



A Sita Amidst Many Ravans

○ Nitasha Guha

The girl was running as if the devil was in pursuit. Not more than 16, she was rather pretty, her figure was slight. Her frightened eyes located a cab and she ran towards it, while the early risers looked on curiously. Throwing herself into the cab she stammered out the name of a well known red light area of south Calcutta.

This was Sita's (not her real name) first taste of victory over her unfortunate circumstances. Sita had been kidnapped from her village in the hills a year ago. Walking back from school one sleepy afternoon she had been left far behind by her friends. Suddenly she had been accosted by two young men who grabbed her and put something forcibly in her mouth which made her unconscious. When she came round her bloodied clothes and excruciating pain told her she had crossed the boundary of her village, never to return.

The tiny unlit hole for a room and locked door told her the story. It was retold to her every time the door was unlocked and a customer lurched in. Devoid of any communication with outsiders except these men it took her a year to realise that she was prostituting in the most notorious red

light area of Calcutta. "I could never get over the fact that God had chosen this black hole for me to spend the rest of my life."

And when after a few months she was quietly informed by the house servant that she was being taken to Mumbai the next day to be sold to the flesh traders of some Gulf country her fear, anger, hurt and feeling of unfairness all welled up within her in the shape of reckless courage. With the help of the kind-hearted servant she managed to flee the house at dawn the very next day to try her fortune somewhere else.

Sita had realised with uncommon clarity that she could only better her standard of living but could never change her profession. She had been branded. After paying the taxi fare from her tiny savings that she had very cleverly hidden from her 'madam' she entered the labyrinth of narrow lanes and by-lanes of this unknown locality. This brought her face to face with her next challenge. Within a few hours a handful of goons entered the basti in pursuit of the golden goose. Sita had already been adopted by one set of prostitutes who had found her loitering in the lanes. Conniving

with the local *dadas*, the goons tried to overpower her by sheer physical force.

It goes to her credit that she did not give in, and more by will than physical power she kept hitting out with her fists and legs and even beat up one of them with her *chappals*. When she was picked up like a doll by a six-foot giant, her anger knew no bounds. In sheer rage she sank her teeth into his chin and tasted blood. The howling man threw her back on the bed with such force that she lost consciousness. But she had won another round of victory. The goons left without her, though as a result of their battering she was admitted to the hospital from where she returned after six days.

This, however gave the local boys a chance to think up of additional ways to exploit her helpless situation. She was asked to shell out around Rs 6,000 as gratitude money for being allowed to remain in the locality. In the next few weeks as her clientele grew so did her confidence and she began to relax amidst those who belonged to her community. But fate once again decided to test her tenacity to breaking point. Her beauty and youth became the bone of contention amongst the local men, as each vied with others for her attention. She explained, "It is an age-old tradition in our trade that each sex worker is retained by a *babu* who has the multiple role of a pimp, a husband, a caretaker and ultimately an extortionist. I was advised by an elderly woman to refrain from indulging in such relationships, for in the end he almost invariably turns into

It took Sita, a simple village girl, a full year to realise she was prostituting in the most notorious red light area of Calcutta.

a parasite whom you just cannot shake off.”

This then became her *mantra* which she was determined to follow. For this she had to undergo yet another bout of torture. Once she was slapped and then beaten up by one prospective *babu* and his cronies. The next time, she had her arm twisted till she almost fainted with pain and was somehow rescued by her neighbours.

Finally, some of them took recourse to the supernatural. “I have always been afraid of ghosts and the dark, and somehow this fact leaked out to them.” In the narrow confines of her room her window was broken one dark night and hands began pummelling and pinching her. The result was disastrous. In the morning her roommates found her reduced to a jabbering idiot and frothing at the mouth. She was immediately taken to a local doctor who was wise enough to realise this was not an epileptic fit but a psychological break-down.

Against all odds,
Sita has attained a
dignity of a
real but different
kind.

Sita claims it took her two weeks to return from the hospital. She came back with a terrible stammer from which she has not recovered till today. Her traumatic experience left a damaging mark on her senses to the effect that whenever she encounters anything even mildly unpleasant or gets involved in an argument her symptoms recur in the form of violent behaviour and nonsensical talk. But this little five-feet nothing-girl held out to the very last, referring to these *babus* as her elder brothers whenever they approached her with a proposal.

They have ever since remained on the periphery, not daring to cross this gutsy girl again.

Today Sita shares a room with another sex worker for which she pays a daily rent from her earnings. She is her own master, facing the hardships of her life and profession alone, without the traditional *babu* feeding on her. Her fellow workers have an open admiration for her. She has shown them that independence in her work is not achieved by having others hold their hands for them and pretend to guide them.

The strength to fight for a little independence can never be bestowed upon us from outside. It lies within, waiting to be discovered. The real challenge for Sita lay in putting her inner strength to full use to attain for herself whatever little dignity she could still attain from all that society had so unfairly snatched away. It is dignity of a real but different kind that this Sita has achieved in her life. □



Women Bhakt Poets

*“No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy.
Modesty, shame, family honour - all these I threw off my head.
Flinging away praise and blame, I took the narrow path of knowledge.
Tall the towers, red the windows - a formless bed is spread,
Auspicious the five coloured necklace, made of flowers and buds,
Beautiful armlets and bracelets, vermilion in my hair parting,
The tray of remembrance in my hand - a beauty more true.
Mira sleeps on the bed of happiness - auspicious the hour today.
Rana, you go to your house - you and I cannot pull together.
No one can stop you - Mira set out in ecstasy.”*

Mirabai

Available in an attractive hardbound edition. Contains accounts of the life and poetry of some of the most outstanding women in Indian history from the 6th to the 17th century - Mirabai, Andal, Avvaiyar, Muktabai, Janabai, Bahinabai, Lal Ded, Toral, Loyal. Many of these poems had never been translated into English before.

120 pages, profusely illustrated ♦ Price: Rs 100 (+Rs 15 postage) ♦ Overseas Price: US\$ 10

Send advance payment to the **Manushi** address.

Makes A Beautiful Gift