

BROTHER AND BORN AND BRED



Center for Advocacy on Stigma and Marginalization (CASAM)

Brothel Born and Bred:

Children of Sex Workers Speak
Monograph Series 3.

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Sampada Gramin Mahila Sanstha [SANGRAM]

Arohan, Ghanshyam Nagar,
Madhavnagar Road,
Sangli – 416416, Maharashtra, India
Tel: +91-233-2312191 / 2311644
E.mail: sangram.vamp@gmail.com
www.sangram.org



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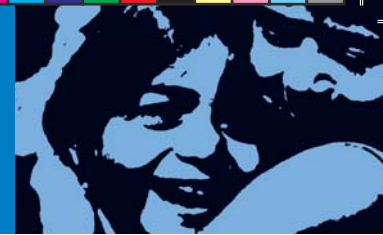
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Brothel Born and Bred: Children of Sex Workers Speak

The children of female sex workers inhabit two separate worlds. “Your mother is bad. The company she keeps is bad. Her behaviour is bad”: this is the child’s first world; while the other is: “My Mother”. When children step out of their home, one world begins; when they return home it is the other; the conflict between these two worlds traumatises the children.

This dichotomy has many consequences, including a high school drop-out rate and consuming intoxicants at an early age. Moreover, these children are forced to resort to falsehoods when dealing with the rest of society, in the process denying the history of their own lives.

What is the approach of society in dealing with children from such a context? Society says that these children should be kept away from their mothers, thus resulting in them feeling increasingly abandoned. Besides intense loneliness, the impact is both physical and psychological.

When Sangram began working among sex workers, it also became necessary to address the problems of these children who lived in such a divided mental universe. Theirs was a strange situation. Deeply troubled, they cursed their mothers, even beat them at times. But underlying this aggressiveness was one major trait – self-destructiveness.

Much time was devoted to understanding these young people. The women in business – who are also mothers – often try to purchase the love of their own children. The converse is that the children are violent, and sometimes even threaten to kill their mothers, and a mother might herself ask the police to arrest her child, frustrated by his waywardness. Spoilt by attempts to purchase their love, the children are more often than not headed towards delinquency.

When working with the women, we began with the standard approach of telling them that they were making a mistake. But in attempting to unravel the complex reality, we then tried to understand the problems faced by these children, many of whom were accused in criminal cases. Indeed, charge sheets had been filed against quite a few. Clearly they were trapped in a circle of crime. But this was not their fault. Even before they were fully aware of the reality surrounding them, ‘respectable’ people had made them their pawns. As they began to understand their situation, they changed. We kindled awareness among these children: “Who is a mother? What is her role in your life? What is life? What is our role as children?” We decided to meet the children once a week. As our conversations continued, positive changes were visible.

The biggest problem these children faced was their inability to openly assert their identity. The inability to openly say, “This is my mother”; the inability to take their mothers to the doctor when they fell ill because the doctor would ask innumerable questions; the inability to take their mothers to their school day functions; the inability to take their friends home with them. Alongside, the agony of an unacknowledged father was an ever-present issue. Likewise, the deep sense of alienation: “What is to be done about a society that refuses to listen to what I have to say?” A radical change in their thought processes began with questioning the society that was rife with hypocrisy and double standards. As such, we began a parallel education, right from the school level: an education that equipped the child to question and deal with society. These children could now tell a society which was trying to rob them of their self-esteem: “We will not let you do this.” These changes are the yield of 15 years of work.

Meena Saraswati Seshu
Director
SANGRAM

BROTHEL BORN AND BRED



My mother is also my father

Kalappa Subhadra Shivasan

My name: Kalappa Subhadra Shivasan. My present name: Kalappa Channappa Shivasan. When the teacher scratched out my mother's name because the kids were teasing me and attached my uncle's name to mine, I began to cry. My mother does everything for me. Then why not have her name? My mother is also my father.

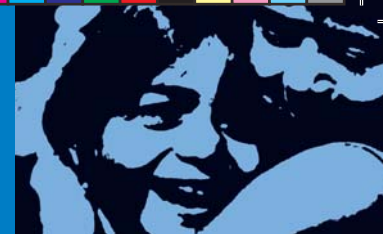
Kalappa Subhadra Shivasan. Education only till Class 7. The class teacher that year scratched out my mother's name and substituted my uncle's. For the present my full name is Kalappa Channappa Shivasan. I am the son of a prostitute. Because she is not educated, she would be hauled up and told to remove me from the school. Mother would quarrel with the teacher each time. "This is my son. I have given birth to him." One day the headmaster tried to explain: "Your son is smart. But his friends always ask him whether or not he has a father: 'Why do you use your mother's name?' Due to this taunting, he is unable to concentrate on his studies, he gets poor marks. He also bunks school a lot." Hearing all this, Mother decided that something had to be done.

