bidyaniketan, *A Life of Light* in Dr. Smarajit Jana (ed.), 'Namaskar' (Patrika/Journal), Year 7, Volume 1, Durbar Prokashoni, January 2005. p.47

²⁹¹ Rocky Gayen, 8 years, Class IV, Rahul Bidyaniketan, *The Exorcist* in Dr. Smarajit Jana (ed.), 'Namaskar' (Patrika/Journal), Year 7, Volume 1, Durbar Prokashoni, January 2005. p.47.

in class five. In the class I saw there were, little girls who were younger than me were studying in with me. I looked at myself and at them and it hurt me a lot as they were too young than me. I was feeling shame on myself as I was studying in class five with those girls. One-day aunties of the school assault me saying that I am too old and studying in class five. Hearing these all I was crying in the school and I felt very bad. Then slowly I stopped going to school and finally I stopped going to school. My dream could not come into reality. I used to think about the aunties of the school and cry, I could not concentrate on study anymore, and I have thought that I will not take admission again in school I am shattered. Now I have thought that I would learn some work and with the earnings, I would take care of my mother. Now I have this much of dream, I do not know whether this will turn into reality. I have nothing more to write.²⁹²

4.19. Social Responsibilities of the Prostitutes:

In large cases prostitutes have always exhibited their responsible attitudes towards society through various social activities and concerns, despite all kinds of social seclusion as well as ignorance. Let's take up the excerpt from Manada's autobiography in the early twentieth century where she had given the description of prostitutes' involvement in various social activities which not only explored the sensitive aspect of Manada's nature but also helped to bring prostitutes into the focus throwing light upon their humanitarian approach towards life:

That year, during autumn, there was severe rain and storm in East Bengal. Many people died, their homes and fields were devastated. To offer relief, stores were opened in Calcutta. Well-known barrister Byomkesh Chakraborty and Chittaranjan Das (both are no more now) took initiative in this work. With their efforts thousands of rupees were collected as donation. Young men used to sing and move around in groups from street to street collecting money. They came to our locality too. We too donated as per our capacity. One day...doctor friend of mine said 'Mani, why do not you girls from the brothel area collect some funds for the East Bengal Cyclone Funds; Mr. C. R. Das would be particularly happy. He wishes that all classes of society should participate in this good work. Can you do it?' I said 'See, I am new here, I do not know everybody here. With your assistance I will try my best.' He said, 'I know quite a few women in Rambagan, Sonagachhi and Phoolbagan. Even theatre-artists can be brought into this.' I heard the doctor was acquainted with Mr. C.R. Das. With his and his friends' efforts, a few thousand rupees donation was collected from the red light area. This was my first participation in social work. I took this opportunity to touch the great Mr. C. R. Das. When we touched his feet and kept the bunch of notes at his feet, tears of happiness flowed from his eyes. He touched our heads and blessed us. I realized he was really 'Deshbandhu' (The title received by him meaning 'friend of the nation').²⁹³

Manada Devi's autobiography also gives information regarding participation of the prostitutes in the freedom struggle movement of India. Her narratives throws immense glimpse upon the participation of the prostitutes in the non-cooperation movement:

²⁹² Indrani Sinha & Nabarun Bhattacharya (ed), *Tahader Katha: Nijer Bhashar Nijer Katha*, ABARBONITA – A Quarterly Journal Against the Sex-trade, (First Edition). Jan - Marh 2000. p.19-20

²⁹³ Manada Devi, *Sikshita Patitar Atmacharit*, (autobiography in Bengali), Chirayat Prakashan, Kolkata, 2004. p. 57-58

In the year 1920, the non-cooperation movement started all over India, under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi. In Bengal, the leadership was in the hands of Deshbandhu Chittaranjan Das. The non-cooperation movement had five points of action – (i) Students would leave Schools and Colleges. (ii) Lawyers and barristers would stop the practice (iii) All would boycott the Council (iv) The titles awarded by the British Government would be boycotted and (v) No one would buy imported items. All over the country, in villages and towns, propaganda started through meetings, street corner rallies and lectures, picketing and through active resistance of the opponents. There was a demand for more workers. Along with men, women also came forward to join these activities. Deshbandhu Chittaranjan's wife, the great Mrs. Basanti Debi became their leader. From rural areas and small nearby towns lots of women came to join the movement. 'I saw such enthusiasm, such inspiration and such willingness to work.' Deshbandhu established '*Nari-Karma-Mandir*' to coordinate and unite all these women workers. The participation of the so-called 'fallen women' or the prostitutes in this 'Non-co-operation Movement' was truly a historically important incident. It was another side of the life of the harlots outside their normal profession.

The police started arrests here and there. The police did not spare even women workers. A few of us together made a small group. Our *Babus* were advising and encouraging us from behind the scene. Earlier, while collecting flood-relief funds for cyclone in East Bengal, we had come into interaction with gentlefolk. That made us bold, clever and courageous; we met many a leader of the country – big and small. So this time when we again came out to work actively, Deshbandhu's co-workers were very happy and helped us in many ways. This excitement in connection with the Non-cooperation was so great that while working together it was not even remembered that we were despicable whores, and the others were respectable family men. Those gentlemen also forgot that they were respectable family men. They forgot that they were moving with prostitutes. Those men who never visited a brothel, who never even dreamt of seeing a whore, were moving with us, we were traveling in the same car, talking and joking together; all were praising our hard work. It used to please us and made us proud like anything.

One day before going home, we bade farewell to Chittaranjan and went to touch his feet. He blessed us with affection. An elderly man who was sitting nearby knew that we were a bunch of whores and uttered, 'At last, these people have also joined the work – is it good Mr. Das?' Chittaranjan gave him a caustic reply, 'you are all moral policemen. My ideas do not tally with yours. Go to the editor of '*Sanjivani*', Kesto Mitra. You will like him. Your Sadharan Brahma Samaj was formed only to come out of the narrowness of Keshab Sen; but at last even there we find meanness. Do not be narrow like a well; be wide like the ocean to accommodate everybody. What do you see in the West? We, too have to be like that. Those whom we have pushed far away with hatred are coming to the forefront. This is a good sign. I found a great power in the garbage heap.'²⁹⁴

After some time, there was severe flood in North Bengal. To help the flood-affected people, a lot of efforts were made in Calcutta to collect funds. A central committee was made for this under the leadership of Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy. Young students went out to the streets singing songs. Rich people donated money generously. The owners of cinema-theatres arranged 'Benefit Nights' to collect funds. Government gave some money. Like this when all classes of society came forward to help the flood victims, the prostitutes too were not sitting idle. The

²⁹⁴ Ibid p 65-66

following narratives of Manada further explores the social activities carried out by the some section of prostitutes of Calcutta red-light area during the first half of twentieth century:

We became bold and courageous after joining the non-cooperation movement earlier. Therefore, at this time too, we were not aloof. Our group was already formed. But now it was enlarged further. We proposed that we would first donate money and take out our group on to the streets singing in chorus and start begging. Accordingly, groups of girls from various brothel areas like Harkata Gully, Rambagan, Sonagachhi, Phoolbagan, Champatolla, Ahiritolla, Jorasanko, Simla, Kerani-bazar etc. took out their separate groups and came out singing songs and collecting money. It was a wonderful sight! The people of Calcutta were stunned. In each group there were 50 – 60 prostitutes – they were in saffron-coloured saris with red borders, with untied long hair flowing, big red *bindi* on their foreheads, beautiful voice and lovely graceful movements— they went singing along the streets. Some men were with them playing harmonium and clarinet. At the head of each procession two women were holding a red festoon with the name of the respective women's organization of each locality. Behind them were another two holding a sheet of cloth where donors were showering coins and currency notes. Two more women were collecting clothes for flood victims....

When we went to collect donations, hundreds of men used to walk with us. Not that everyone donated money moved by compassion for the flood-hit people; they were moved by our physical appearance, our songs and our glances and gave money generously. Students and youth groups could not gather such a crowd. We went out twice – morning and evening – to collect money. We got thousands of rupees, but only a part of it reached the central account after a lot of it was wasted on useless expenditure. Whatever we gave was gracefully accepted by Acharya Prafulla Chandra Roy. Some of the prudish moralists were reluctant to accept our money, but Prafulla Chandra explained to them and made them agree to accept our money.²⁹⁵

The ample of evidences in the post independent era also shows the social activities and concerns of the prostitutes.

