

# When Police Act as Pimps

## Glimpses into Child Prostitution in India

*We are reproducing edited extracts from an investigation conducted by Roma Debabrata for the National Commission for Women in 1997. The report provides a glimpse into the many powerful vested interests who are parasiting off these vulnerable children and why it is almost impossible for child prostitutes to escape.*  
—Editor

A small voice said, “We used to live in a narrow dingy street in Gokak, Belgaum district, in Karnataka. I asked my Ma for a velvet blouse. My mother scolded me. Father was always in a drunken stupor. There was hardly any food to eat. So I ran away from my house. I met this uncle at the bus stop. He promised to buy me a velvet blouse. Then I don’t know what happened until I found myself in a dark room in Gokak village”. This 14-year-old girl child is forced to take about 20 clients a day. She earns about ten rupees for a single day’s work. Hers is the story of most of the children in prostitution. She wants to get out but asks: “Where am I to go? How am I to support myself? What about the loan from Madam?”

### Inside a Brothel

There are 86 kothas on the G. B. Road, which house 2,500 commercial sex workers. During random sampling of 28 kothas, we found that almost 60 per cent of the prostitutes are children. The adult prosti-

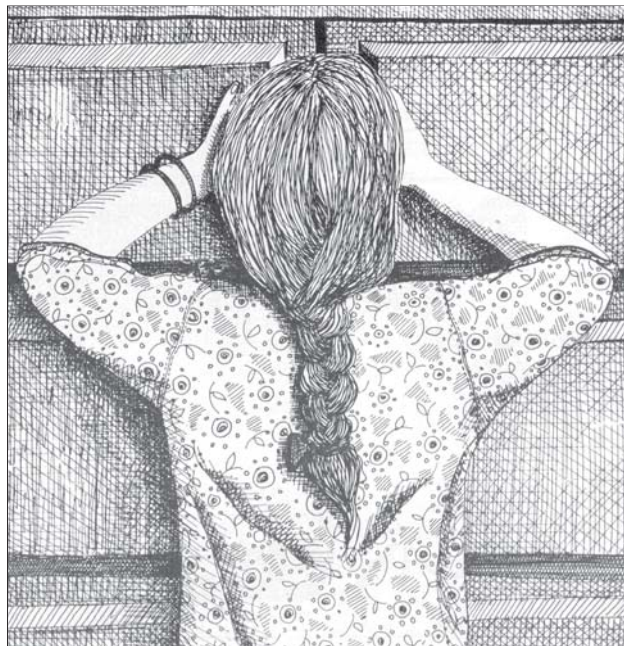
tutes are mostly visible during daytime while the minors accost clients when it’s dark.

On a visit to a G.B Road brothel, we found at least a dozen girls huddled up in one small stinking room. It was suffocating. The place resembled a pigsty. There were more than 20 minor girls among the 30 prostitutes in the brothel. These minors looked not more than 14 years of age but they said they were 20 years old.

The entire place was submerged in an uncanny ambience. There were dark compartments in various parts of the house though they were camouflaged to look normal from outside. These dark compartments are known as *tehkhanas* in the local parlance. *Tehkhanas* are hidden safe places between *do-chattas* (mezzanine space narrowing down from the roof of a big room). These *tehkhanas* are convenient to hide child prostitutes whenever there are raids or visits by social workers.

In some of the brothels our team members introduced themselves as astrologers, clients, sales representative selling *agarbatis* and other consumer items to elicit factual information about the occupants and their activities.

A commercial sex worker, as long as she is 18 or above and solicits peacefully and voluntarily and keeps her activity outside the vicinity of public places and notified areas, is not punishable under the law. However, running or abetting a brothel, living on the earnings of



prostitution, procuring or inducing or taking persons for prostitution, carrying out prostitution in the vicinity of public places, and seducing or soliciting for the purpose of prostitution, are all punishable acts.

The law dealing with prostitution is ambiguous. While on the one hand it does not prohibit prostitution, on the other hand it penalises those prostitutes who are caught soliciting customers—whether by words or gesture or willful exposure of her person. This can be punished with imprisonment of up to six months and/or fine of up to Rs 500. Persons soliciting on behalf of a commercial sex worker in a public place can be similarly punished. Thus, pimps and procurers can also be booked. However, this law is mostly used to harass prostitutes, both adults and children. A sex worker can legally practise her profession inside a house but cannot solicit clients on the streets.

The punishment for procuring, inducing or taking away persons for prostitution has been enhanced to a minimum of three years and a maximum of seven years of rigorous imprisonment. Forcible detention for the purpose of prostitution can also be punished with seven years to a life term. In addition the law provides for special police officers, non-official advisory bodies and police officers specifically assigned to stop trafficking to be appointed by the central government, as well as special courts to deal with cases under the Act. It also provides for the establishment of protective homes meant exclusively for “rescued” girls who can stay there for a maximum period of three years.

