



An Interview With Chinnammu Sivadas Who Filed The Nari Niketan Petition

WE talked to Chinnammu Sivadas to find out how and why she had decided to file the petition against Delhi administration. She told us of her experiences as full-time central organizer with the association for social and moral health in India. In her 18 years of work, she had many occasions to witness the callousness and negligence of the administration "I came into conflict with Nari Niketan because whenever a voluntary organization refers a woman to them, they make a lot of fuss. Once I referred a destitute young woman who had been brought from Bihar as a domestic servant, and then been thrown out. The superintendent of Nari Niketan said she couldn't be admitted without the permission of the member-secretary. When I spoke to him, he said the case worker's investigative report would be required. But the woman needed shelter immediately. So I asked him: 'Would you prefer to admit her now and save her from prostitution? Or would you prefer her to become a prostitute by this evening—as she may have to—and then admit her only when she is brought by a police constable?'"

She also told us how she discovered that many of the mass marriages conducted by the Nari Niketan as a form of "rehabilitation" only led to further misery for the girls. "Our association used to offer counselling services. There was one blind man named Kaul who used to come for counselling. The women counsellors got fed up with him because he would talk only about sex all the time. I also worked with him for some time. When I heard that he had applied to marry a girl from Nari Niketan, and his marriage had been arranged with a disabled girl, I wrote to the superintendent of Nari

Niketan, saying that this man was not in a proper state of mind for marriage, and no woman would be able to live with him. But the superintendent told me over the phone that the chairman had approved of this man, and 'the boy and the girl liked each other.'

This is when I asked: 'What is the criterion for liking?' I wrote a very strong letter of protest, and refused to attend the marriage. I had tried my best to prevent it, but after all, I was only an employee in a voluntary organization so I couldn't succeed. On the third day after marriage, Kaul came to me and said: 'I want your help. My wife is missing. I called up the police and some time later, the woman's dead body was found. She had committed suicide by jumping into the Yamuna. I talked to the neighbours and they said they used to hear her screaming. So I asked Kaul what had happened. He was quite ready to talk about it. He told me that on the first night he had sex with her 11 times. She was only 19 years old, and a very feeble girl. Being disabled, she couldn't even resist him.. And after her death, he said: 'Please look for another girl for me.' He was upset because he missed sex, not because the girl had died."

While trying to set up a multi-purpose centre for the women and children at GB Road, she also discovered that many of the so-called marriages were merely passports back to the brothels: "At GB Road, I met many girls who said they were from Nari Niketan. They were sold off after marriage, or had run away and landed up there. At GB Road, the girl's name is changed and from Kiran she becomes Husaini. So even though many of their faces were familiar to me because I had seen them earlier at Nari Niketan, I

couldn't prove it to the authorities. They would say that the name was different in their records."

We asked why she had resigned her job: "I resigned because I was getting completely disillusioned with social work. All the time, one is either building up the image of some prominent person, or attending conferences or doing paper work. I thought that all these years have really been love's labour lost. And I wanted to do something solid. Many times, I used to tell the Delhi administration authorities: 'The day I get out of this organization, I will take you to court.'"

Ms Sivadas feels that the situation is by no means unique: "There are altogether in India 262 correctional or protective homes. They have each on an average 40 inmates. In all Delhi administration homes, the girls are only kept for three years, and sometimes after that period, a chowkidar is told to go and leave the woman on the street outside. The institution should be a place where the women feel free to leave yet the situation inside should be such that they wouldn't want to leave. When there is such extreme regimentation, when the girls are abused, are all the time reminded: '*Tu randi thi*' and are not even given proper food or clothing, why should they want to stay there?"

She feels that vocational training is of vital importance because: "If a woman knows that after three years she will have to go back to prostitution since she has not been trained for any other employment, naturally she will feel that these three years of her youth will be wasted inside the institution. During these years she could earn more as a prostitute—later there will be more

competition in the market. But the authorities have no understanding of the women's predicament."

She is convinced that: "If prostitutes had a choice, they would come out. Once you offer them something better, they wouldn't want to leave the institution. Because the prostitute's life is much worse than one can imagine." She told us what she had seen of that life at GB Road: "Young girls who know the art of entertaining can earn upto Rs 500 or even 1,000 a day. But usually within two or three years, the same woman ends up earning Rs 3 a day. How long can she entertain eight or ten men a day? She is mishandled and used so roughly that she gets worn out in no time. There was one girl coming to our centre who was immaculately beautiful but in three months' time when I looked at her, she was so exhausted and faded. Most of the women end up as beggars. Sometimes the younger ones take pity on them and feed them. But they have to hear the madam's abuses every day. A woman's real earning cannot be for more than six months, if she has a brisk business during those months."

We asked how much the woman herself gets from this real earning. "She doesn't get more than ten per cent of what she earns. The rest goes to the madams, the pimps, the procurers, and to pay bribes. At first, she has to entertain customers alone in a room, later two beds are put in one room, and a stage comes when ten or twelve women entertain customers simultaneously in one room. The customers pay two to five rupees at this stage. And the girls are searched by the madams to check that they are not paid anything.

Nowadays, the richer, sophisticated men go to call girls in hotels. From two star to five star places, there is a whole range of new kinds of 'entertainment.' So the girls at the GB Road type of place earn less. They get only the poorer customers."

Above all, she told us, this kind of prostitution entails not just selling one's body but being completely enslaved: "The woman just cannot say no to any customer. If she does, the pimps will come and beat her up. No matter how ill or exhausted she may be, if a customer

comes and pays well, she will be sent with him. There is no word No in their dictionary. She has no choice at all."

What is supposed to be pleasure for the man is torture and murder, slow or immediate, for the woman. She told us of one case: "There was a pregnant girl who died because some man was willing to pay any amount for a pregnant girl. She died in the process of sex. I was very attached to that girl. She used to tell me that if she had a daughter, I should adopt her because I like girls! And I promised to arrange for her child's adoption. After she died, I used to see her standing before me, when I went to bed at night. As it happens, when someone of your family dies."

So Ms Sivadas' experience amply proves the falsity of the myth that women enjoy being "hardened prostitutes" and prefer this to other employment. But, as she pointed out, if the protective home turns out to be a brothel which does not even give the women ten per cent of their earnings, why should they want to stay there: "Recently I met a woman in Morena. She told me that her daughter

who is now at GB Road, had once been taken to the government protective home in Meerut. From there she was sent for prostitution on three consecutive days and the superintendent pocketed the money. On the fourth day, she was not sent—not because the superintendent had a change of heart, but because the girl ran away."

Ms Sivadas was emphatic that a different kind of shelter is desperately needed for destitute women: "The whole structure is such that there is no care for the girls. Nari Niketan's expenditure last year was three and a half lakhs out of which more than two lakhs were spent on salaries. And yet when they are asked to give proper food, they say the financial situation has to be taken into consideration. Not more than two per cent of institutions in this country offer proper food and clothing. There should be short-stay homes in which the period of stay is not specified. 'Short stay' should be defined to mean a period of time within which the woman is equipped to lead an economically independent life." □