In the year of 1995 a group of prostitutes celebrated the birth anniversary of *Rabindra Nath Tagore* (*Rabindra Jayanti*). An evening of cultural programme was organized by *Palatak* a local club which included songs and poetry by *Tagore, Nazrul and Sukanta Bhattacharya* on the occasion of *Rabindra Jayanti*. Besides professional artists performed in that programme, local talents inclined to persue facets of rich heritage of Bengal were also included in the cultural programme. The workers and volunteers of the club appeared on that day with full of enthusiasm and got involved in social welfare activities with a motto of local people's benefit. That is why this club was chosen by 'All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health' to set up their AIDS/STD intervention clinic. The work comprising spreading awareness of and preventing the sexual/venereal disease were also successfully carried out by this club. They started celebrating *Rabindra Jayanti* in 1994. The lighting, stage backdrop, painted by the members of the club and the function itself were full of reflection with

²⁹⁵ Ibid p. 68-69

a taste for culture which was quiet unexpected in such surroundings (*red-light area Maniruddin Lane*). The walls of houses around the grounds were decorated with quotes and lines from poems by *Tagore, Nazrul and Sukanta Bhattacharya*. With the increasing darkness of the evening a huge audience started flocking to the club ground at the end of Maniruddin Lane which proved that Tagore's influence had broken all kinds of class and economic barriers. In this regard one of the organizers of the function put his expression in response to the question about the turnout and interest shown by the residents of the area was like this: 'Good music has no barriers'.²⁹⁶

On 9th July in the year of 1999 sex workers of Kalna red-light area took initiative under the leadership of sex-worker Bharati Das and Shandhya Das to walk down the streets in order to collect donation for the brave soldiers who lost their lives and those who were severely injured during the Kargil War. Shefali Das, Saahera Bibi, Dolly Ghosh, Tapasi Dutta, Asha Chatterjee, Ila Paul (sex-workers) moved around the streets throughout the day and collected donations for the soldiers. To explain the reason behind such kind of initiatives taken by them sex-workers, Khanto, Reba, Jaanu, Geeta, Moni, Neel said "Those soldiers who are sacrificing their life for protecting our country and saving ourselves, are also hailing from some family; they are also someone's husband, son or someone's brother. We have a strong desire to do something for them. Our financial capacity is very limited but with that limited capacity we have taken this initiative. We hope that we would be able to donate ten thousand rupees to the Kargil fund formed by the honourable Chief Minister". It was decided to handover the donation to honourable Chief Minister through organizing a function.²⁹⁷

The 'birth centenary' of Indubala Devi*, famous singer and actress of 'yesteryear' was held at Minerva Theater in the year of 1999. It was organized by Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee (DMSC). They organized an exhibition at Minerva Theater on that day. Records, and old gramophone and a harmonium belonging to the singer Indubala were also kept for display. The former Education Minister *Pratap Chandra Chunder* gave speech on the role played by Indubala* in organizing sex-workers and setting up an organization to work with them as early as 1956. Contemporary Mayor Prashanta Chatterjee said that 'The CMC was considering renaming a road in her honour.'²⁹⁸

²⁹⁶ Staff Reporter, *Rabindra Jayanti with a difference*, The Telegraph, 10th May 1995.

²⁹⁷ Staff Reporter, *Kargil Juddhe Nihoto, ahoto sainikder saharthe pothe naamlo jaunaakarmee ra*, Kalnar Dristi, 22nd July 1999.

²⁹⁸ Staff Reporter, *A Tribute*, Statesman 19th July 1999; * Indubala was born in 1898. She was highly trained in classical music under two famous ustads Gourishankar Mishra and Gauhar Jaan. Indubala Devi came in close contact with Kazi Nazrul and sang several songs composed by the poet. She acquired proficiency in singing in several Indian languages and Indubala Devi became the court singer of the prince of Mysore for over a decade. She also achieved fame for her acting skill. As an actress Indubala Devi was featured in several Bengali films eg. *Meerabai, Chand*

In the month of August during 1999 five prostitutes (Sandhya, Meena, Sona, Parvati and Chanchla), residents of red-light areas located in northern Calcutta donated their eyes²⁹⁹. Such kind of initiatives taken by the prostitutes as the other respectable group of the society take, is really remarkable.

Prostitutes have also proved their humanity several times through rescuing minor girls and those who are forcibly pushed into prostitution. In this way in the year of 1999 minor girl Naseema Khatoon was rescued by DMSC and returned to her parents. Naseema was kidnapped by trafficker Shirazuddin Sheikh and was taken to various red-light areas for selling her but each time his motto was not fulfilled and lastly he brought Naseema Khatoon to the Kadaroad red-light area (Durgapur). In this red-light area Naseema was rescued with the initiative taken by the members (Sex-workers) of DMSC and Shirazuddin Sheikh was handed over to the police by them³⁰⁰. Another incident took place in 2006, when a 12 year old girl child, Mamoni (name changed) was lured by 50 years old neighbour Manoranjan, who promised her to secure a well paid job of a maid-servant but finally brought her in Sonagachi and got her locked in a room. Then he forcibly tried to sexually abuse her and started threatening her to not reveal this to anyone. She was asked to work in the red-light area. Initially being confused, the innocent girl now realized that she was cheated and brought to the red-light area. The girl started screaming and crying. Hearing her voice, *Bariwalli Gangadevi* opened the door and rescued her from Manoranjan. She took the address from the girl and brought her back to her residence in Ultadanga. She did not stop here, when Manoranjan pleaded her for mercy and also tried to bribe her; she refused and informed the incident to the local club. Police arrested Manoranjan and they were amazed by this attitude of Gangadevi, who could have easily forced this child into her business. Gangadevi said, "When I saw this small girl, it reminded me of my own daughter. I made my mind that I will neither allow the girl to be sold off nor allow anyone to make the girl victim of his lust." Describing this incident, the Project Director Bharati De said, "I hope this step of Gangadevi will be a great example for the other inmates in the brothel. If we receive such cooperation from them, it will reduce the job of police department and also the trafficking of girl child into the red-light area."³⁰¹

Saudagar and Nal amayanti. Indubala Devi also performed acting on stage with theater personalities like Dani Gosh, Sisir Bhaduri and Nirmalendu Lahiri. Staff Reporter, *Indubala*, Ananda Bazaar Patrika, 19th July 1999.

²⁹⁹ Staff Reporter, *Sonagachite Aidsrogir Sonkhya 300: 5 Jaunakarmeer Chokkhu Daan*, Aajkal, 9th September 1999.

³⁰⁰ Staff Reporter, *Jaunakarmeeder Udhoye Nabalika Phirepelo Baba Maake*, Bikaler Kagoj, 21st September 1999. Staff Reporter, *Dalal Jamaibabu Gireftar: Jaunopolli Theke Nabalika Uddhar*, Dussahos: Shandhya Dainik, 4th September 1999.

³⁰¹ Rajibaksha Rakshit, *Aandhaar Rajye Aalor Dishari 'Gangamami'*, Anando Bazar Patrika, 6th July, 2006

MAY DAY PREPARATIONS



The Asian Age, 1st May, 2002

In the year of 1998 sex-workers under the leadership of DMSC made all arrangements to celebrate 'May Day'. They planned to be gathered at the college street of Central Calcutta at mid-night of 30th April when the May Day about to begin.



Sex workers at a midnight rally from Sonagachhi to College Square on May Day eve to demand labour rights. Picture by Arka Datta

The Telegraph, 1st May, 1998

Sex-workers' May Day Rally

Several cultural programmes were also organized to be performed by the sex-workers as well as their children on that day in the various red-light areas of Calcutta as well as entire West Bengal.³⁰²

On 19th February in the year of 2000 prostitutes in the city of Calcutta opposed against the ban on the shooting of Deepa Mehta's movie 'Water'.

³⁰² Staff Reporter, *Jaunakarmeera Palon Korben May Dibas*, Protidin, 16th April 1998.



Kalantar, 20th February, 2000.

The Demonstration of DMSC against 'Fundamentalist's attempts to scuttle the shooting of Deepa Mehta's Film 'Water' at Esplanade.

Prostitutes of Calcutta invited Deepa Mehta and her unit to shoot 'Water' in Calcutta. Famous singers and film makers were accompanied by over two thousand prostitutes in walking in the rally silently organized by the DMSC. The demonstration against 'Fundamentalist's attempts to scuttle the shooting' was held at Esplanade. DMSC had also perused in seeking help from Governor for shooting 'Water' in the state of West Bengal.³⁰³

More than two thousand prostitutes worked in the rally with their mouths covered to demonstrate protest against *Viswa Hindu Parishad's* attempts spoil the shooting of the film 'Water'. On this issue *Sadhana Mukherjee* (Secretary of Asia-Pacific Network of Sex Workers) stated: "We are behind Ms Mehta. The exploitation of widows in religious shrines has been a social curse for ages and we needed someone to 'raise' the issue so that the world gets to know about it. Women from middle class families go to these holy places with the hope of achieving salvation. But they end up being used by the *pandas* and the priest of the temples. The film would reach out to the masses and help weed out this social evil".

³⁰³ Staff Reporter, *Prostitutes Invites Deepa to City*, The Sunday Statesman, 20th February 2000. Staff Reporter, *Water Ke Samarthan Mein Veshyaen Aage Aaye*, Janasatta (Hindi), 20th February 2000. Staff Reporter, *Water: Sahore Elona Unit, Deepa, Shabanar Kushputul Daho, RSS Daftore Samne Bikkhov*, Bartoman, 20th February 2000. Staff Reporter, *Waterer Pokshe Jaunakarmeeder Michil*, Kalantar, 20th February 2000. Staff Reporter, *Water Ke Samarthan Mein Veshayon Ne Juloosh Nikala*, Chapta Chapta (Hindi), 20th February 2000. Staff Reporter, *Water Bondher Dabite Shivsena Gelo Aadalate*, Bikeler Protidin, 19th February 2000. Staff Reporter, *Aaseni Deepa, Water Bitorko Saharmoye*, Ananda Bazaar Patrika, 19th February 2000. Staff Reporter, *Veshyaon Ne Water Ke Samarthan mein Pradarshan Kiya*, Sunmarg (Hindi) 22nd February 2000.



Sex-workers of Calcutta walked down in a rally in support of Deepa Mehta's film 'Water'.

