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From The Hills Of Purola To The Brothels Of Delhi

We reproduce here a condensed version of a study done by an IAS officer who was posted in the Uttarkashi region. He has made a sincere attempt to study and to understand the conditions wherein people live in this area, and the forces that facilitate the recruitment of women into prostitution. This kind of work is rarely undertaken by bureaucrats. He has put together valuable information and the thrust of his analysis is that landlessness and economic wretchedness of certain communities are important causes for women being sold into prostitution. Yet he also makes several self contradictory statements which do not in any way flow out of the facts but rather betray the prejudices of the author. For instance, he says that since "government, its laws and regulations are visible only in shadowy forms ...Government has almost no impact on society...it is not difficult to understand how women are taken down to the plains for prostitution." This implication that a more visible government would be effective in stopping prostitution is contradicted not only by the fact that these women are brought down to the capital city which is the seat of government, but also by the author's own admission that local administrators and forest officers are active participants in the trade. Similarly, he calls bride price "absurd" Says that "the system of polyandry is in direct opposition to the ideal of the Hindu wife" "and suggests that this is in part responsible for easy acceptance of prostitution. From five husbands to six or seven other men is not a difficult transition." Such statements betray upper caste prejudice, since bride price is no more absurd than is dowry, and prostitution has existed and does exist in societies where polygamous or monogamous marriage is the norm. Since such statements seemed to confuse the issue, we left them out in the interests of clarity.

OF all the blocks in Uttarkashi district, Purola is the worst afflicted by trafficking in women. It is our endeavour to trace the circumstances which lead to a woman being carried from the green fields of Purola to, the brothels in the plains below.

Purola is part of the ancient princely state of Tehri Garhwal. Almost the entire Purola region is policed by patwaris. These patwaris form the revenue police and rule over the interior villages with absolute authority. In this paper I seek to show how the trade in women is inextricably linked to the problems of bonded labour and rural indebtedness, particularly among the harijan community.

Origins Of The Traffic

It is important to know the history of trafficking in women in this region. When did it begin, and when did it become as acute as it is today? There are two theories regarding the history of the trade. The first is that held by H. R. Trivedi of the department of social welfare, and the second that held by Bahukhandi, former subdivisional magistrate of Purola.

From his research, Trivedi has come to the conclusion that trafficking in women from this area has been practised since time immemorial. According to him, even in the days of the princes of Tehri Garhwal, women used to go down to the plains for prostitution. At that time, local contractors, timber merchants, officers of the court, landed nobility, and members of the princely family were the

chief promoters of prostitution amongst harijan women.

It must be noted that the princely state of Tehri Garhwal had passed strict laws to end prostitution in this area. From 1935 onwards, any woman engaging in prostitution and any person promoting the trade could be fined upto Rs 500 or receive six years' imprisonment, or be punished with both. Every patwari was required to maintain a comprehensive register regarding the activities of men and women involved in the trade. However, we suggest that these regulations could never have been implemented seriously by an administrative structure consisting, as it did, of princes and feudal lords, many of whom were debauchees.

Bahukhandi did pioneering work in making a survey of the trafficking in

the Purola block. As subdivisional magistrate of the area, he made ceaseless efforts to stop the trade. He was able to recover about 50 women from brothels in the plains, and also to rehabilitate some of them.

According to him, trafficking in women from the Rewain area does not have a long history. At most, it is a phenomenon of the last 60 years. One of his main evidences for this statement is the fact that no such trade is mentioned in Atkinson's Himalayan Gazetteer, written in the middle of the nineteenth century, which is otherwise a compendium of even the most obscure details regarding life and society in Tehri Garhwal.

According to Bahukhandi, the first woman from Purola to leave her village and enter prostitution, did so in the year 1915, when she moved to Shimla, the

summer capital of the British rulers of India. In the thirties, a number of women from the Rewain, Jaunpur and Chakrata regions, went to Lahore to work as prostitutes. In Delhi, I was able to interview one woman from Purola who had worked in a Lahore brothel, and had moved to Delhi after the 1947 partition.

Organised export on a large scale, of girls from the Purola area, started after 1940. This export received greater impetus after 1947, as the area was slowly opened up to a new set of officials and traders. Bahukhandi also points out that the building of roads and markets and the advance of government offices into the Purola block has definitely enhanced the tendency of unscrupulous men to start centres of prostitution around these markets. Such brothels are already in existence in Barkot, Purola and Damta.

