

I AM AN INDIAN based in Kanpur and an electrical engineer by profession. For the last two and a half years, I have been working with an organisation of Nepalese immigrants in India called Akhil Bharat Nepali Ekta Samaj. This organisation attempts to address many problems faced by many Nepalese forced to leave in search of basic livelihood and who work as largely unskilled labour in India. These include a whole range of social problems such as problems in work environments not shielded by trade unions, family problems, dismissals without pay, physical beatings by employers, alcoholism, penury, implications in theft, and other crimes.

Their guidelines for organisational objectives included a very interesting demand for many years, possibly unique to any immigrant community in the world — “*Nepali mahila ki khareed bikri bandkaro*” or “End the sale and purchase of Nepalese women.” This demand in the form of a slogan represented the anguished cry of a large immigrant community in India, whose males were doomed to watch powerlessly the spectacle of their women being sold and purchased in a foreign land for prostitution in cages.

It was on this issue that I specifically began working with the Ekta Samaj. They have been addressing this problem for many years, but being an organisation composed largely of members drawing low wages in insecure employment, their work has been severely hampered. They represent an interested force inside India that is capable of sustained long term work on the issue of intervention in trafficking of girls from Nepal to India.

On paper, prostitution per se is not illegal in India as per the Prevention of Immoral Traffic Act 1986, and our lawmakers regarded it as an unavoidable evil. There are

From the Hills of Nepal to the Brothels of Delhi

Nikhil Nigam

conditions under which prostitution is allowed to operate. Trafficking, however, has penal clauses. But, there are specialist lawyers in every city of India with an open red light district, who can ensure that you go scot free even if you sell a minor girl to a brothel, provided you do not sign a stamped receipt. Largely, brothels in India operate openly, 24 hours a day, seven days a week, though there are some periodic raids, round-ups, bail and back to business routine played out for media consumption and other purposes. The court rooms and police *thanas* tell a very sorry tale about our handling of these ‘working women’. In Nepal, however, by law the Muluki Ain forbids prostitution or trade in humans.

The concerned legislation on trafficking — “*Jiu masne bechne karya (niyantran) ain*—2043” prescribes upto 20 years im-prisonment (the same as for murder) for trafficking in girls or women. However, because there are many intermediaries involved and the final selling takes place in a foreign country (India), many registered cases die due to lack of evidence and disinterest in followup. However, there are also isolated instances of joint raids by Nepalese and Indian police for recovery of a girl from the Shah clan from an Indian red light area.

There are many factors conducive to the smuggling out of women from Nepal such as poverty, the failing economy in mountain areas, social imbalances due to large scale migration of young men, illiteracy and the inferior status of women in several, rising expectations, lack of income generating and vocational options for women, alcoholism, the prevalence of very free societal and

marital norms amongst some tribes in Nepal, the presence of an open border between India and Nepal as per the 1950 treaty, and the myths about prosperity in Indian cities. These factors are all relevant and will continue to be so for many years to come. My personal belief is that in themselves these factors do not explain the large scale sale-purchase

of Nepalese women in Indian brothels. Certainly, these factors should not be used only to justify inaction on the issue of trafficking.

There have been a few districts in Nepal like Nuwakot, Sindhupalchowk, Kabhre, Rasaua, Dhading, where amongst the Tamang tribe, the men have knowingly acted as suppliers of their daughters, sisters, wives, and distant relatives, to Indian brothels. There is an element of social sanction for such “earning women” or *lahure*’s



in many villages of these districts sur-rounding the Kathmandu valley. These women often return to their villages in five-ten years, after completion of their 'captivity years', and when their fair skin and good looks begin to fetch diminishing returns from the Indian[^] sex market. Those women who return laden with money and goods and without sexual diseases, often marry and settle down in their villages or begin to work as procurers for 'fresh' girls, sometimes bringing them through the route of carpet industry labour, and often directly to India. The mountain girls are sold at a premium because they are considered minimal risk vic-tims by the purchasers in Bombay and Calcutta, the major "breaking" centres. However, in other districts of Nepal, there is no such social sanction for this trade in women. Yet, this busi-ness is booming in all districts of Nepal, including the richer districts. The girls are recruited from all tribes and castes present in Nepal (Brahmins, Rais, Tamangs, Limbus, Chhetris, Newars, Kami, Lohar, Gurung, Tharu, Magar) and a large

number of them are now literate as well. Their families have sufficient income generating options. The recent linkages between Indian redlight areas and Nepal villages are based on systematic falsehoods. The Indian sex market with its Indian and Arab customers, creates a very strong demand for fair skinned, small, hon-est, disciplined women who undress freely. This strong demand is reflected in their purchase rates also. And what could be better for the Nepalese pro-curers and madams than an anony-mous Nepali girl, bewildered and powerless in a foreign country, whose father or brother will never come searching for her? In five to ten years, the girl, if alive, is allowed to return or rather, is persuaded to vacate for the new girls who keep coming in.