Social Activist Sunanda Chakraborty's expression was like this: "People who are trying to stop Ms Mehta from making the film are doing so to keep the mask on their faces from falling off. They fear that the movie will expose the social wrongs that take place in religious spots like *Varanasi* and *Vrindavan*. Otherwise why should they frantically try to bar Ms Mehta from making the film if there was no truth in it?" In this context *Putul Singh* (secretary of Mahila Samannay Committee) observed: "Previously sex-workers were not regarded as human beings. Their complaints were not given heed to by the police. The media has always stood up for us and we are grateful to the media for this. Ms Mehta is trying to expose an injustice which has tormented many helpless women. She has come as our saviour and we will not allow any political party to stop her from making the film. After all, it is these politicians who are responsible for encouraging these panda-priest nexus which is exploiting helpless women who go to these shrines for salvation."³⁰⁴

In the year of 2002 prostitutes of Kolkata took the initiative under the leadership of DMSC to fight for the cause of peace. The annual meeting of the prostitutes was held on 3rd till 9th March 2004. The theme of their annual meeting was fighting against the 'threat of war looming large over the subcontinent' (in the form of terrorism, war etc) and praying for world peace. In this regard Dr. Smarajit Jana (project advisor to the DMSC at that time) said: "We have called it Peace Fair this time mainly because of the current instability in the sub-continent, involving India and Pakistan and the Afghan war". Dr. Jana further explained that the 'Peace Fair' would seek to situate sex-workers

³⁰⁴ Staff Reporter, *Sex Worker walk in Silence for Water*, Asian Age, 20th February 2000.

on the 'global agenda'. This 'Peace Fair' also organized seminars on the issue involving well known intellectuals and social scientists, while focusing 'spotlight' on peace. In this context Dr. Jana said "All we want is peaceful coexistence between individuals and among diverse groups in the society and among the countries as well...War means prolong instability and economic recession, which will also have its impact on the sex-trade as any such situation affect normal life....From our experience we have always found the sex-workers turning out to be chief victims whenever police gets hyperactive". The 'anti-war campaign' also had other significance. It would integrate prostitutes/sex-workers with the mainstream of the society and 'mitigate' their social seclusion. In this context Dr. Jana said "We always like to take up such a people's cause simply in order to put it before the world that sex-workers are as much responsive to the geo-political changes as any right-thinking individual. It helps shake off our isolation and come closer to the mass." In this regard it deserves to be mentioned that DMSC came forward to hold public demonstration against terrorism after the September 11 attack on the World Trade Center and Pentagon in the US, nor against the Taliban in Afghanistan the 'regime' that caused subjugation and oppression of women in the name of religion.³⁰⁵

In 2002, the sex-workers of Calcutta protested against the communal riot occurred in Gujarat and attacks on minority in this riot. They also protested against the harassment of news reporters in the Sabarmati Ashram during this riot period. Sex-workers walked down in a rally from College square to Rani Rasmani Road on 20th April 2002. DMSC played the leading role in this regard to bring sex-workers together and raised voice against this political injustice. Sex-workers demanded immediate resignation of Chief Minister of Gujarat Narendra Modi. On Rani Rashmani Road an effigy of Narendra Modi was set on fire by the sex-workers. Swapna Ganguly (secretary of DMSC) said "All the sex-workers have come here leaving their daily work. Sex-workers have demanded immediate resignation of chief minister Narendra Modi without any sort of hesitation and putting an end to all sorts of attack and injustice directed against the minor community."³⁰⁶

³⁰⁵ Gautam Chaudhuri, *City Sex-workers to Join Anti-war Campaign*, Hindustan Times, 2nd January 2002. See Correspondent, *Sex-workers Call Meet For Peace*, Hindustan Times, 4th February 2002. See Staff Reporter, *Shantir Prarthonai Pocheesh Desher Jaunakameera*, Ananda Bazar Patrika, 9th January 2002. See Staff Reporter, *Sex-workers' Meet*, The Telegraph, 8th January 2002. See Abhinaba Chatterjee, *Sex-workers' Meet to Talk Up War Issues*, The Times of India, 11th February 2002. See Staff Reporter, *Shanti Utsav*, Hindustan Times, 8th March 2002. See Staff Reporter, *Jaunakarmee Dwara Atankhwad Ki Ninda, Mahanagar*, 5th March 2002. See Staff Reporter, *Shudharanider Shanti Utsav*, Protidin, 10th March, 2002. See Staff Reporter, *Jaunakarmee Mela Aaj Theke Suru*, Protidin, 3rd March, 2002. See Abhijit Roy, *Shanti Utsav*, Protidin, 5th March 2002. See Deepak Sanyal, *Kolkata Mein Viswa Shanti Ke Liye Duayen Mangi Desh Videsh Ki Veshyaen*, Rastriya Sahara New Delhi, 26th March 2002. See Staff Reporter, *Prottashar Aalo Chokhe Mekhe Sesh Holo Milanmela*, Protidin, 22nd March 2002. See Staff Reporter, *Saltlake Mein Suru Hua Jaunakarmee Ka Mela*, Prabhat Khabar, 4th March 2002. See Staff Reporter, *Sex-workers Call for World Peace at Meet*, The Times of India, 4th March 2002.

³⁰⁶ Staff Reporter, *Gujarat Kand Ke Virodh Mein Juloosh*, Chapte Chapte, 21st April 2002. Staff Reporter, *Modi Ke Istife Ki Mang Par Jaunakarmee Ne Nikala Juloosh*, Janasatta, 21st April 2002. See Staff Reporter, *All For A Cause*, The

In the year of 2002 sex-workers of DMSC raised voice against Interest reduction policy of Bank. In this regard they organized discussion forum and walked in the rally for demonstrating their protest. Representatives of DMSC had also met finance minister of West Bengal Ashim Dasgupta and submitted a memorandum to him and secured assurance of finance minister to think about the problem of sex-workers with regard to the interest reduction.

He also asked DMSC to provide plans on betterment of the living conditions of old sex-workers. According to DMSC, The reduction on the interest of bank cannot be equally applicable in every one's life. There are many people who have other source of income after retirement.



सपु बचत योजना की ब्याज दरें घटाये जाने के खिलाफ शुक्रवार को निकली यौन कर्मियों की रैली तरामंडल के सामने से गुजरती हुई। दैनिक बिस्वमित्र चित्र

Dainik Biswamitra, 25th May, 2002

Sex-workers of Calcutta protesting against the reduction in the rate of interest for small saving scheme.

But in this regard the condition of sex-workers is totally different. An old sex-worker Lakshmi Devi who was also a member of Usha Multipurpose Co-operative Society stated "All kinds of expenditure comprising children education, treatment for health etc are carried out by us only. No one comes forward to help us out while we fall sick. Earning bread and butter also depends upon us. With the growing age we lose our income in this profession (prostitution). In this condition if rate of interest also go down day by day then what would be our condition and where will we go³⁰⁷?"

Asian Age, 21st April 2002. See Staff Reporter, Jaunakarmee Ne Bhi Gujarat Mein Huye Dange Ke Khilaf Aawaz Uthayi, Sunmarg, 21st April 2002.

³⁰⁷ Staff Reporter, *Banker Sud-hrasher Protibade Michil Jaunakarmeeder*, Ananda Bazar Patrika, 25th May 2002.



Janasatta, Kolkata, 25th May, 2002

Sex-workers of Calcutta protesting against the reduction in the rate of interest for small saving scheme.

Which is most interesting in this issue that CITU (Centre for Indian Trade Union) decided joining hands with the city sex-workers to fight against 'reduced rate of bank interest' (put in effect by a policy decision of the Union finance ministry in 2002). In this regards Mr. Joydeb Ghosh, a senior Union leader said: "CITU will support the fight of the sex-workers against the reduction of bank rates from 13% to 9%. These people will be severely affected due to the slash in interest rates. We support their demand of restoring the original rate....Since sex-workers Can not work after a given age, their retirement plans solely depends on the amount of monthly interest they earn from their savings accounts."³⁰⁸

Besides these, 'Women's Day', 'World's Aids Day', are also celebrated by the prostitutes of Calcutta. DMSC mostly plays the leading role in motivating sex-workers in such event management. In the year 2003 Women's Day was celebrated in the red-light area of Kanthi under the leadership of DMSC. On this day various cultural programmes and discussion forum were organized in that area except the members of DMSC, various other people and intellectuals were present in that programme. The main theme of the discussion forum was 'Government's attitudes towards the sex-workers and workers right claimed by the sex-workers.' Ila Manna (Field coordinator of the branch) of Durbar in Kanthi said: "The collective consciousness and unity among all classes of women should be generated to raise voice against all kinds of discriminations and oppression exercised upon them in various fields". The entire program was directed by Zarina Bibi (sex-worker).³⁰⁹

³⁰⁸ Correspondent, *CITU Joins Hands with Sex-workers*, The Asian Age, 25th May 2002.

³⁰⁹ Staff Reporter, *Durbar Samiti Naridibash korlo Nishiddha Pallite*, Upokulbarta, 9th March, 2003.

Sex-workers of DMSC reached *Amlasole* (a remote area of Bengal situated near Jharkhand border) 'with relief supplies'. Food supplies were distributed among 'Sabar' families of that remote village by the sex-workers. In the year of 2004 five *Sabars* died out of 'starvation' in *Amlasole*. After the news got flashed on media, Durbar immediately took initiatives on sending relief supplies to the affected area and on planning for the improvement of the living condition of those tribal.

