

UNDER Indian law, brothels, prostitution, soliciting and pimping are criminal offences. Yet who does not know that G.B. Road is Delhi's redlight area or that there are cages in Bombay where you can buy the favours of girls, some of whom may be barely 12 years old? The Suppression Of Immoral Traffic In Women And Girls Act (SITWGA), 1956, is one of the most hypocritical, useless pieces of legislation, yet not a single women's group has ever agitated for its repeal.

From time to time, prostitutes have stood up for their rights. They have demanded licences and other facilities, but their voice is not powerful enough to penetrate the sandstone walls of the Lok Sabha.

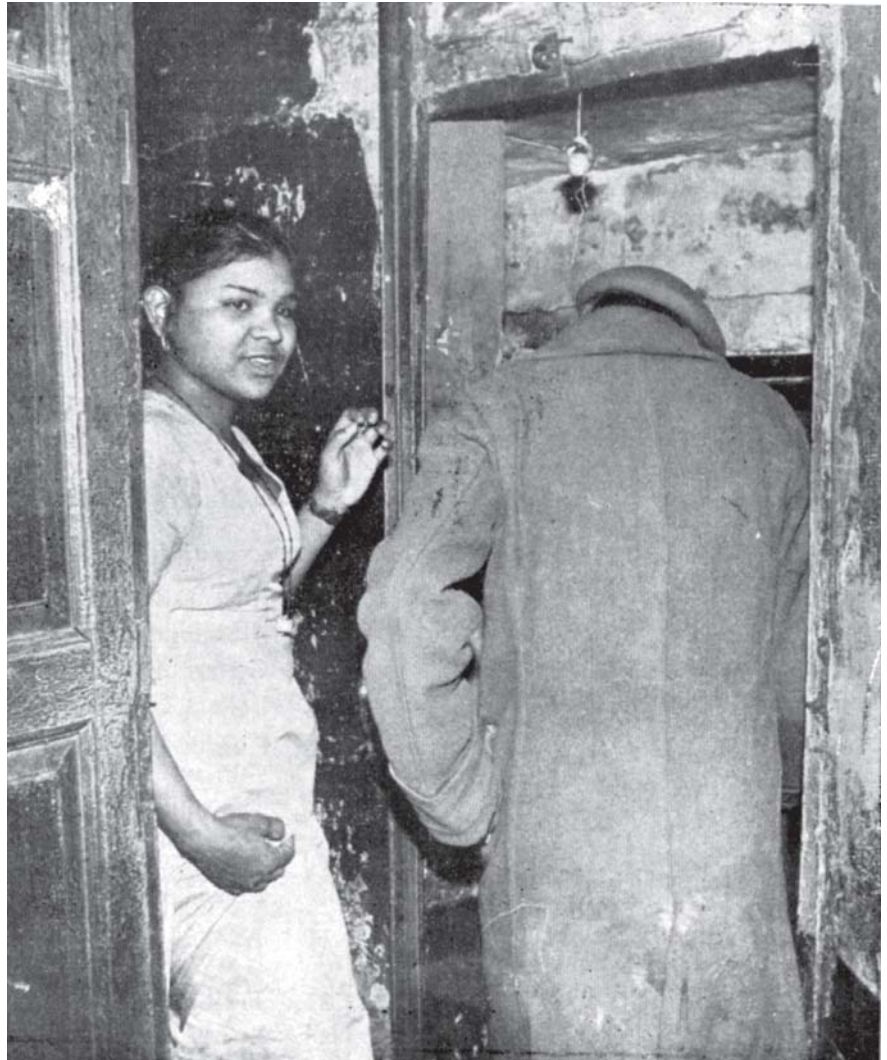
In the old days, G.B. Road *kothas* are supposed to have been patronised mainly by princes and the very rich. The sordidness of prostitution was concealed under a veneer of romance of the Umrao Jan, Pakeezah variety, and several of the women managed to move on to careers as film actresses or singers. Until about 10 years ago, the women of G.B. Road lived with a measure of dignity and comfort.