The law has many loopholes and inadequacies. It does not punish the client and it does not make any provision for the rehabilitation of women and children who are rescued from brothels. There is no single legal entity which oversees its imple-

mentation. The definition of prostitution is vague and tends to punish women and minor girls, who are the victims, rather than those who live off their earnings. Besides, though all offences are cognisable under the Act, they rarely result in convictions. While the minor girls are sometimes rounded up during raids and detained in remand homes, the pimps, *kotha malkeens* (women who own brothels) and clients go scot free. *Kotha malkeens* or ‘madams’ arrested usually manage to secure bail and continue running their business of exploiting minor girls.

### Police Complicity

Police extorts money from traffickers, prostitutes and *kotha malkeens* and is even involved in trafficking. Bharatiya Patita Uddhar Sabha (BPUS), a union of Delhi-based prostitutes, contends that the police are involved in a staged process of registering the victims. After a minor girl is brought into a brothel the *kotha malkeen* calls on the local officer — (sub-inspector

(SI) or assistant sub-inspector (ASI) — and beat officer (havaladar or constable) and requests them to make a new entry for a newly purchased minor girl for which she pays Rs 10,000 to the police. Reliable sources also revealed to the BPUS that the minor girls have to first satiate the sexual urges of these SIs, ASIs, havalendars and constables.

The farce follows set stages: a trumped-up case is registered against these minor girls falsely alleging that they were trying to solicit clients in a public place. The minor girls are then arrested and kept in the lock-up while the police prepare a *challan* wherein the minor girl’s age is entered as 21. This entry is apparently sufficient to transform overnight the minor girl into an adult for all subsequent court proceedings. After this, these minor girls are produced before a magistrate and released on bail. The police thus violate all norms as well as all the legal rules and regulations with impunity to help perpetuate child prostitution within the *kothas*.



The BPUS further reported that the *kotha malkeen* gets an agreement signed by the newly purchased girl on backdated court stamp paper stating her willingness to work for the *malkeen* as a domestic servant. Simultaneously, by a false promissory note, the girl states she has taken a loan of Rs 40,000 from the *malkeen*. By this process the minor girl enters into servitude under the rule of the *kotha malkeen*.

Ordinarily, a minor girl is purchased for about Rs 10,000. The police take a bribe of Rs 10,000 to frame the charges. Rs 20,000 is spent on getting the bail. The total expenditure incurred in the process is Rs 40,000 which is borne by the *kotha malkeen*. However, this amount is recorded as a debt the minor girl owes the *malkeen*. In this entire operation the dominant role is played by the police.

The BPUS also says that the police have designed a slab structure of protection money to be collected from *kotha malkeens* if they open a new *kotha*. The bribe rate of the police is as follows:

- Rs 50,000 for a brothel consisting of 10 minor girls.
- Rs 1 lakh for a brothel of 20 minor girls.
- Rs 3 lakh for a brothel having up to 50 minor girls.

The sabha further charged that out of every Rs 55 paid by a customer Rs 10 goes to the police. The cops receive cuts (according to their ranks) on a daily basis. A constable could expect Rs 25, head constable Rs 40, ASI Rs 80, SI Rs 100 and SHO Rs 500 from every brothel. The district special branch police, which address special categories of crimes, collect Rs 300 from a *kotha* of ten girls, and Rs 500 from larger *kothas* every month. Some of the child prostitutes disclosed names of some police officers and personnel who have been taking bribes



from them regularly. They further alleged that many of them even come as clients.

It's noteworthy that hardly any minor girl is caught during special raids at G.B Road. Most of these raids are made to be noted in police registers as signs of proper police activity or to carry out a vendetta against those girls who do not pay their routine bribes. During our field study some of the child prostitutes revealed that the police harass them even when they are with their clients. They alleged that the police barge into the cubicles and try to extort money from their clients. If the client is unable to shell out the demanded amount, they immediately drag him to the police station. This obviously affects the *kotha's* business as well.

The sources stress that the *modus operandi* is planned in such a manner that the police deliberately prefer to arrest the adult prostitutes, and not the minors. The adults are sent to the juvenile remand homes. From there they are released on bail, as they have been provided papers to prove that they are adults. These adult girls return to the brothels. For instance, in October 1996, out of five girls arrested by the police after a special raid, only one was found to be a minor. In

1994, after two special raids, out of the 44 girls arrested, only two were identified as minors. In June 1997, out of seven girls arrested, only one was identified as a minor.