हीन दृष्टि से देखी जानेवाली महिलाओं ने भी पेश की मानवता की मिसाल



Hindustantimes, Ghatshila, 21st June, 2004

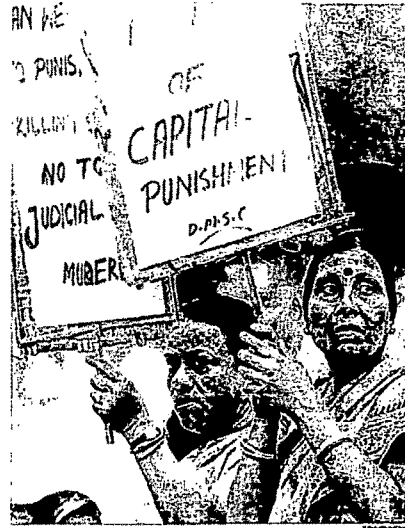
Sudipta Biswas (sex-worker) resident of Sonagachi, former president of DMSC stated, "We have distributed relief material worth more than Rs. 60,000." *Putul Das*, Secretary of the organization, further said, "We basically work for HIV/AIDS awareness among sex-workers but after the news was flashed, we came to here to extend our help to these poverty-stricken families. Sabars are marginalised community like us." The Assistant Secretary of Durbar, *Meena Halder* said, "We do not depend on the government for funds, instead generate our own funds."³¹⁰

Durbar took a bold step for the development of *Sabars'* living conditions and to mitigate those problems, they started interacting with other government officials and NGOs. Thus, they succeeded to establish a connection between *Amlasole* problems and government officials and NGOs. Under the Durbar's initiatives, discussion forum on the issue of the development of *Amlasole* and betterment of *Sabars'* living conditions was also organized. Those tribal were very much moved by the generosity of the sex-workers. Through interaction and inter-exchange program, *Sabars* also became aware of Durbar's objective and demand of labour rights for the sex-workers. *Sabars*

³¹⁰ P.Sanatani, *Sex-workers bring Relief to Sabars*, Hindustan Times, Ranchi, 21st June, 2004. See, Staff Reporter, *Bhasense (BSS) ne Amlasole Me Shibir Lagakar Rahat Samagri Baanti*, *Dainik Jagaran*, Jamshedpur, 21st June 2004. See Staff Reporter, *Heen Drishti se dekhi Jaanewali Mahiliaone bhi pesh ki manabata ki misaal*, Hindustan, Jamshedpur, 21st June, 2004. See Staff Reporter, *Amlasole Sonagachi'r Jaunakarmeera*, *Ebong Paushali* (weekly Newspaper), 5th July, 2004.

supported Durbar's movement. Later on, in the month of October people of *Amlasole* came down to Calcutta and met Durbar for further discussion on development purpose of *Amlasole*.³¹¹

It is also very much important to mention here the opposition raised by the sex-workers (Durbar) against the death penalty imposed upon *Dhananjay Chatterjee* by the High Court in 2004.



MARCH AGAINST DEATH PUNISHMENT at 11:30 AM organized by the Durbar Mahila Samakshya Committee Tuesday
Hindustantimes, Kolkata, 29th June, 2004



দেহের পোষাক মর্মেই স্বর্গের চরিত্রকে কোঁচিয়ে দেওয়া যায় না। হলে সেজন্য মহাকাব্যে নতুন যুক্তি দিতে হবে। এঁক তখন কৃষ্ণ সংস্করণে আসবে। কী ভয় করা হবে। নতুন যৌনকর্মীদের সংগ্রামে যে পোশাকের বিচ্ছিন্ন মূল্যবোধ পড়ে গেলে বিকল হবে। - জোড়ো : ঢাকার ডাক্তার

Chapte Chapte, 30th June, 2004

Durbar Protesting against the Capital punishment of Dhananjay Chatterjee in Calcutta.

The Calcutta sex-workers believed that “death is freedom. So let him live and pay for his crime.” To demonstrate their protest, some 1200 sex-workers walked down in a rally under the banner *DMSC* from College Square to *Rani Rashmoni Road* and submitted a demand to the governor. In this context *Mrinal Kanti Dutta* (Program Director of Durbar) gave various reasons to substantiate their demand. He said, “Capital punishment should not take place in a civilized country like India. If such happens, then we will be behaving like barbarians.... If *Dhananjay* is hanged then undoubtedly his

³¹¹ *Namaskar*, Year 7, Volume 1, January 2005, Durbar (Patrika), Durbar Prokashani. p.36-40.

family will lose a lot, but have you ever thought what the convict himself would lose? By hanging *Dhananjay* we will in one way give him freedom. That way he will escape from the punishment he deserves. We want him to live and pay for what he has done. The government should send him to rigorous imprisonment for the rest of his life. Finally, by hanging *Dhananjay* can the government guarantee that such incidents would not happen again?" But in this regard, Mrinal Kanti Dutta did not hesitate to admit that it was not so easy for him and other representatives of DMSC to convince all sex-workers to participate in the rally. He said, "Many among them joined this trade because at some point of their life, they were also victim of rape. If you ask the sex-workers individually then most of them will tell you that they want *Dhananjay* hanged. But they still participated in the rally because this is the stand of the group."³¹²

In the year of 2004, on 11th September sex-workers under the leadership of DMSC celebrated 'World Fraternity Day' in the red-light area of *Kalna* in West Bengal. On that day, sex-workers tied *Rakhee* (a symbol of fraternity) first in hand of *Dr. Gauranga Goswami*, Municipal Commissioner and inaugurated the program. They walked down in a rally from *Chalk Bazar* area. People with different profession (shopkeeper, small-large businessmen etc.) and hailing from various strata were offered with *Rakhees* by the sex-workers. They also tied *Rakhees* in the hands of all the students (male-female) of the *Charulata Educational Society* (Primary Teacher Training Institute). In this regard, Municipal Commissioner *Dr. Gauranga Goswami's* expression was like this, "this kind of initiatives taken by the sex-workers is really remarkable. I give assurance that the Municipality will always extend their help to the sex-workers for such endeavours." In this context *Sandya Das*, sabhanetri of DMSC said, "The sense of fraternity is almost ceased to exist in today's world. The sex-workers are considered as marginalized community in the society. Through taking these kinds of initiatives they are trying to fill-up the gap between the general mass and the sex-workers with an expectation of securing acceptance of the common people of the society." It must be mentioned that District Magistrate was also invited in this celebration; he conveyed his thanks to them for such invitation and also apologized for not being able to remain present on that day. Moreover, he appreciated such initiatives taken by DMSC.³¹³

We have already mentioned about the STD/HIV prevention project and movement claiming labour right for the sex-workers under *Durbar* (one of the largest organization run by the sex-workers) in

³¹² Correspondent, *Sex-workers Want Dhananjay to Suffer*, Hindustan Times, 29th June, 2004. See Staff Reporter, *Durbar Mahila Samitee Ne Fansi ke Birodh me Julus Nikala*, Dainik Jagaran, Jamshedpur, 30th June, 2004. See Staff Reporter, *Dhananjay ki Saja Ka Birodh*, Sanmarg, 30th June, 2004. See Staff Reporter, *Dhananjayer Fansi Rukhte Rajyapaaler Kaachhe Durbar*, Sambad Protidin, 30th June 2004. See Staff Reporter, *Dhananjayer Fansi Rukhte Aaj Rajyapaaler Kaachhe Durbar*, Sambad Protidin, 29th June, 2004. See Staff Reporter, *Fansi Ke Khilaf Jaunakarmeeone Julus Nikala*, Bishwamitra, 30th June, 2004.

³¹³ Staff Reporter, *Bishwa Bhratitwa Dibase Rakhee Poralen Kalnar Jaunakarmeera*, September, 2004

this chapter. While discussing prostitutes' responsibility towards society it is found to be interesting to mention about Bharati Dey (sex-worker), who was selected and appointed as the Director of STD/HIV Intervention Project (SHIP, a project by WHO) managed by Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee, known as Sonagachi Project on the World AIDS Day in 2005.

Sex worker at helm of WHO project

By Rakhi Chakrabarty/TNN

Kolkata: Her husband deserted her and her family left her to fend for herself. At 21, Bharati De, an un-employed mother of a seven-month-old son, landed in a brothel at Titagarh. That was 1986.

On Thursday, World AIDS Day, De will take charge as director of STD/HIV Intervention Pro-



gramme (SHIP), a model project by WHO, commonly known as the Sonagachi Project.

The post will be a culmination of De's long years of struggle.

SHIP is managed by Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee (DMSC), a forum of 85,000 sex workers of West Bengal. SHIP was initiated in 1992 by the All India Institute

of Hygiene and Public Health, a central government institute in Kolkata.

Ever since its inception in 1995, Durbar has been fighting for prostitution to be recognised as 'work' and sex workers to be empowered with the status of workers. The committee's demands include decriminalisation of adult prostitution and amendment of laws that restrict human rights of sex workers and limit their enfranchisement as full citizens. DMSC took charge of SHIP in 1999.

"I joined Durbar in 1997 and have worked as a peer educator in Titagarh. We have had to fight goons to protect ourselves in the Titagarh brothel," said De. She was beaten up, her teenage son was framed by goons and had to give up his studies.

"After seeing the worst of life, nothing seems daunting any more. I feel I can do the job well since I know the problems as an insider. The girls in brothels would be more candid with me about their problems than they would with an outsider," said De.

