



## A Woman's Last Resort

### Prostitution In Calcutta

THE four case studies presented here were collected in connection with a more comprehensive study of working women in the unorganised sector which proliferates in and around the city of Calcutta. Casual observation indicated that there had been a significant increase in the number of women earners in Greater Calcutta's workforce. This was evident in spite of the fact that in the late fifties and early sixties the relatively small workforce engaged in the organised industrial sector decreased very sharply. Concluding that it was only the

unorganised sector which accounted for the rise in the number of women in the labour force, a relatively large sample based survey of such workers in and around the city was undertaken.

In defining the area of study, the problem of women earners whose sole or primary source of income was from prostitution presented itself. It became apparent that such women should be included within this category of working women. There was no substantial reason to exclude these women when others engaged in the service sector were

included. Following the criterion of income, it was impossible to separate such earners from the sample frame which was, in this case, the census list in Calcutta.

One of the major findings of this survey was the wide variety of occupations in which women were engaged in order to eke out a living for themselves and their families. It should be emphasised in this connection that the Bengali middle class *bhadralok* assumption that prostitution is the most common resort of women forced to earn

a living is largely erroneous. Prostitution is usually the very last resort of working women. Nevertheless, prostitution, open or concealed, does constitute a significant category of occupation and quite a large number of women are dependent on this occupation.

The case studies presented here are from one poor, redlight area in south Calcutta and are not therefore a representative cross section of those engaged in this occupation throughout the city. Prostitutes in Calcutta come from many states and cater to men of many income groups. The four case studies here do have some things in common. All four women came from rural areas to the city in search of other occupations and were forced, in desperation, into prostitution.

### **Annapurna**

Annapurna is a pretty, fair complexioned 20 year old and has lived in this slum for six months. Her original home was Bangladesh. During the 1971 war, she fled to Calcutta with her family but she got separated from the other members. She managed, even as a single woman in a foreign land, to retain her honour. She spent some days in a camp near the station and then found employment in a house in Maniktola, where she got board and lodging and Rs 15 a month.

After working there for five years, she left. At first, she did not reply when I asked her why. I came to know later that the mistress left all the responsibility of running the household to Annapurna while she herself went out frequently. The master began to make use of his wife's absence. Initially, Annapurna was frightened and ashamed. But the master easily managed to take advantage of her since she feared she would lose the job if she disobeyed him. He secretly gave her small trinkets and Rs 10 to 15 a month extra. He claimed that his wife tyrannised him and Annapurna was his refuge.

Finally, Annapurna became pregnant. The master gave her various quack medicines which had a very adverse effect. She fainted with pain and was sent to hospital where she stayed for nearly a fortnight. During this time no one came to look for her. She learnt from the nurse

that she had lost the child and would not be able to have any more children. The news shocked her and she could only stare at the nurse. She asked if either her master or mistress had come, and was told that on the first day a man had come and left money for her expenses. Annapurna had no idea whether or not she should go to their house when she was discharged. The nurse scolded and taunted her. She fainted and felt trapped like a crippled bird. The following day, the nurse came with her discharge papers. The bed was needed that day.

Annapurna left the hospital. Not knowing where to go, she sat, resting her head against the wall. She felt a gentle touch and looking up, saw a fat old woman whom she recognised as a hospital ayah. She asked Annapurna where she was going. "I am not on duty so I will take a rickshaw and come with you", she said.

Annapurna did not even have the rickshaw fare. All she had was in the house. They reached the house and, climbing the stairs, Annapurna came face to face with the mistress who began to shout at her and abuse her. The ayah shouted back : "Is this the way *bhadralok* behave ? This girl has worked for you so many years. She returns sick from hospital, and you behave like this." The mistress was prevented from retorting by a voice from inside the house which instructed her to give Annapurna her trunk and belongings.

Annapurna was put out of the house. The ayah called a rickshaw and took her to a brothel. When Annapurna began to weep, the ayah said : "Now you are fallen so no one will give you shelter. You will find no work other than prostitution." From that day, Annapurna has lived in the slum. A lawyer visits her regularly and meets her expenses. She has no other clients. He has promised to set her up somewhere else. He is already married so there is no question of marriage. "I shall never marry", says Annapurna, "What sort of marriage could I make? I shan't be able to be a mother."