During our field study, police were reluctant to divulge any information regarding child prostitution. Incidentally, we came across a plethora of facts such as an SHO (posted in Govindpuri sometime back, and now transferred to a nearby police station) deliberately hushing up a case of rape and murder of a minor girl in return for Rs 3 lakh. Sources also indicated that an SHO of a neighbouring police station owns a brothel which is managed by an elderly madam. Even in some of the prostitution prone areas, police stations do not have recorded cases of child prostitution. On the whole, very few cases of child abuse do figure in police records.

A frequent *modus operandi* for returning a child to prostitution is that someone from the *kotha* turns up masquerading as the minor girl's mother, aunt or grandma. They convince the magistrate of the genuineness of their relationship with the girl with the police's assistance. And the remand home is then forced to release the girl into the hands of those pretending to be her relatives.

There exists a three-tier system at G.B. Road. In the first tier come the *malkeens*. Initially when they came into this area as minor girls, the *malkeens* themselves originally operated as sex workers. Some of them, who had demonstrated sufficient enterprise, were able to save enough money and finally became *malkeens*. About one in 200 becomes a brothel owner.

In the second rung are the madams. A madam is one who cannot afford a *kotha* but has saved some money. She hires a place and keeps 2-3 minor girls who earn for her along

## In Their Own Words

A 17-year-old girl agreed to talk to us after much persuasion. Her unfortunate story unfolded as a series of missed opportunities. She hails from South 24 Parganas district of West Bengal. Her parents, with a meager income, had many children to support. It was a difficult task to survive.

"I got abducted at the age of 9. Someone promised me a job," Vandana recalls her past. "I was sold in Sonagachi in Calcutta." The small dingy room in the brothel where she solicits has at least 25 girls — some shouting abuses, others simply chatting — all resulting in a cacophonous sound. "For three months, the *malkeen's* babu assaulted and raped me to prepare me for this trade," Vandana told us. After a few months she was formally initiated. One day there was a police raid in the brothel where she was living, and she was taken into police custody.

Suddenly she bares her legs and shows a deep scar. "I was put behind the bars. There at midnight a policeman came and tried to squeeze me out of the lock-up. He could not squeeze me out, my legs got entangled in the iron bars. While I was stuck between the bars, the policeman raped me. My legs were injured and were bleeding profusely but he did not care. I was shouting but there was no one to listen."

Vandana goes on with her tale of horror: "I was staying in a caged brothel in Bombay for three years. When there was no client, we were pushed into a cage and locked in."

Rani said she hails from Bhubaneswar in Orissa. She had lost her parents when she was four years old. From then onwards started her ordeal. The uncle's family with whom she lived maltreated her and kept her like a slave. She was to follow the dictates of her aunt who didn't even

spare a single moment to maltreat her. "I cannot even recall how many times my lecherous uncle raped me, from the time I was 10," the 16-year-old girl disdainfully remarked. "This continued for three years. Sometimes even his friends came over and performed the same heinous act with me." Rani was seething with anger together with a feeling of dejection.

Unable to live any longer in these dehumanised conditions, Rani ran away from her uncle's home with a boy from the neighbourhood who promised to take her away from that nightmare. She fell for his soothing assurances and ran away with him. "We landed in Varanasi ticketless. The boy who accompanied me tried to hire cycle rickshaw which he could ply and earn money." But the owner of the rickshaw didn't let him use it as he could not give any security money. Moreover, language was the biggest handicap. Reconstructing her agonising story, Rani said that they met a "benevolent" looking man at the Kashi station, who seeing their pitiable state promised to ar-

range some money for her boyfriend to get a rickshaw and for her to get the job of a domestic maid at his house. "Without doubting his intentions, we followed him like devotees. He gave us lots of sermons on the way to his home. He had given us good food and clothing. Two days later we saw his true colours. Never could I have imagined that I was being prepared to be a sacrificial goat. He took me to Dal Mandi and introduced me to a lady who taught music and dance to young girls. I was to work as a domestic maid there. It was a bolt from the blue after a week when I realised where I had landed." With a deep sigh, Rani said, "*Dal Mandi se G.B. Road door nahin tha!*" (G.B Road was not far away from Dal Mandi.)



with her. Eventually she does not prostitute herself but becomes a manager.