The Times Of India, 1st Dec, 2004

Bharati Dey (sex-worker) appointed as the Director of STD/HIV Intervention Project (SHIP, a project by WHO) managed by Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee

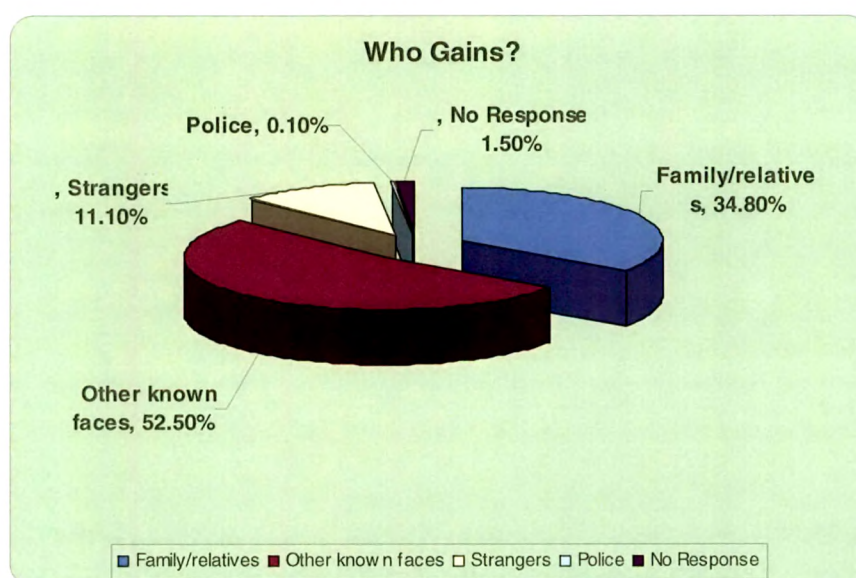
It is important to mention here the story of her struggle. Bharati Dey, was deserted by her husband at her age of 21 year with a seven month old son and her family also refused to accept her. Being unemployed and therefore, helpless, she was left with no other option but to step into red-light area taking prostitution as her strategy for survival in 1986. It was a very happy moment for her when she was appointed as the Director of STD/HIV Intervention Project (SHIP, a project by WHO) managed by Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee, known as Sonagachi Project on the World AIDS Day. This was marked as a success of her long struggle. On this occasion she expressed, "I joined Durbar in 1997 and have worked as a peer educator in Titagarh. We have had to fight goon to protect ourselves in the Titagarh brothel.... After seeing the worst of life, nothing seems daunting any more. I feel I can do the job well since I know the problem as an insider. The girls in brothels would be more candid with me about their problem than they would with an outsider."³¹⁴

³¹⁴ Rakhi Chakrabarty, *Sex Worker at helm of WHO Project*, Times of India, 1st December, 2005.

Prostitutes have also given shelter to the freedom fighters into their houses during the freedom struggle of India. At the time of naxalites' movements of 1960's, many naxalites had taken shelter in to the prostitutes' quarters of various red-light areas in Calcutta. In this regard, 93 year old freedom fighter, Mr. Kartik Kashari's experience deserve to be mentioned. In 1932, while on the run from the authorities and hiding in the Shantipur forests, it was the prostitutes who had given him food and shelter. The price on his head never tempted them to sell him out rather they went out of their way to help him. With the feeling of showing a gesture of gratitude, he started running a brothel and charging the prostitutes minimum rents without creating any kind of hazards. According to a prostitute, "we pay him only Rs. 60 a month, this is much less than what we would have had to pay elsewhere." Another prostitute's expression was like this, "I migrated from Barrackpore, as I found I would have to pay much less rent here." Another prostitute added, "whatever I earn, I keep. There is no question of paying a commission to the landlord."³¹⁵

In the post independent era gradually, the relationships between prostitutes and their families have become easy. In larger case, prostitutes afford the family expenditure with their own earning. Due to the dire poverty, sometimes, family does not go against own daughter to become prostitute. The village called Madhusudanpur of South 24 Parganas is the biggest contributor among Bengal villages to the brothels in Calcutta and outside Calcutta. Tripti's aunty works as a sex-worker in Sonagachi and with her earning, her family was able to build a single storey structure, watch films on CD etc. According to a villager, "its easy for families, which have been showed a glimpse of the money, to forsake their daughters' happiness when everyone else is doing it."³¹⁶

Table: 4.19.A



³¹⁵ Pronob Mondal, *Freedom-fighter turns prostitutes' keeper*, The Telegraph, 14th June, 1996.

³¹⁶ Sunanda Sarkar, *Families Flourish on Flesh Funds*, The Times of India, 7th November, 2004

Source: Sunanda Sarkar, *Families Flourish on Flesh Funds*, The Times of India, 7th November, 2004

4.20. Self-perceptions of Prostitutes:

The prostitutes' views of themselves and their self-esteem are very important facets of the existential question. The various oral records, songs-sayings and autobiographies help us to capture their voices. It throws light upon various aspects in the life of a prostitute. Due to the paucity of primary sources, according to the class-structure of the prostitutes, it has not been possible to explore their voices according to their class differences, mainly during the post independent era. This description, therefore tries to understand the self perception of the prostitutes as a singular observation channelled through various voices, that defies any segregation along lines of class distinction..

The era of the high-class courtesans and nautch-girls almost came to an end by the end of nineteenth and early twentieth century. But still, during the first half of twentieth century, some *baijis* were present in Bengal. Mostly, by birth, *baijis* used to belong to North India. The original homeland of the majority of the *baijis* was in North India. *Gauharjan*^{*}, *Malkajan* to name a few, reached the zenith of success in their profession and achieved huge fame and popularity during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Calcutta. Though, *Malkajan's* era was in the last phase of nineteenth century but her daughter *Gauharjan's* glory sustained till the first half of twentieth century (1873 – 1929). Other few *baijis*, hailed from Northern India, became the permanent residents of Calcutta during the contemporary period of *Gauharjan*, e.g. *Noorjahan*, *Benazir*, *Lucknow-walli Bachuabai*, *Monuabegum*, *Janakibai*, *Kiranbai*, *Munnibai*, *Kashi borisona*, *Nanua*, *Bachua*. On the other hand, *Krishnabamini*, *Shwetangini*, *Saramabai*, *Jadumani*, *Basanta baiji*, *Sarala Sundari*, *Mejibai*, *Gyanadabai*, *Kitijaan*, etc. were among those *baijis* who hailed from Calcutta. Many of those *Kalkattawalli baijis* used to come from Bengali families.³¹⁷ Their songs explore various facets of their life. Pitted against a world that refused to sympathize with them or acknowledge them the minimum respectably, it were often their songs that became the vehicle of their emotive expressions- love, pain, agony, even religious inclinations became subjects of their musical renditions. It can be said that songs constituted as one kind of medium of their self-

³¹⁷ Somnath Chakraborty, *Kolkatar Baiji Bilash*, Bookland Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1991, p.110-117. ^{*}*Gauharjan's* actual name was Elina Angelina Eward. Her father was Robert Williams Eward and mother's name was Edelai Victoria Hemings. When her parents got separated, her mother converted herself from Christianity to Islamism; her mother's name was changed and came to be known as *Bibi Malikajaan* or *Malkajaan*. *Gauharjaan* was mostly popular by the name of '*Gahar*'. Calcutta has hardly witnessed such talented and skilled artist in the field of music. She was also an expert in the field of dance. She was known as 'Indian Nightingale'. Her life span was from 1873 till 1929. Radharaman Roy, *Baiji Elo Kolkatai*, Kamini Prakashalay, Calcutta, 2001 (Bengali Era 1407), p.175.

expression. The religious as well as spiritual mentality of prostitutes is reflected in the famous song of *Gauharjaan*. It shows her immense faith on almighty, which is considered by her as the only way to achieve 'salvation':

*"Hori bole dak roshona (ei bela re)
Ar amon din pabe na re|
Koro Horir dhyan, pabi poritran,
Tobe kano bhule roili|
Horinam ar na nile mon,
Tobe kiske toribe
(Bhobosindhu pare kiske jabe)
Ore amar mon tobe,
(Kiske) bhoboparabare jabe||*

Call the Lord, oh my tongue, (this is the time)
You may not get a chance again.
Meditate in the Lord's name; you will be saved
Then why did you forget?
If you do not take the Lord's name
How will you get salvation?
(How) would you reach the glory of Heaven?³¹⁸

Gauharjaan's agony finds expression in her following song. It exhibits the deepest yearnings of her heart and pain caused by the ignorance of her paramour in love relationship.

*Je jatona ojatoney, monemone mon e jane,
Pachhe shotru hashe, lok laje prokash korine|
Prothom milonabodhi, jano koto oporadhi,
Nirobodhi sadhi pranpone,
Tobu she to nahi toshe,
Aro doshe okarone||*

How painful it is, his neglect for me only I know
Lest people make fun of me, I keep quiet
Since we first met, I feel such guilt,
I try to keep all in mind.
Still he does not care,
Blames me for nothing ||³¹⁹

Prostitutes are considered as marginalized community in the society. They are most often criminalized. But, despite having stigmatized and social seclusion, they also possess heart and are not deprived of common sensibilities and emotions. The following song captures the grief of a prostitute while she was abandoned by her lover whom she had loved unconditionally with full of devotion.

Ke tumi nidoy hole haanle nayan-baan,

³¹⁸ Somnath Chakraborty, *Kolkatar Bajji Bilash*, Bookland Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1991, p.94.

³¹⁹ Ibid. p.92.

*Haanle nayan-baan (jadu tumi) bodhle amar pran!
Jhara-jhara jhara jhorchhe nayan, bhaslo kulomaan, dhan, maan, jouban, binamullye nile pran,
kare bolbo katha, jurabo hey pran.....*

Who are you so cruel; hit me with your glance
You pierce me with your glance and hit my soul,
My eyes shower tears, I lose my honor,
Free of cost you took my wealth, honor and youth,
Whom to tell and soothe my heart!!³²⁰

This song portrays how desperate a prostitute can be to sacrifice everything even her life for her love.