What Surveys Show

Our survey in Putola block in 1974 was not a comprehensive one. We were not able to interview more than 12 prostitutes who were contacted in their villages and interviewed in their homes. At best, ours is a sample survey. We may refer to a survey conducted in 1969 to see how conditions changed in the intervening five years.

The 1969 survey reported that 45 women from Purola were known to have gone for prostitution in that year. With the exception of one Rajput girl and one Muslim girl, all the women who had gone to the plains for prostitution were from the harijan community. It was estimated that about 500 families were the victims of this profession on account of their extreme poverty. The survey also revealed that a large number of women did not continue in the profession for more than five years. It was found that 41 percent of the women returned to their homes after remaining in the profession for three years.

This information confirms the findings of our own survey. It is quite clear that most of the women, then as now, were taken into prostitution by

their own husbands, fathers or brothers. The object was to earn freedom for the men or the family from the local moneylender. Ironically, in several cases, men get into debt when they buy their wives, and later, these wives are sent into prostitution to earn their husbands' release. This confirms the hypothesis that prostitution from this region is inextricably linked to the prevalent system of bonded labour.

Our survey also revealed that over 60 percent of women from the Rewain area were working in brothels in Delhi. About 77 agents were engaged in procuring women for prostitution from the Purola region. Only four percent of these agents were upper caste men. The rest were harijans. Though our survey team could not compute figures with

any degree of exactitude, it appeared from our conversations with several local men and women that the percentage of upper caste agents must have been much higher. This is certainly the case today.

While conducting the survey, we quickly realised that it was difficult to find reliable informants. Some men, who we thought were reliable, turned out to have themselves been involved in the trafficking business. A case in this regard had been registered against one of our earlier informants.

How It Happens

With this background, we can try to construct a reasonably accurate picture of the circumstances in which a young harijan woman is taken from her parental home in the village to a brothel



in Delhi or Meerut. What follows might be taken as a plausible typology.

A young girl of 15, belonging to the bajgi caste of landless harijans, is married off to a bajgi man in a neighbouring village. The girl's father receives Rs 2,000 as brideprice from the girl's husband. The husband then takes the girl home to his village, and puts her to work on a strip of land belonging to the local rajput moneylender to whom he is indebted. In a few rare cases, the girl might be put to work on land that her husband himself possesses.

The girl's husband is deeply indebted to the village pradhan or to the *malguzar*. He had incurred this debt because he had to raise Rs 2,000 to buy himself a wife. The rate of interest in this region is around 31 percent. A few years pass in which this harijan couple sinks deeper and deeper into penury. Year after year, they labour on the rajput moneylender's lands only so that they can pay the interest. Eventually, a time is reached when the harijan husband is in an extremely vulnerable position and has no fighting power left.

One fine morning, the moneylender arrives, demands his capital sum, and when it is not forthcoming, puts an idea in the harijan husband's head. It is suggested to the helpless harijan man that if his young bride were to be sent down to the plains for a year or so, she might be able effortlessly to free her family from the debt. The husband agrees. The wife has no say in the matter. Within a few weeks, the whole transaction is arranged. The rajput, accompanied by his harijan serf, takes the girl to a village fair or to some other crowded place, where she is approved of by the agent. Within days of the viewing, the husband and wife, in the company of the agent, travel by bus to Delhi. At the Damta checkpoint, a police constable enters the bus for checking. The girl, who has been well prepared and prompted, declares that she and her husband are proceeding to Hardwar for a dip in the Ganges.

In Delhi, the girl is sold to a brothel keeper for Rs 3,000. The husband is

given Rs 2,000. The agent and the moneylender divide the rest of the money. From time to time, the girl's relatives visit the brothel to collect her earnings. Of course, this depends on the method whereby the sale of the girl has been arranged. In the rare instance in which a girl has tried to withhold her earnings from the family, a case is immediately registered against her by one of her family members, and she is sent back to her village or, even worse, to a Nari Niketan.