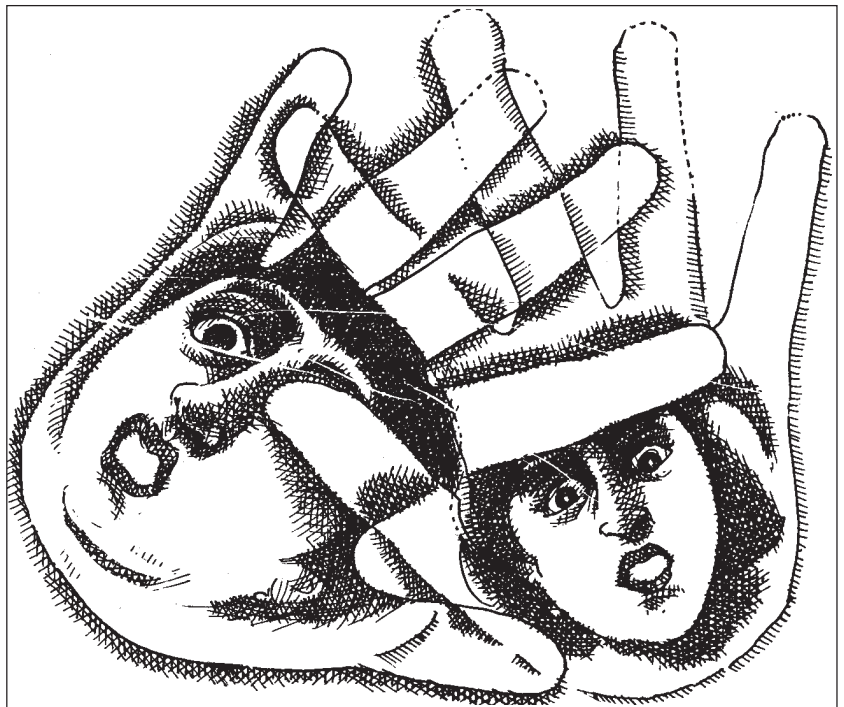
The sex workers comprise the third tier at G.B Road. Here as many as 60 per cent of the sex workers are minor girls. The rest are adults. Eventually, when they can no longer earn their living as prostitutes, some of them take up petty jobs as housemaids, while others work as baby sitters or cooks for the working prostitutes. And when they are unable to keep even those jobs due to physical inability or old age, most are simply forced to move to the pavements where they are reduced to ragpicking and begging. Some of these women, however, manage to keep in contact with their families in their native places. Later in life many of them end up earning their livelihood by acting as procurers of minor girls whom they encourage and trap into prostitution.

*Dalaals* are a significant link in the prostitution business. They help both in transporting minor girls and selling them to the *kotha malkeens* and call-girls. However, sometimes they also act as pimps when they supply minor girls to politicians, officials, and businessmen.

There is a dearth of shelter homes for the few child prostitutes arrested by the police. The state run remand home, Nirmal Chhaya, gets a few child prostitutes through one or two special raids in a year which are conducted in redlight areas only to fill up their quotas of arrests. The few state or NGO run homes do not have a systematic way to keep and make available vital information regarding these children who need special attention nor are they willing to share the information they do maintain with anyone who is legitimately trying to collect data on child prostitution.

### A Typical Recruiting Ground

Situated on the eastern fringe of the capital, New Seemapuri is a typical location where child prostitution flour-



ishes. It has around 4,750 jhuggies. The approximate population of the area is 28,000. In this slum colony, jhuggi dwellers are migrants from Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar, West Bengal and neighbouring countries like Bangladesh.

Most of the menfolk work as rag-pickers, industrial workers and rickshaw pullers. Women work mostly as domestics in the nearby residential colonies like Dilshad Garden and Anand Vihar.

Residents of the colony point out that minor girls are supplied along the Delhi-Uttar Pradesh border to the ever increasing number of truck drivers. Minor girls from this slum colony have been sold in Arab countries also.

Women *dalaals*, mostly original inhabitants of Bangladesh subsequently settled in India after their marriage, go scouting for minor girls deeper into the impoverished villages of the bordering districts of Bangladesh such as Satkhira, Jessore, Jhinadah, Meherpur, Rajshahi, Nawabgang and Joypurhat.

A women *dalaal* scouts for minor girls with certain characteristics. Acting as a *ghatak* (female match maker) as a cover up, she negotiates with the parents of a minor girl and settles a sham marriage with a male *dalaal*. Then she informs the male *dalaal* in India. Pretending to be a legitimate bridegroom, he ties a "nuptial" knot with the minor girl. The so-called bridegroom is able to induce the poor parents to give their minor daughter for this fake marriage by paying them Rs 15,000 to Rs 20,000 in Indian currency. These male *dalaals* have performed numerous marriages of this type in Bangladesh.

Nepalese minor girls in G.B Road kothas are predominantly from Kathmandu, Birgang, Biratnagar and Nepalgunj. The demand for Nepalese girls by the *kotha malkeens* is high. Reports suggest that these girls are sold in different brothels in India for up to Nepali Rs 60,000.

Thus, the problem of child prostitution is rooted in rural poverty with numerous vested interests parasiting on these vulnerable lives. □