*Tomari biroho shoye, banchi jodi dekha hobe,
Heno gyan hoy priye, e dehe pran na rohibe|
Ami matro ei chai, mori tate khoti nai,
Tumi amar sukhe theko, e dehe shokoli shobe||*

If I live after bearing your separation, will meet again,
I feel my soul would leave this mortal body.
Even if I die dear, my only wish—
That you live happily; I can manage any torment!!³²¹

Having betrayed by lover is a common experience in the life of a prostitute. She desires for love and a committed relationship in her life but in subconscious mind she knows, in most cases, reality is harsh and she is not blessed enough to have devoted love so often. That is why she alerts of not being swayed away by any unknown lover because in this regard she had come across bitter experience in her own life.

*Jongola kokhono posh na maney|
Koro na koro na pirit bidheshir soney||
Urilo Jongola nidoy hoye,
Pichhu pichhu dhai chumkuri diye,
Ay ay kori, britha deke mori –
Antorey chaturi, na shuney kaney ||*

The wild one can never be tamed,
Do not, oh do not fall in love with a stranger.
The wild one flies away heartless,
I run after calling in vain,
I call again and again in vain –
The naughty one, does not listen.³²²

The famous Urdu poet Akbar Ilaahabadi had composed a 'sher' on *Gaharjan* which depicts the glory of most talented and beautiful *Gauharjaan* and his line 'Shauhar ke Sewa' throws light upon the social segregation of *baijis/prostitutes*, that despite having enormous talent and skill, a *baiji* can be

³²⁰ Radharaman Roy, *Baiji Elo Kolkatai*, Kamini Prakashalay, Calcutta, 2001 (Bengali Era 1407), p.174.

³²¹ Somnath Chakraborty, *Kolkatar Baiji Bilash*, Bookland Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 1991, p.94

³²² *Ibid.* p.100-101

considered as only source of entertainment by the people of the society but she cannot acquire the respectable position in the society being wife of a gentleman (so called *bhadralok*) because, she is refused social sanction to get reincorporated in the mainstream society.

*Motammin kaun zamane mein hai
Shauhar ke sewa|
Sabkuchh Allah ne de rakkha hai
Shauhar ke Sewa!!*

In this era who is so lucky who has
everything except a husband!
The Almighty has given everything to *Gaharjan*
except a husband!!³²³

The following song captures the self-description of the life of a prostitute in her own words:

*Jo na ban sake main woh bat hun
Jo na khatam ho main who rat hun
Yeh likha hai mere naseeb main
Yun hi shamma banke jala karun ||*

I am that word which never happens
I am that night which never ends
It is written in my fate,
And I burn it like a lamp!!³²⁴

Prostitutes' customer had become one of the major constituent of their songs and sayings . These songs were about the 'rakes', 'false lovers', 'the seducers', 'gigolos', 'the old rogues and young macho men'. The idiom used in most of these songs is often "sexually explicit, with a liberal sprinkling of four letter words". The language used in these songs and sayings possesses a strength and 'robust' character³²⁵ which already have been mentioned before.

As an example the following song can be taken into account; where a prostitute's response to her lover has been described on the imagery of kite flying – one of the popular game of contemporary Bengal:

*Ketey diye Premer ghuri
Abar Keno lotkey dharo ?
Ek tanetey bojha geloe
Tomar sutor manja kharoe.*

³²³ Ibid. p.100

³²⁴ Gopa Mukhopadhyay, *Bajji Theke Begum* , Pratikshan Publications Pvt. Ltd., Calcutta, 2000. p.15.

³²⁵ Sumanta Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast*, Seagull Books, Calcutta , 2000. p.108. "They were turned almost into characters in a merry strip tease, watched and dissected by the bargaining eyes of these women. It was their way of turning the tables on their male customers". Ibid.

Why are you still hanging on after having snipped off the kite of love?
One pull was enough to show that the glue had made your string sharp.

The term *sutor* denotes two layers of meaning here – the string with which the kite is raised up in the air and it also evokes phallic associations. At one level 'lover's libertinism' could be complained by the woman. This has been described by "rousing the love kite in her and then snapping it all by a sharp swing (like the kite flier's, which cuts the string of his rival's kite, and brings it down)". From another angle, this can be assumed that her lover's 'inadequate performance' might have constituted the main reason which instigated her to laugh at her lover. "One pull of his string (one stroke?) was enough to prove that his *manja* (the glue used to sharpen the edge of the string) was *kharoe*" - this term denotes the meaning of 'brittle' or that which crumbles fast. A 'nimble witted twist' has been lent to the songs and sayings of the prostitutes by "such double entendre".³²⁶

The 'perpetual tensions' which remain always present between the prostitutes and their landladies (the brothel keepers) who are known as *bariulees* have been reflected in some of the songs. The *bariulees* frequently hike up the rent which forces prostitutes to move to some other place and find shelter over there. In the following song the prostitute complains against *bariulee* with which 'conventional romantic images of flowers, rivers, moon etc' have been replaced by 'more substantial images of material things of daily use:

*Amar bhalobasha abaar kothaye baasha bendhechey,
Piriteyr parota kheye mota hoyechey
Mashey mashey barchhey bhaara,
Bariuree dichhey taara,
Goylaparar moyla chhonra praney merechhey !*

My love has taken me to set up home at another place.
It has fattened upon the paranthas of past affairs.
The room rent is going up every month.
The land lady is threatening to evict me.
But my soul is smitten by that dark lad from the milkman's colony.³²⁷

According to Sumanata Banerjee the use of metaphor *parota* – (Hindi *Parantha* means layered fried bread) to give description about her experiences of love can be considered as a 'marvellous bravura'. The experiences of various dealings with male customers was piled together one on the top of another just 'like the thin layers of fried bread in a *Parantha*' and become the reservoir of memories of the prostitutes which included both physical as well as emotional experiences. But the 'dark lad from the milkman's colony' has been chosen by her from her reservoir of memories. With

³²⁶ Ibid. p.108; See- Meghnad Gupta, *Rater Kolkata*, Pratik, Kolkata, 1991 (first Publication 1923), p.34; See - Sumanta Bandyopadhyay, *Ashruto Kanthaswar*, Subarnarekha, Calcutta, 2002. p.110

³²⁷ Ibid. p.110; See Meghnad Gupta, *Rater Kolkata*, Pratik, Kolkata, 1991 (first Publication 1923), p.14; See also Sumanta Bandyopadhyay, *Ashruto Kanthaswar*, Subarnarekha, Calcutta, 2002. p.108

this the Radha-Krishna legend has been reconstructed 'in her own localized version'. Her "lover is imagined as a contemporary replica of that dark prince of the cowherd-milkman community of the ancient myths – Krishna".³²⁸

During the early twentieth century, the educated prostitute, Manada's statement critically pointed out the prevailing 'double standards of sexual morality' in the society:

I had told Mohantaji at that time, 'Babaji, I am a great sinner, I have no place in society, and my father has rejected me. But see, so many men have given all their wealth and honour at my feet. They have surrendered their body and soul at my feet. See they are all people respected by society – they are poets, authors, politicians and freedom fighters, rich and wealthy men who are honoured by society. Some are even spiritual leaders established at the helm of society. The society knows everything, but keeps silent. They have no problems in working in Courts, Councils, Corporations and even temples. And we, for one foolish mistake of childhood, are still suffering for the last twelve years. This is the justice meted out by your society.'³²⁹

Ranimasi's statements focus upon the contemporary society and her perception towards the society as well as male community, while convincing *Manada* in the process of initiating her into the prostitution. She also reveals the hidden truth of the society and the life of a prostitute, to her, which is nothing but the most harsh reality. Manada says:

Ranimasi said, 'you say your father thinks you are as good as dead; does not want to take you back; neither do you wish for his protection – then why do you fear him?' I said, 'Still, if my father sees with his own eyes that his own daughter has come to this sinful path, won't it make him sad?' Ranimasi said, 'If he is so sad, he can easily take his daughter back home and get rid of his sadness. Dear, you have come to this line; you'll see many new things. You'll find daughter working as a whore in front of her father – you'll see a mother sending her daughter to the streets daily dressing her up for the purpose. You will find brothers, sisters and relatives living on the money earned by a prostitute. It is not only us that are fallen. The whole society is 'fallen'.

Rajbala and I were listening silently. Ranimasi continued, 'Mani, someday you might find your Nanda-dada himself coming into your room. Your Mukulda might come too. Do not mind dear, what I'm saying is true. Someday you may meet your father in your own room, it's not impossible. I put out my tongue in shame. Rajbala bent her head down. Ranimasi went on. 'What to say, dear, you saw that lady who came that day from Rambagan; you know her history? Her father ... Bhattacharya, was a Senior Professor in a College in Calcutta. Now he is retired and is living with the illegitimate daughter of her own kept woman. He has fallen for the daughter and is spending the last few years of his life with her. I have seen so much, heard so much. You'll also see.'³³⁰

Though Manada questioned the practice of 'double standards of sexual morality' in the patriarchal society, which stigmatize prostitutes, but on the other hand, she had a strong realization of herself.