Another fairly common modus operandi in the Purola block is as follows. A rajput man goes to a poor harijan family, and marries a daughter,



paying a brideprice of Rs 1,500. He then goes to two other harijan families and contracts two more marriages after paying the brideprice. The parents who, in any case, have no fighting power, feel that they have legally married off their daughters. The rajput takes his three wives to Delhi, after keeping them in his house for a short while. He sells all the girls to brothels and returns home, richer by about Rs 5,000.

Demonstration Effect ?

In some cases, Delhi brothel keepers use women from Purola, who are already in the prostitution trade, to entice their sisters or cousins to the brothels. Sometimes, this is done by

what has been termed the demonstration effect. Women from the brothels are sent home for a vacation. They are sometimes accompanied by an agent who hovers in the background.

These city returned women now dress up in clean, colourful clothes. They wake up late, long after their sisters have begun their daily chores.

They spend the days talking about the pleasures of city life. In the evenings, they stand everyone to liquor and then insist on cooking a goat. All this is done at their own expense. After a few days of merrymaking, these women manage to convince a few village women to leave their hard drudgery behind, and to accompany them to Delhi on a short visit.

A very interesting aspect of this demonstration effect is that in certain villages, it has got the pandit and rajput communities very worried. In the vicinity of Thaddiyar village a young rajput girl left her home, saying that she was tired of the daily drudgery. Thus, in some villages at least, our team encountered elders of the upper castes who were utterly horrorstricken at the prospect of their own wives and daughters deserting them for the "pleasure" of city life.

Poverty The Cause

Though the *devdasi* system does not exist in the Purola region, there are several castes of harijans whose only profession is based on the worship of the deity. The bajgi caste performs the job of playing music to the glory of the *devta*, and is also closely connected with temple ritual. My visit to Handol revealed a whole bajgi village in which all 13 households were involved in prostitution. The one household which was not involved was that of the pandit who is the guardian of the famous temple of the Mahasu Devta.

A thorough study of the entire vicious circle which permits trafficking in women from the Purola block, reveals that the chief factor perpetuating prostitution among harijan women is their utter poverty. The families of these

women are mostly landless. In 75 percent cases, the men of the family are bonded for life to an upper caste moneylender. The father, the brother and the husband of almost any harijan woman, work on the land of a rajput moneylender. There is complete economic dependence on the landlord.

Harijan families are invariably in debt to upper caste rural gentry. It cannot be enough emphasised that the economic structure of the village does not permit the harijans any position except the very lowest. The central factor in this circle of vice is that the harijans do not possess land. Without land, they are totally defenceless.

It must also be mentioned that centuries of wretchedness have taken the fight out of the harijan family. A harijan family is psychologically so depressed and so uncertain of its own social condition that it makes no attempt to fight prostitution. For such men and women, all issues have resolved themselves into an economic battle for survival. Thus we have to admit that it is a fallacy to accuse these harijans of lacking self respect. If a rare harijan male does want to take a stand in favour of his wife, the sinister shadows of the rajput patwari and, the rajput pradhan take all the fight out of him.

The Social Ethos

Many harijans in Purola village still live in polyandrous families. Hard scrutiny suggests that the harijan man cannot afford the "luxury" of one wife to himself. In contrast, the upper caste men indulge in polygamy whereby they have one wife working in the fields and another keeping home and hearth.

Among harijans, social intercourse between men and women is free and friendly. At fairs and festivals, men and women drink freely and dance arm in arm. Women are not very inhibited in their behaviour with the male sex.

There is almost no social ostracism against a woman who returns from a brothel in the plains. Economic wretchedness has produced a philosophy which refers to prostitution in a casual way as *pesha me jana*, to go

into business.

Some scholars have suggested that harijan women in this area have no real emotional attachment to the husband or to one home. The point to the prevalent ideal of the *sat ghariya*, a term which refers to a woman who has been divorced and remarried seven times, and has gained expertise by crossing seven different thresholds. While it is true that the *choot pratha*, a system of effortless divorce, prevails in region, it is incorrect to say that a system in which divorce is common leads to commercialised prostitution. It has to be emphasised continuously that prostitution stems from the economic structure of a Purola village wherein a harijan family has at best a chance of mere survival on the lowest level possible.

