

Fight for Prostitutes' Rights as Citizens

by
Maithri Forum for Women

Mehboob-ki-Mehendi is popularly assumed to have derived its name from associations with the Nizam, Mehboob Ali Pasha. Historically, however, it has a connection with the Nizam, who probably never visited the place. It derives its name from Mehboob Subani which is a relic of Sheikh Abdul Khader Gilani whose tomb is in Baghdad. His relic, along with a miniature of his tomb, is kept in a *dargah*. Every year, there is an urs, during which sandal and henna (*mehendi*) are applied to the relic, followed by procession in the locality. A lot of singing and dancing forms part of this celebration, owing to the Sufi tradition. Many of the singers and dancers originally came from the north, except for one woman who was from Bombay. This was an area where singers and dancers lived.

Mehboob-ki-Mehendi as an institution has been in existence for the last 100 years. There are now at least 500 women there, eking out a living and supporting a family of dependants, either as singers or as ordinary prostitutes.

The ordinary prostitutes lived across the river Musi in the narrow lanes behind the bus station. Since buses from many places came to the Gowliguda bus station, these women were accessible to travellers coming to Hyderabad. In 1974 the women of Mehboob-ki-Mehendi were harassed by the police. They were beaten up and thrown out of their houses. They would be picked up in police vans and dropped at far off places like Bhongir and Raigir, generally outside

city limits. The women then approached Keshavrao

Jadhav and R.V. Mooley, and an agitation was launched that lasted six months. Finally, Lakshmi Devi, then minister for social welfare, intervened and gave instructions to the police to stop harassing the women, and promised to rehabilitate them.

After the police action, the area became the stronghold of the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and the Arya Samaj. Their moralism and desire to "purify" the place hounded the prostitutes across the river, and they too settled down in the Mehendi area. Even today, there is a

sharp social distinction maintained between the singing and dancing women and ordinary prostitutes.

The women are marked and recognised as Mehendi women, and since their clients come from all over the city and state, there is no place they can live anonymously and quietly. It is only the Mehendi which has traditionally been an area of security and shelter for them. Mehendi houses families if "respectable" people too. The relationship of these families with those of the prostitutes are free and Cordial. Over the past year, these families have been the only ones to provide emotional

Dharna at secretarial, Hyderabad, January 11, 1990



and moral support to the prostitutes who stayed on in the area.

The recent round of trouble in Mehendi first started on July 15, 1988. A young man who visited the house of Padma, took ill. Padma rushed to the Charminar police station for help but was told to get out. She rushed back and got him admitted in Osmania General Hospital, leaving behind her address. The man, whose identity has not been established, died. As a result, four women from Mehendi were taken into police custody, 200 to 300 of them were locked out of their houses for a week, and the women of the area were beaten indiscriminately by the police.

The police officials, as expected, denied that anything like this had ever happened, and even offered to reimburse the women if they came forward and identified the constables responsible for this. We know, as well as they do, why this is not possible. The women finally obtained a court order and reentered their houses.

Eight months later, in March 1989, the police entered the area again and threw 500 women out on the streets. The police were instigated by a group of men who called themselves the Youth Welfare Committee, who claimed that it was their duty to "cleanse" the area.

For nine months, between March and December 1989, women were locked out of their houses, and beaten up if they attempted to return to the area. The leader of the group Moham-med Fasiuddin's men kept a vigil on the area and reported every attempted reentry to the police. On September 12, Sakina Bi, aged 35, was brutally beaten up in the Charminar police station and died in a pool of blood. Other women were threatened with death if they attempted to go near the body. There were four more deaths during this period. Dancing women and singers who had licences were also prevented from performing.

The women of Mehendi feel that there are basically two reasons behind this harassment. First, the hoodlums want to occupy their houses and land,

as the land value in this area is very high. Second, the police became vengeful when the women refused to pay them bribes. They were earlier paying Rs 15 per day per house to the policemen on duty and Rs 500 per month at the police station. They stopped this in early 1989.

The cause of the women from Mehboob-ki-Mehendi was first taken up by Ms Meghamala, a social worker belonging to the Congress-I. We went there after seeing a report in the local press of a press conference organised by Ms Meghamala, on December 21, 1989.

In January 1990, Fasiuddin, the leader of the group issued a statement in the press condemning what he called attempts to revive prostitution in Mehendi. This was immediately after we took up the Mehendi issue. The Youth Welfare Committee, he said, was against revival of prostitution in the densely populated Mehendi locality as it might adversely affect the character of young boys and girls belonging to respectable families. The detection of AIDS in some Mehendi prostitutes was also cited as a reason for complete stoppage of prostitution. Mr Fasiuddin denied that the police were physically assaulting the

women. He stated that the strict vigil kept by the police had resulted in gradual stoppage of the flesh trade. Clearly, Mr Fasiuddin and the police have joined hands. It might be pertinent to point out here that Fasiuddin has in the past been charged with raping a woman in Mehendi.

Although harassment is not new in the area, it has taken on a new brutality in the last few years. Reports of this harassment drew us to the area initially but it was only after a couple of months of working in the area with the women that we were able to comprehend a little of the complexity of the issue itself and of the reactions it evoked from other groups and from the press. While the local press has been supportive to a great extent, for a section of the press the issue has been something of a picnic. What can provide more juicy titbits for the weekend than a full page photo feature in colour of prostitutes exhibiting their bruised bodies? This compulsion to trivialise a serious issue and extract a vicarious thrill even from the most agonising situation is only an extension of the brutality that left these women battered in the first place, and it distresses us. □

The Bitch

*She scampered around
chased away from many a staircase
the bitch wretched, hated
in disgust, guilt, pity.
No one suspected her pregnancy
Yet she gave birth on a frozen
morning bloody
sickly her pups mistaken for mice
died before her.
Returning from work I saw she
was there
guarding one (dead many hours ago)
obstructing a passage again
but this time with a difference
She attacked irate maids
and heckling chowkidars
who found it an amusing way to pass*

*an afternoon.
Unnerved by her doomed maternal
fierceness
they kept away, eventually.
After many hours of endeavours cruel
stones, buckets of water
filth accumulating with broken pots and
mud strewn
she removed herself yelping
the lifeless lovingly clasped in her
mouth.
The sweeperess complained of all the
work.
Would I pay her some extra?
She deserved it, she said.*

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