³²⁸ Ibid

³²⁹ Manada Devi. *Sikshita Patitar Atmacharit*, (autobiography in Bengali), Chirayat Prakashan, Kolkata, 2004, p.44 (First Publication - 1929)

³³⁰ Ibid. p.53-54

While practising prostitution, she had to take up various ways to sustain but somewhere she was not totally free from a feeling of ambiguity and stigma. She failed to consider her profession as 'work'. May be here, Manada lacked her spirit. In this context, today's commercial sex-workers may stand largely in sharp contrast to the middle class prostitute Manada during the early twentieth century Calcutta.

After I came to Sonagachhi, my income dwindled. Even my health was affected by many ailments and I became thin and weak. I used to spend a lot of money on servants, cook, medicines etc. I used to spend on Pujas (worshipping) too. I never missed the Saraswati (Goddess of learning) Puja. I could not manage all these with my existing income.

A lawyer and a barrister used to come to me. They were partners in business. They used to come together as partners to me too. I am mentioning a practice prevailing in the prostitutes' quarters. To get attached to a friend or an acquaintance of a Babu was considered to be a scandalous affair. Of course to make money many whores did not care about this practice, but it would still earn a bad name for them. Sometimes gentlefolk lose their old friends in connection with this rivalry regarding prostitutes. Sometimes even fights and murders were also committed over this matter.

I was in need and to make more money I took these two friends as lovers. But there was no feeling of rivalry seen between them.

For this practice of mine, many of the other girls used to gossip and talk ill of me. But I thought, 'One whose bed is in the ocean, why should she fear the dewdrops?' (It is a common Bengali saying). After all I have become a 'fallen woman'. Why do I care for shame or scandal? I remembered the song of the mad woman in the Bengali play 'Balidan' –

Kolonko Jar Mathar Moni,

Lukano Prem Tar-e saje.

'One who has made scandal the crown on her head; Need not fear a secret love affair.'

Since I have sunken deep inside Hell, let me go to the deepest abyss and explore its various undercurrents.³³¹

In spite of having their 'Kolonko mathar moni', or disgrace as a crown of glory, they had no dearth of self-respect. Singer Indubala (1898-1984), who spent all her life at Rupogachhi, also known as Rambagan adjacent to Sonagachhi quarters, shows this self-respect in her words:

Why I could not become the well-known singer that I am today, from an ordinary respectable family? Why I had to stay in these quarters? ...My grandmother came from Bonobishnupur as the bride of the respected Mukherjee family. Later on as a widow she had to shift to this locality; can I leave this residence of three generations? No. ... In the end where will I die? I have no idea. But this place has made me Indu, Indu of Rambagan, I learnt music, got respect and fame. Everybody knows me here; why should I leave this place and for what?³³²

Actress Kanan Devi (1916-1992), in her autobiography has spoken about this 'self respecting humanity':

³³¹ Ibid. p.82

³³² Bandhon Sengupta, *Indubala*, Moushumi Prakashani, 1984, p.219-220

When I grew up, I heard from some people that my father was not my mother's married husband. And some told me just the opposite. I do not know which one is true. But I have no headache regarding this. I am a human being; and that is enough for me. And I have also witnessed my mother's genuine love and dedication towards my father, which was no less than that of any married wife.³³³

The characteristics of the red-light area, prostitutes' material condition, lifestyle, circumstantial scenarios, *babu-bibi* relationships etc. often constitute as the popular subjects of prostitutes' self-expressions – songs, sayings etc. An aged sex worker *Uma Mondal* who is a resident of the Harkata red-light area (Bowbazar) has written a poem about the Harkata lane and its adjacent areas. It gives an explanation about the residents of this red-light area (prostitutes). It further holds the notorious character of the Harkata red-light area (Bowbazar) along with its location.

*Khancha laal dighir paani,
Baro mishtota shunil,
Keu bole bhai nonta laagey,
Dharmer hoi haani!
O tui chokh bujhe jaabi sidhey,
Saamne paabi Shyambazar,
Manob deher Kolkata ki chatatkaar!
Aachey Harkata gali, tate bartomaan koli,
Haar kate, ghar muchre dharey, dei nara boli!!*

Women are like red water of the lake,
Which seems to be very sweet,
Some say oh! It's salty,
They affect our religion,
You shut your eyes and go straight
You'll find Shyambazar.
Kolkata of human bodies is so wonderful!
There is Harkata lane, where buds of the present time,
Break bones and Twist necks, kills human beings.³³⁴

In the following song a prostitute addresses the married woman of the *bhadralok* society (respectable society) and compares their status with them:

*Toder Holud Makha Gaa Tora Rath Dekhte Jaa
Mora Holud Kotha Pabo Mora Ulto Rath-e Jaabo.*

Your bodies yellow with turmeric, you go 'n see the chariot,
Where do we get the yellow colour, let's see the return of the chariot.³³⁵

The going and coming of the chariot - Part of a festival of the Hindu god, *Jagannath*, belonging to the pre-Vedic age, the chariot or '*rath*', his carriage. But here '*rath*' denotes married life. 'Turmeric'

³³³ Kanan Devi, *Shobare ami nomi*, M.C.Sarker & Sons Pvt. Ltd, 1973, p.3

³³⁴ *Jaunapallir Chalchitra* (A Pen Picture of Brothels/Red-light areas), Durbar Prakashani, Kolkata, 2001. p.59

³³⁵ Subodh Das, *Chalaman Jounakarmi*, Gangchil, Kolkata, 2006. p.93

is used to make the woman have holy bath in the morning of her marriage day. It is considered as an auspicious custom in the Bengali society. A prostitute generally is not acceptable as gentleman's wife and cannot acquire the sanction to enter the *bhadralok* society. That is why, despite having *babu* or lover and living husband-wife relationship with her *babu*, she cannot aim for a secured and steady life in future. Due to the absence of family acceptance, despite having this relationship, in most of the cases, she can never enjoy the family life. That is why her life takes a different shape in sharp contrast to the lives of married women of the conventional society. '*Ulto Rath*', here denotes 'the life moves on totally in opposite track'! (In Bengali *Ulto* means Reverse).

Shefali is a girl from Birbhum. She is not educated. But after joining '*Durbar*' she has learnt to sign her name. She knows the Bengali letters. She is plump and plain to look at. But has a fresh beauty of youth on her face. She has a ready smile when she utters these rhymes –

*Harailaam, sab harailaam,
Baastuhara doley!
Aami aapon doshey sab harailaam,
Bhalobaasar tarey!!*

I lost, oh I lost everything
In the gang of the homeless refugees!
In my own fault, I lost all
For the sake of love!³³⁶

This song explores the painful outcry of the girl, who got deceived by her own lover, who drove her into prostitution. It also throws light upon the partition period and poverty ridden areas in the later period, when a large number of girls often used to get deceived after being lured with promising offers (job etc.) and secured life and finally were pushed into prostitution.

Prostitutes' songs, sayings many times contain obscene way of expression. These kinds of songs are mostly on the description of their bodies, sexual relationships with client/*babu* etc.. These songs sometimes ridicule male folk and sarcastically express their own living conditions being marginalized in the society and deprived of family lives, other amenities etc.

*Phulur Chuchi
Fulko Luchi
Aai Hataabi
Sai Paataabi*

Phulu's breasts
Are like two buns fresh,
Come and handle,

³³⁶ Krishna Dutta, *Laal Batir Neel Porira*, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 2006. p.70

Make her your friend.³³⁷

In this song, a prostitute is giving her physical description to attract clients, because, in this profession body is the only capital. This song stresses on this facet only.

Client of a prostitute may belong to aristocratic class but her children generally grow up within the status and living conditions of their mother. Therefore, father's status hardly leaves any impact on those children. The following song is almost on that aspect of the life of a prostitute where she sarcastically expresses the bitter truth or the harsh reality of herself and her son. [*Khanki* in the colloquial rural term of 'Prostitute']

*Khankir chhele khan bahadur,
Tor maa ke chude gelo laal bahadur!*

You son of a whore, the great lord,
Your mother was fucked by the master lord!³³⁸

This song vividly focuses upon the sexual relationship between a prostitute and her client/*babu*. A prostitute should be expert in the sexual art because giving sexual pleasure to her client/*babu* is an integral as well as most important part of her profession to retain client and key to sustain in the profession. In course of having sexual relationship, gradually intimacy develops.

*O Tule Dhare Mukh Aami Namiye Di Bonta
Ehabe Kathopokathon Ehabe Shrota Hoye Otha.*

He lifts his face and I bend down my nipples
This way we converse, we listen to each other.³³⁹

Prostitutes are also often found to ridicule male community. In this context, the following song shows how a prostitute ridicules the robust personality of men where she says whatever strong personality a man possesses, he would never be able to resist his sexual lust.

*Bichi jatai baro hok na keno
Barar nichei thakbe!*

However large the testes are
Their place is under the penis!³⁴⁰

In Bengali '*bichhi*' denotes 'testes', which here personifies 'a man's robust personality'. '*Bara*' in Bengali, means 'penis', which has been compared to sexual lust of man.

³³⁷ Subodh Das, *Chalaman Jounakarmi*, Gangchil, Kolkata, 2006. p.147.

³³⁸ Krishna Dutta, *Laal Batir Neel Porira*, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 2006. p.74

³³⁹ Subodh Das, *Chalaman Jounakarmi*, Gangchil, Kolkata, 2006. p.205

³⁴⁰ Krishna Dutta, *Laal Batir Neel Porira*, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 2006. p.74

One prostitute having two *babus* many times causes clashes between those *babus*. In early history, there are enough instances of such kind of conflicts, which sometimes also used to result into one's murder. In today's red-light area, these kinds of incidents are not rare to find out.