The trafficking routes are well known to many. However, policing these routes is impossible for any organisation. In the Indian demand centres, the problems with regard to Nepalese women are also well known. The operations are very tight knit and the chances of rescue by Indian agencies are minimal as the girls are

rehearsed to give standard statements in courts about voluntarily being in pros-titution. It seems tragi-comic hearing a 15-year-old girl with diseases claiming her satisfaction with prosti-tution and the madam who is very considerate towards her.

Moreover, many organisations which initially gained publicity for themselves through well orchestrated rescue cases, later backed off, postulating that rehabilitation "does not work". While I, too, largely agree that it is impossible for any NGO, which has many masters to please, to invest the amount of humane attention and sustained personal care required for even one happy rehabilitation, I nev-ertheless feel that broad based societal intervention can be fruitful at least in the cases of minor girls. Rehabilitation of minor girls means not necessarily a special institution but a family. If a girl is brought out in the first one year or so of being sold off, even the larger society and her own family will take her back. Today, the girl thinks of the traumatic process of her conversion from a normal active girl to a prostitute in an Indian cage as



her individual black fate. However, it is up to the larger society to convince her that it was a deceitful social process that made her a victim, took away her womanly dignity, made her an object of lust, and it is the same process that would have her continue as a prostitute.

The girl is told by the "reasonable and honest" madam that the amount for which she was purchased, along with the interest on it, has been written off as a debt on her and she is to return to her village as soon as she clears the debt. Thereupon, the girl reconciles herself to her fate and in silent impotence gets down to earning as much money as possible, as fast as she can, as honestly as she can without cheating the "didi" who, periodically, holds out threats of physical violence and of chasing the girl back to the village if she attempts any insubordination like trying to contact her village or dreams of marriage during her 'prime' years.

The specific Arab demand for Nepalese girls has further increased their purchase rates and created a comfortable nexus whereby Nepalese madams are able to carry out transactions in Arab languages. One tragic case in my knowledge is of a young Nepalese mother who was separated from her new born child and despatched with an Arab man as his maid servant, with the Nepalese madam richer by one lakh rupees. The justification offered by the Nepalese madam is that the Arabs take pity on the Nepalese women who are forced to enter prostitution due to poverty and take due care of their sex slaves. Kamathipura is an open shopping centre for such transactions, where the madam guarantees the silence and good performance of her "girls".

In a larger perspective, I feel that if we can raise the issue of minor girls in red light areas, we will be able to keep the focus on women as victims rather than allowing it to degenerate

to the issue of AIDS laden Nepalese women being deported from India and returning to Nepal "to pollute Nepal with Indian filth." Already, every district in Nepal has such well publicised cases of women returning from India, only to die in a couple of years. Such cases will keep increasing in the future and will spell further trauma for these "earning women".

In my work inside Nepal, in an attempt to network with interested parties and organisations, I have largely felt happy that Nepalese society, men, women and youth, are keenly sympathetic towards the plight of Nepalese women sold into prostitution. In general, however, they voice disappointment over the apathy of people in power and express their own powerlessness due to lack of networking with Indian organisations which could share their concern. For many Nepalese, a prostitute in India is still a woman, so and so's daughter who disappeared without a trace three-four years back. It is this

humane concern that we need to build upon. Prostitution thrives on deliberate anonymity, women transported large distances and resettled as roofless entities. This veil of anonymity allows for callous degradation of young girls in our flesh markets. Networking between Indian and Nepalese women's organisations would be a step in the direction of preventing anonymity from clouding the real issues of degradation of women. "Bahadur" has a prefix and a suffix; the anonymous, smiling Nepalese prostitute also has a full name, a tribe, a village, another, a family "somewhere in the hills", not necessarily Kathmandu and Darjeeling.

I do hope that meaningful dialogue between Nepalese and Indian women's organisations would be a step forward in the direction of intervention in this problem and in building a societal support system for minor girls sold in Indian brothels.

Follow Up

One Step Forward Sexual Harassment Case in Delhi University

We are happy to inform our readers that subsequent to a report published in issue No 68 (Jan.-Feb. ,1992) listing serious charges of sexual harassment of women working in the Department of Adult Continuing Education and Extension (DACEE), Delhi University, by the former director, Dr S. C. Bhatia, the vice chancellor of the university, Dr Upendra Baxi, has appointed a retired High Court judge to enquire into the allegations. We had published extracts from a written statement signed by 14 members of the DACEE staff, including two women who were among the victims of Bhatia's aggressive sexual advances, including attempts at molestation.

Justice S. T. Wad (retd) was appointed in July 1992 to conduct the enquiry. On the basis of the written statements submitted by the aggrieved parties, Justice Wad's report established a *prima facie* case against Bhatia. This was discussed by the Executive Council (EC) of the university in May 1993. The EC also decided to issue a show cause notice to Bhatia, who was to be chargesheeted. He was given three weeks' time to reply.

The actual enquiry is due to begin soon. The list of witnesses to be called is being prepared. **Manushi** will continue to follow up the case.