A reference must be made to the very low position of women in the social structure of this region. It is true that because of their ability to labour

ceaselessly, both in the fields and at home, women are an economic entity, and have a sellers' market. Yet they have no say in deciding their future. Once they are bought or sold, they work obediently for their master. Thus it has become accepted social practice for a harijan family to send women into prostitution whenever there is economic hardship.

In some areas, a study team previous to ours noticed the peculiar phenomenon whereby industrialisation, having dislodged a few harijan families from their traditional occupational pattern, led them into bonded labour and eventually into prostitution of the women. In some caes, while a lohar or blacksmith had suffered because of Tata, a chamar or tanner had been displaced by Bata. This is true only in areas around the new Purola road.

Powerful Men

Harijan women are often taken into prostitution by upper class men who



form a powerful rural interest group in the area. Our team came across a couple of cases in which well placed, upper caste men, using their caste as a respectable facade, prostituted harijan women and lived on their earnings.

One of these men, a pandit by caste, and also the sarpanch of Kuan village on the DamtaNaugaon Road, has been controlling a scheduled caste girl for the last 15 years. He has sold her into prostitution on four separate occasions. Each time, he collects the brideprice from the man to whom he sells her. The transaction is called a marriage. Another such man is a teacher in the college at Purola. The station house officer of Barkot told us that on July 27, 1974, this teacher took a 27 year old harijan woman via Dehradun to Delhi. This woman had already worked in a Meerut brothel for five years but had saved enough money to come back home, where she had been trying to adjust for the last two years. This teacher had then enticed her back into prostitution. A trip to Thaddiyar revealed another case of a local school teacher being involved in such trafficking.

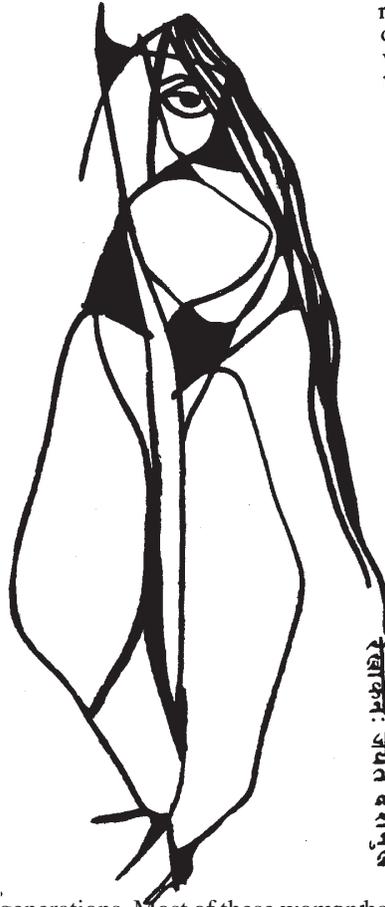
Since 88 percent of the total land area of Purola block is under forests, the forest department here is a very powerful force. At Thaddiyar we came across local forest officials who have settled a few poor harijan families on forest land. The daughters of these families are used for prostitution by the forest department of this region.

It must be mentioned that the large scale trafficking in women of Purola is the outcome of a long process whereby the methods of operation of brothel keepers and their agents from Delhi, Meerut, Saharanpur, Muzaffarpur and Dehradun, have become more effective and sophisticated. Thus, despite better awareness of the problem today, trafficking is on the increase.

Interviews In Delhi

We were able to accompany Kiran Bedi, police officer, on a raid at GB Road, Delhi. We were able to interview nine prostitutes from the Purola Rajgarhi

area. All these women were of the lohar, bajgi and mistri subcastes of the harijan community. Five of them said that their husbands had sold them into prostitution, because of the helpless indebtedness of the family. Three of the women belonged to families which have been in bonded labour for the last three



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generations. Most of these women had been in prostitution well over five years. They had no intention of returning to their villages.

One 22 year old girl of Garh village had been kidnapped and brought to Delhi. At the age of 17, she was dragged from under the eyes of her impoverished mother. She said there was no going back for her.

Another woman, aged 35, was sold by her husband, and now has four children. Her only desire is to remove her children from the brothel. This sentiment is shared by all the prostitutes who have children. Some of them have admitted their children in a government run institution, and send

them maintenance money.