Ekta maagir duta nang,
Tanatanite jaije praan!

One strumpet has two lovers,
Between two of them, she's torn into pieces.³⁴¹

In the above song, '*nang*' means 'client' in rural Bengali. Here it is denoting *babu* (fixed client). '*Maagi*' is a rural term which denotes 'prostitute'.

In order to secure life of a prostitute, money is the only strength for her. Therefore, she attempts to earn as much as possible in her young age. To accumulate much wealth, she often needs to have multiple clients/*babu* at a time than just having one *babu* (fixed client).

Rendi ki chaar yaar,
Ek andar, ek bahar,
Ek bimar, ek toyar!

A Whore has four friends
One inside, one out
One sick and one fit.³⁴²

In the above song, '*rendi*' is a colloquial word in Hindi which means the 'whore'.

Prostitutes generally do not enjoy a steady family life which indirectly resists them from aiming for future life.

Khankider ki ba raat, ki ba din,
Rat hole sadhoba, din hole bidhoba!

A whore has no night or day,
A married woman at night, widowed by day.³⁴³

In Bengali, '*sadhoba*' denotes 'a married woman whose husband is alive' and '*bidhoba*' whose husband is dead. A prostitute entertains her clients mostly at night, an activity that engages in highest physical intimacy. This act of physical interaction stands in sharp contrast to the same kind of relationship that is observed between a married couple as a married man and woman enjoys social sanctity and marriage actually seals the relationship against any kind of perceived threat or

³⁴¹ Ibid.p.74

³⁴² Ibid. p.74

³⁴³ Ibid. p.74

promiscuity. The song is an expression of the frustration of the prostitute who entertains and becomes intimate with her client at night, thus fulfilling the role of a wife- something like an 'absentee' wife, while being reverted back to the status of a widow by the daytime when her client returns home to his family.

The following song focuses on the babu-bibi relationship where mostly they live a superficial life without having any certainty of a secured future life with the *babu*. *Babu* is regarded as her husband, love, everything.

*Chal Nei Dhaan Nei Golabhara Indoor
Swami Nei Put Nei Kapal Jora Sindoor.*

There's no rice or paddy in my barn, it's filled with rats
No husband or son do I have, my forehead sports vermillion.³⁴⁴



বাবুর মঙ্গল কামনায় সিঁথিতে সিঁদুর।

Sex-worker use Vermillion on the forehead or parting of hair
(Source: Babuder Andarmahal Theke)

To have the essence of family life, a prostitute (*bibi*) never desires to break the relationship with *babu* rather she prefers to compromise and have the superficial relationship. Praying for the wellbeing of her *babu* (so called husband), she uses vermillion, which is the sign of a Hindu married woman and the use of it signifies long life of her husband. A prostitute laughs at her fortune sarcastically and compares her life with a empty barn infested with rats. Shorn of a son and husband, her life resembles an empty larder. The vermillion mark on her forehead betrays her battered existence only left, the sign of desire to have husband, children and family in the form of vermillion. [Vermillion is red powder on the forehead or parting of hair is the sign of a Hindu married woman.]

³⁴⁴ Subodh Das, *Chalaman Jounakarmi*, Gangchil, Kolkata, 2006. p.94

Material well being/opulence/Money is the only strength in the life of a prostitute. It is this financial security which guarantees a prostitute's future well being. This following song throws light upon the close association of money and prostitute which is as true as the association between the essence of fragrance and the flower of rose. That is why a person has to spend money while visiting prostitute's quarter.

*Phool hai gulab ki, khushbu lijiye,
Ghar hai randi ki, paisa dijiye!*

It's a flower, rose, take its fragrance,
It's a room of a whore, pay money this instance.³⁴⁵

The following song reveals the inherent ego and self satisfaction that a prostitute earns for her through her own prowess. She has rightfully earned her apparent comfortable and wealthy life by leaving behind a despicable and poverty ridden life. [Lakshmi is the Hindu goddess of wealth and Alakshmi is the opposite to her who drains out wealth, it is used in negative sense].

*Dhon Aanchhi Jon Aanchhi
Hiramon Manikya Aanchhi
Alakshmi Falaiya Lakshmi Aanchhi.*

I brought wealth, I brought people,
I brought jewels – pearls and diamonds,
I've got rid of trash and brought wealth galore/Lakshmi herself.³⁴⁶

Prostitute's suspicious as well as hatred attitude towards men is very much prominent in the following saying:

Purusher Kuttachhinaalir Hadish Peye Jaowa

To find out the true character of men's bitchness.³⁴⁷

A Film, titled 'Mohanar Dike', directed by Bires Chattopadhyay captures the vulnerable position of the women in society that drives them into prostitution. This movie is based upon the story written by Prafulla Roy, where he tried to throw light upon the socio-economic situation that compelled her finally to get into this sex-industry. It also explores the transmission of value structure of a girl in course of time while she gradually gets absorbed into the profession. But here, the profession of prostitution is considered by the girl as strategy for survival rather an easy source of money leading a luxurious life. Having a deep sense of sensitivity, this girl cannot accept her profession as work and therefore, failed to get rid of mental depression, loneliness. She realized that her life was

³⁴⁵ Krishna Dutta, *Laal Batir Neel Porira*, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 2006. p.74

³⁴⁶ Subodh Das, *Chalaman Jounakarmi*, Gangchil, Kolkata, 2006. p.133

³⁴⁷ Ibid. p.157

moving through an aimless journey that gives her only social stigma from where she would never be able to return to her past life. Her painful outcry is beautifully captured in following song:

*Nai Nai E Andhaar Theke Pherar Poth Nai
Nai Nai E Andhaar Theke Pherar Poth Nai
Nai Nai...*

*Putul Nacher Putul Hoye, Nechei Shudhu Geli;
Mon Ke Sudhaa Naachar Phaley, Jibane Ki Peli;
Jakhon Chirbe Suto Bujhbi Je Tui,
Aagun Nebhaa Chhai!
Nai Nai...*

*Lobher Parey Paap Aase, Paper Parey Maron;
Bandha Mone Andho hoye Korli Kake Baron
Toke Je Aaj Bhalo Basbe Aabar,
Kaal Debe na Thaa!*

*Nai Nai E Andhaar Theke Pherar Poth Nai
Nai Nai E Andhaar Theke Pherar Poth Nai
Nai Nai...*

No, no, there is no return
From this darkness
No, no, there is no way to go
From this darkness
Not there, not there...

You danced all along like a puppet,
Ask your mind what you gained from this
The puppet-strings will snap one day,
You will know then that only ashes remain,
Nothing, nothing is there...

From greed comes sin, and from sin death:
Your mind closed, whom did you espouse in blindness
One who loves you today, again
Won't let you in by morrow!

No, no, there is no return
From this darkness
No, no, there is no way to go
From this darkness
Not there, not there...³⁴⁸

³⁴⁸ *Mohonar Dike*, a film directed by Bires Chatteropadhyay, song sung by Kishore Kumar, Lyrics and Music by Swapan Chakraborty, Story by Prafulla roy, 1983.

The last half of twentieth century witnessed a major transition in the phenomenon of prostitution. The prostitutes' right movement of the 1980s claimed prostitution as a form of work just like any other work 'freely chosen' by women. There was also another argument that the sexual liberation for women was represented in the profession of prostitution.³⁴⁹ These changing attitudes towards the institution of prostitution and roles of NGOs altogether propelled prostitutes as active participants in the movement for worker's right. The slogan is now:

Gotor khatiye khai, Shramiker adhikar chai!³⁵⁰
[We earn through our toils, we demand recognition as labourers]

Mrinal Kanti Dutta, son of a sex-worker, has endeavoured to find the answer to the question whether prostitution as a profession is really so dreadful or not. He has put certain questions:

Almost everybody has a sex-life. It is a normal instinct of all living beings. Why then those who earn money in return of sex are looked down upon by society? Leave alone the society, the sex-workers themselves consider themselves as detestable. Why is this so? Is it because they have sexual relations with many men? Why, Draupadi, the queen in Mahabharata had five husbands! Nobody took her to be a fallen woman! In fact she was considered to be one of the five saintly mythical women characters.

...in our country many movie stars or models make a living out of their sex appeal. Nobody speaks badly of them. In fact people wait on the streets for hours to have a glimpse of them. Moreover, their profession is accepted by society. In reality, this male-dominated society has divided womankind in two parts—good women and bad women.

...Those women who do not take money in return of sexual favours, but get security or the assurance of a life-long security and care, are considered to be 'good women' and are termed by society as 'sati' or honest women. And those who take money are deprived of two things—one is safety, security or the assurance of it; the other is social respect. Today, these sex-workers do not expect any assurance from any individual; their demand is from the state. They want recognition from the government as 'workers'.³⁵¹

³⁴⁹ Sheila, Jeffreys, *The Idea of Prostitution*, <http://www.feminista.com/archives/v2n2/jeffreysreview.html> p.2

³⁵⁰ Mrinalkanti, Dutt, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Kolkata 2005, p.174

³⁵¹ Mrinalkanti, Dutt, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005, p.74-75. . According to the myths, a woman who maintains sexual relation with two men is fallen (*Kulata*). One with three lovers is *Dwarastree* or a street-woman, one who caters to four men are called *Pungaschali*, or one who is too easy-going with men. The woman who lives with five men is known as *Veshya* or prostitute. More than five partners make a woman *Mahaveshya* or a Mega-pros