### **Sushma**

Sushma lives in the house next to Annapurna. She is dark, slim and pretty with a ready laugh. Her husband died,

leaving her with two children. Her father-in-law is blind, and her mother-in-law an invalid. Sushma is illiterate and her husband had worked as a hired agricultural labourer. After his death, the task of maintaining the family fell on Sushma. With the permission of her in-laws, she took up prostitution, though for this she needed the assistance of a pimp.

She came here five years ago. Initially, it had been very difficult to leave the children, especially as she was still suckling one, but gradually her milk dried up. She still maintains contact with her in-laws and sometimes goes to see the children. Twice a month, her mother-in-law comes to Calcutta to collect money. Generally, her earnings are passable and her health is still good. She does not care to think of her own future. "If only I could keep my health until the children have grown up, that is all I ask", she says, laughing.

### **Anayara**

In the next house an old lady sat on a mat. At her side sat the 16 or 17 year old Anayara. She had soft slanting eyes and was dark skinned. I was surprised to see a Muslim girl in this Hindu slum. Anayara and her mother came from a village in the Darbhanga district of Bihar 10 years ago. Poverty forced them to consign all but a very small piece of their land to the moneylender. All that remained was a bit of land round the house where Anayara's grandmother and six younger brothers and sisters lived. Anayara's mother was forced to put her into prostitution and to stay with her in Calcutta. A Hindu neighbour who worked in the city had helped them to get there. The mother had intended to collect some money and return with her daughter to the village after a couple of years. She had hoped that friends would help her recover the land which was at present occupied by others, and that she would then be able to cultivate it.

On enquiry, I found that it had been impossible for them to find any other employment but prostitution, nor could they take up prostitution at home because the whole family would have been socially ostracised and would never have been able to return to normal life.

This was the reason for their having sought shelter in a Hindu slum. Here, no one could easily enter and make enquiries. Anayara's mother paid the landlady a higher rent, Rs 12 a day.

Anayara's mother maintained contact with the village. She went to visit her mother-in-law and children, and took money to the money-lender. The villagers think that she and her daughter work as a cook and ayah in a well to do household in Calcutta. I tried to talk to Anayara but she refused to speak. With her head bowed, she kept picking at her toe nails. I asked her mother if she thought they would return to the village. She was silent for a while, then replied that she still wanted to go back with her daughter.

### Minati

"Yes, I went into prostitution of my will. No one pushed me into it", said Minati. She lost her mother when she was a child. Her step-mother, who became pregnant almost continually, did not like Minati and used to abuse and taunt her, calling her dark and ugly. Minati loved her schoolwork and though her stepmother burdened her with household chores, she studied secretly at night, and in this way managed, to the astonishment of her family, to pass her school final examination.

Her stepmother was most displeased. She felt that if Minati got a job there would be no one to look after the children. Minati wanted to continue her studies. Her father said he would try to help her financially but it would have to be a secret as he could not let his wife know. Minati refused and said she would manage on her own. She went to the primary school to ask for a job but a precondition for getting a job was that one had to be married.

Against her parents' wishes, she married a man not of her caste. For a few months she was happy but then she found that she received no affection and her life was passing without any purpose. When she protested, her husband said: "Who would marry a girl like you? What joy can there be in such a marriage? You needed shelter and you got it. What more do you want? You have enough to eat and a place to sleep. If you don't make a fuss you can spend

your life like this. I'll maintain you but one thing is clear, I will not get involved in any personal relationship with you." Minati was aghast. In her determination to remain independent and resolving never to trust any man again, she went into prostitution.

Minati had heard stories of prostitutes from friends. She had no difficulty in making a start. She found a woman who let out rooms but who was not enthusiastic when Minati asked for shelter and work. Finally, because she was a brahman and had passed school finals, she was taken on for a fortnight's trial. If she could prove herself during this period, she would pay Rs 8 for a room and Rs 12 a month for lighting and servants. The woman would get a proportion of her daily earnings if she brought in more than five customers a day. "At first, it was really hard. I could not affect the mannerisms of the other girls as they stood on the streets. I would stand in a corner with the modesty of a

college girl. However, due to this I seemed to do very well. A major cause of my attraction seemed to be my lack of greed. In a week I had proved myself."