Then, the Arabs started coming to Bombay and the better off women and those with talent or looks moved there because the payment was better. At around the same time, G.B. Road started running out of rich patrons because getting a woman in Delhi became easier. The five star hotels provide their own "special services" and there are also the guest houses mushrooming in South Delhi.

Once the decline began, things seemed to get worse very rapidly. Today, the brothels of G.B. Road are places of such unimaginable sadness and misery that it is difficult to believe that they are there to sell pleasure.

It is harassment by the police which has really precipitated the decline. Since G.B. Road is technically illegal, it exists only at the mercy of the police. The recently formed Bhartiya Patita Uddhar

A Case For Freeing Prostitutes From The Clutches of the Police



A policeman entering a brothel as a "customer"

Sabha estimates that the 64 *kothas* pay the police over Rs 300,000 every month, merely to be allowed to survive. Despite this, the police make sure that the prostitutes are not left in peace.

Nimmi Bai, who is president of the newly formed union, invited me and photographer Sondeep Shankar to spend an evening in her *kotha* to see for ourselves how the police operate. We arrived at around 9.30 p.m., and noticed that all along the length of G.B. Road there were policemen posted as they are in a riot situation. Most of them stood at the entrances to the brothels, because, according to the women, their main tactic is to stop customers as they are leaving.

According to Nimmi Bai: "You see, apart from the money that they take from us, they also extort what they can from the customers. They generally catch the ones who look as if they come from decent backgrounds and threaten to arrest them. Naturally, this frightens them because nobody wants a scandal, so they give the police whatever they have on them—watches, jewellery, cash. Once this happens to someone, he naturally does not want to come here again."

The women say that this has been going on since 1977, but nobody was sure why a law that was passed in 1956 seemed to have come into force only 20 years later. The absurdity of the law is patently obvious from the fact that if it was effective, there would be no G.B. Road.

The fact that even those who framed SITWGA, 1956, did not take it very seriously is evident from clause 7 which says that prostitution in the vicinity of public places is banned. This comes after six clauses which state categorically that brothels and prostitution in general are banned.

The tragedy, of course, is that the women who end up in G.B. Road are generally illiterate and completely unaware of their rights. They tend to arrive in the *kothas* because they are abandoned by their husbands or because they come from such poor

families that a female relative sells them into the trade merely to avoid paying a dowry to marry them off.

There is little evidence in G.B. Road of the kind of forced prostitution of which there have been cases in Bombay and in some small towns. Yet, the police, from time to time, dredge up an alleged victim of "abduction", who disappears into the portals of Nari Niketan and is neither heard from nor of again.

SITWGA allows the police to search a suspected brothel without a warrant, and during the evening that we spent in the *kothas* of G.B. Road, we saw them in action.

Around 10.30 p.m., the two constables whom we had seen patrolling the road below, suddenly swooped on one of the *kothas* and demanded their cut. The women started making a lot of noise, saying they had paid Rs 50 only the day before, and there was some haggling, after which the money was paid and the policemen left. They did not seem to be deterred by our presence and took the money although they saw Sondeep taking a photograph. If this is not pimping, then it is difficult to understand what is, but since the police are the guardians of SITWGA, who can

challenge them?

The madames of G.B. Road believe that it is mainly the police who have brought such hard times upon them. The evening that we were there, it was clear that there was a mere trickle of customers into most of the brothels. The girls, dressed up and painted, waited on the wooden benches in the main reception rooms but there seemed to be no takers. According to one of the older madames: "If you had come here a few years ago, you would not even have found place to stand."

The women live in unbelievable squalor along with a virtual army of small children. The rooms allotted to each family are little hovels, made from wooden partitions, in which there is barely enough room for people to lie down. A pall of filth, disease and despair seems to hang over everything.

The Bhartiya Patita Udhar is the first attempt by the G.B. Road women to assert themselves and to demand the rights due to them as Indian citizens. In the absence of any support from women's groups, it is difficult to imagine that their union will ever be an effective force. So far, all it has managed to do is write letters to the home minister, prime minister and the



A woman dancing

—Sandeep Shankar

lieutenant governor, demanding that police harassment stop and that the women be given licences to function.