Six of the women interviewed said that the patwari had been aware that they were being taken to the plains for prostitution. One woman said that it was a patwari who came to the brothel to collect her earnings, and to deliver them to her family in the village.

One old woman who was originally sold into prostitution in Lahore before the second world war, and has been working in Delhi since 1947, told us plainly that nothing would help, to stop prostitution,

According to her, police raids, checkpoints on the borders of Purola, Nari Niketans and widow pensions are all just part of the game. She was convinced that only control over land can bring freedom for women.

Interviews In Villages

I am giving here five case histories of women interviewed in the villages. Many of the details were revealed because of the persistence of my colleague, Ms Firoza Dastur, who trekked to the villages to interview these women in their homes.

One 35 year old woman of the harijan community in Hudoli village, has been through three miserable marriages and five years of prostitution in a Delhi brothel. She was sold to the brothel by her first husband. Her second husband, also a harijan, died three years after marrying her, and she had to return to the brothel. Her third husband, a rajput, kept her in Dehradun. Finally, a Punjabi khatri bought her from her third husband. She married the khatri with whom she is now living on the fringes of poverty.

She described the inhuman conditions under which prostitutes in Delhi live and work. Their workday begins at 6 a.m. and ends at 1 a.m., with periods of eating and sleeping in between. They are never given more than Rs 10 or 20 out of their earnings which are all kept by the brothel keeper. They are rarely allowed out of the brothel alone. All this is to ensure that they cannot run away. This woman emphatically stated that no one ever

goes into the profession of prostitution unless she is duped or forced into it.

Another 22 year old woman had worked in a Delhi brothel for three years. She was taken to Delhi by her husband who promised her medical treatment there. Since they did not have money to pay the doctor's fees, she was admitted to a brothel to earn money for her treatment. Her husband and mother-in-law used to visit her to collect her earnings. She has now returned to her home, and thinks of her days in Delhi with horror. She says that no one in the village has time for social ostracism. No one taunted her for her past. She was not able to bring anything with her from the brothel.

She was rescued in a raid, and came home in the clothes she had on. Her object in going to the brothel was defeated, since she was not cured of her illness. When questioned about the possibility of her having lured other girls into the trade, she looked at the team angrily and declared that death is better than the life of a prostitute.

The women of the lohar caste in village Kantari were sold into prostitution by their brother-in-law, who also sold his wife in the same manner. One of them said she was 15, but she looked a couple of years younger. At the age of 13, she was duped by her brother-in-law, and taken to a Delhi brothel. He kept every penny she earned. She was later taken to Meerut



and finally to Saharanpur, where she was rescued during a raid. When she was found missing, her father had tried to locate her. He reported the case to the patwari, who was a rajput, as was her brother-in-law. So the girl's father was soundly beaten up for reporting the disappearance of his daughter.

The other woman bought from her husband and sold into prostitution by

this same man, was also rescued during the raid in Saharanpur. Though she had worked for two years, she was unable to collect any money, as her brother-in-law used to claim all her earnings. She is amenable to the idea of learning sewing and tailoring, but says she will never contemplate another man, not even for marriage.

Police Rape in Ranchi

ON January 21, 1984, three girls aged between 14 and 15 were gang raped by four policemen in the Kantatoli police station at Ranchi. An eye witness reports that the girls, Jalmay Elizabeth Ekka, Urmil Mehto and Karuna Tirki, were picked up by two policemen from the Kantatoli square and taken to the police station. On January 24, Jalmay set herself on fire. She was taken to the Sadar hospital where she died. A big crowd collected, the case was taken up by the local people and by some

political organisations. A demonstration was staged at the local court, to demand punishment of the guilty policemen. A memorandum was handed over to the district magistrate. The inspector general of police met the delegates. He promised to get the policemen transferred.

Is mere transfer sufficient punishment for such a crime? How is it that no statement was taken from Jalmay while she was in hospital. Why were the girls medically examined only

48 hours after the rape? It is clear that the police are trying to distort the facts and suppress the case. The police are now saying that the girls were prostitutes. The local people however say that the girls lived in an area where poverty is so stark that the word "prostitution" has no meaning. Sexual exploitation is part of daily life.

On January 30, students of the Xavier Social Service Institute demonstrated to demand a judicial enquiry into the case.

C.A.Kumar
(translated from Hindi)