I asked her what she felt about her work and whether she was financially independent. "To begin with, I was hesitant, but then for two years I worked as though inebriated. Day and night I entertained 15 to 20 men. I thought that I could work fearlessly and have a little money for the future. These days I don't have much strength but I have two children and I am reluctant to give up work until they are grown up."

At the time we met, Minati knew a few words of English, and this seemed useful for her work. Sleeping in the room was a three year old boy who was ill. He looked still a babe in arms. She did not know who the father of the child was. "Praise god, he wasn't a girl. I don't want a daughter who may become like me. When boys grow up they can find work. They don't have to do as I do. At first,



when I was in this job I wanted to go back to my stepmother and make people there respect me. Now I don't want to do that. I just pass my days in pain."

She said that in the five years she had been a prostitute her earnings had increased and especially on big festival days she could earn a lot. Although earnings were uneven and she had to give a lot of money to her landlady her earnings had marginally improved. Some months she could earn Rs 1,500, in others not even Rs 200. However, even in bad times, the landlady had to be paid, and she had also to pay a high rate of interest on debts.

The rate charged depended on demand, but the difficulty for a prostitute was not just the effort to get enough customers. Many different kinds of men come to a prostitute. Some are drunks, maniacs, violent men. If they were dissatisfied, they could be very cruel. She showed me her body which was covered with bruises and marks such as those made by cigarette burns. She told me how one day a man had demanded that she dance. She refused since she did not know how to dance. He became very angry and started to attack her. Fortunately, neighbours heard and appeared. Alarmed, the man left some money and ran off. She added that of course, there were others who just wanted to talk for two hours and yet paid very well. But there were not many like that. If she could get a job and earn Rs 200 she would take it. She begged me to find suitable work for her. As I stood up to go, all of them asked if there was a way to prevent their children's lives from being destroyed as theirs have been.

These are the stories of four "fallen" women. It is very difficult to compute the precise number of prostitutes who work in Calcutta. From pieces of information gleaned from houses in various areas of the city, one may estimate that there are about 10,000. "Call girls", that is, those who earn a large part of their income from prostitution but who keep work life and family life distinctly apart, do not form a significant proportion of the total number.

### Poverty And Debt

A large number of prostitutes come



from market villages. They come to Calcutta because of poverty. Other reasons given include inconsequential disagreements, the lost honour of the family, widowhood and various social inequalities. There were girls from all classes and castes. Many of the women think that they would make a monthly profit and become independent. In fact, the opposite is true. Only a handful of women manage to break even. Most women remain permanently engulfed in debt. A breakdown of the daily expenditure of a north Calcutta prostitute is given below, and one can see how the entanglement in debt arises. Her daily earning is Rs 40.

Rent	Rs 10
Lighting and fan	Rs 2
Pimp	Rs 10
Servant	Rs 2
Food for herself and servant	Rs 10
Miscellaneous	Rs 2
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	Rs 36

So only Rs 4 is left after these expenses are met. This money goes toward meeting the cost of clothes, toiletries, liquor, surgeon's fees which are a major expense, and various contributions such as *puja* expenses which, if not paid, would lead to social ostracism. Clearly, not all these can be met when one remembers that the daily earnings are not fixed but fluctuate. The women are forced to go to the moneylender.

Many women have to pay a high rate of interest, about 10 paise a day. In addition, goods have to be mortgaged to the landlady, the eating house or the doctor. Most of the women are illiterate and cannot even sign their names. Often, they put their thumb mark on a document for Rs 200 when they get only Rs 100. Frequently, in an effort to establish a regular clientele they fall into the hands of a pimp and have to pay him regularly.

The women are often exploited by the local doctors or those from outside the neighbourhood if there is no local doctor. Even if a woman is seriously ill, the doctor will administer a white medicine which is much cheaper than penicillin. Hotel owners and businessmen also make handsome profits by hiring rooms to the women. Not all the clients keep to the bargain struck.

### For The Sins Of Others

Generally, the women regard their work as sinful and as a result, are very religious. Almost every day, they give money for the performance of a *puja* or to a temple.

Around the age of 40, health usually breaks down and they are attacked by serious illness. Some continue to earn their living as cooks and servants in private houses or in cheap hotels. Some go to Nawadip or Brindaban where, if they chant the name of Hari continuously, they can eat twice a day. Some become beggars. Suicide is another alternative which is very prevalent. □