An attempt was also made by some madames to stop paying their monthly dues to the local police station, but the immediate result was that the president of the union, Nimmi Bai, was arrested a few days ago on what she claims are fabricated charges. The police took a girl called Saira into custody and said she was being forcibly kept in Nimmi Bai's *kotha*. Nimmi Bai's version is that the girl is 23 and has been working in G.B. Road for three years. She claims that she is even registered with the police. According to her, the police have threatened to take other girls away from her *kotha* unless she starts paying her monthly dues again.

The guiding spirit behind the union is a slightly eccentric, former freedom fighter called Khairati Lal Bhola, who

believes that he should spend the rest of his life assisting society's outcasts. Before becoming involved with the prostitutes, he had managed to set up a *hijras*' (eunuchs') union.

According to figures collected by him, each *kotha* in G.B. Road pays Kamla Market police station Rs 5,000 a month. This includes payments to many policemen, from the lowest to the highest rungs. An ordinary constable gets Rs 15, a head constable Rs 20, an assistant sub-inspector Rs 80 and the station house officer Rs 500. In addition, every *kotha* pays the crime branch Rs 3,000 a month.

The few women who tried to help improve conditions in G.B. Road are those who have gone there as reformers to try and make "good women" out of "fallen women." This approach is not likely to get very far, because the general opinion of members of the G.B. Road

union is that what they basically want is the right to medical care and ration cards and the right to work in the only way they can.

To quote Nimmi Bai: "Our being prostitutes does not mean that our children should be refused the right to go to school or that we should not be given any medical facilities." The women would like a mobile dispensary to tour their area because they have found that they tend to be treated very badly if they go to general hospitals for treatment or for delivery.

The immediate need, however, is for protection from the police. This can be achieved in any permanent sense only if SITWGA is changed to make it more stringent as regards minors who are forced into prostitution, and more humane and understanding as regards women who are above the age of consent. □

Other Exploits of the Police

THE Andhra Pradesh Civil Liberties Committee appointed an eight member fact finding team to investigate the alleged rape of Satamma and assault on several others at village Samudralingapuram by the police.

According to the village headman and many eyewitnesses, two subinspectors and six constables entered the village around midnight on January 13. They went to the house of Narsaiah and beat him and his two sons with *lathis*. The police also broke up earthen pots, furniture and utensils in his house. They warned Narsaiah to stop cultivating his land. They did not give any reason for their behaviour but he feels they were angry because one of his sons is a political activist.

They next went to Satamma's house in search of her husband. She told them that he had not returned, and refused to open the door. The police broke open the door and hit Satamma. They then wrecked all her belongings and tore up

the papers showing her entitlement to her land. They warned her to stop cultivation since her husband was away. They also beat her two small sons. The subinspector then raped her. She fainted, and cannot remember how many raped her.

When she regained consciousness, she found herself lying on the floor, bleeding. She sat there the whole day, dazed. Towards evening, she had a bath. On the morning of January 16, the headman took her to the hospital since the bleeding had not stopped.

The lady doctor on duty refused to examine Satamma because a rape case has to be registered by the police before government doctors take it up. But how could Satamma complain to the police? She was prescribed a tetanus injection and painkillers. No examination of her body or clothing was conducted. When the committee met her on January 27, the bruises were still visible. Yet valuable evidence has been lost because of the

doctor's refusal to examine her.

The policemen later wrecked two more houses, and beat up several people, including Gangavva, mother of a two month old baby, who was so seriously injured that people feared she would not survive. The police stole Rs 300 and a watch from the villagers.

So terrified were the villagers that when the APCLC team approached in a jeep, most of them started running away and returned only when they saw the women members of the team.

The APCLC has demanded that Satamma's case be treated as a custodial rape case even though it does not fall strictly within the legal definition of custodial rape, that her statement be considered sufficient proof to punish the guilty, that all the concerned policemen be suspended pending enquiry, and that in cases of custodial rape, doctors be required to conduct a medical examination even if a police case is not registered. □