My mother disclosed this to my maternal aunt and her husband in Ichalkaranji. They decided to affix my uncle's name to mine. Uncle came to school and met the headmaster and my mother's name was erased from the school register and my uncle's name substituted. After that, my name became Kalappa Channappa

Shivasan. I cried a lot at the time; I could not control my sorrow. My mother slogs so hard and looks after and educates me – yet they had scratched out her name and written somebody else's. Only then did I get to know that he was my uncle. Earlier my mother had never taken me to her town and introduced me to our relatives. Now I learnt that these were my uncles and aunts. My uncle agreed to bestow his name on me because he had no children of his own. But he extracted several benefits from lending me his name. He would come home often and take money from my mother.

After my name was changed, I stopped being friends with the kids in school. It was due to them that my mother's name had been removed and another name substituted. Earlier, I spent my mother's money on treats for my friends. They liked those treats well enough, but they didn't like my mother's name to follow mine. From that day onwards, I have not had a single close friend in school. My friends were children like me from our lane. But we rarely played together since I would have to





study after returning from school. Besides, the women in the neighbourhood would take us to the movies; I spent a lot of time watching movies

Children who have a mother as well as a father give more importance to their fathers and do not take any important decision without them. The father decides everything: which school you should be enrolled in; how the household budget is to be managed; what food should be cooked at home. But the one who does the actual cooking is the mother. Should not one ask her what she likes? If my mother falls sick, she goes immediately to the hospital for her treatment. She can select a good clinic. But with “ordinary” women it is usually not like this. The woman waits along with her illness till her husband returns. Because she does not have any money; and if she does, she does not have the power to decide which clinic to go to. That will be decided by the husband.

But in our family, Mother does everything; she has no fear of or pressure from anybody else. She makes all the decisions, plans everything. That's why my mother is foremost for me. Society does not accept this. But my question is that if doing this business¹ were bad, my mother would not have accepted this profession. Don't you also select a profession to run your households, to meet your daily needs? Then why is it that we don't have the same rights as you do? The police catch us and take us away as if some big crime has been committed. But the police do not understand that the man who goes to a woman does so of his own free will, and the woman accepts him of her own free will. If this transaction is taking place with the consent of both parties, why this interference? Does this transaction involve robbery or dacoity, murder, pick-pocketing, fraud or force? When men come, they select a partner and if only for a short while the two of them make love to each other. Then why do the police catch our women and take them away? Then they extract money from

them, curse and abuse them, beat them up – all without any reason. Tell me, who is the thief? You or us?

People from this very society have shops in our lane – they sell clothes and make a lot of money. There are rickshaws; when these people come to the lane they respectfully call the women elder sister or aunt. When they take their money and step out of the lane they call them whores and abuse them – but they continue to come to the lane to get money.

For any profession, any job, there is a particular style of dress. Similarly there is a mode of behaviour and speech related to that type of work. For example:

- Lawyers – Black coat, necktie
- Police – Khaki uniform, belt, cap, boots
- Servant – Ordinary clothes
- Factory worker – The uniform of that company
- Doctor – White clothes, doctor's coat

Everybody has a form of dress depending upon the work they do. Then what is the problem if our women use lipstick, flowers, make-up, sarees, dresses, hairstyling techniques etc. for the work they do? A person's occupation can be seen from the clothes.

Then why do you condemn? Why do you taunt?

It was by doing all this that my mother was able to raise me. Educate me. Get me married. Now I have two children; they are studying in an English medium school. My mother brings food for her grandson and granddaughter. Therefore my children don't call her just 'grandmother' but '*khau* (grandmother who brings treats of food) grandmother'. They do not leave their grandmother for a minute. At every turn in my life I see my mother. She is my father too.

¹ 'Doing business' is a common colloquial phrase for prostitution



My mother entered the lane for me

Pratap Surekha Thorat

I was born in Sangli Civil Hospital. At that time our situation was pitiable. Soon, my father began to drink, due to which our relationship with him was limited to a short period of time. Due to my father's death, my mother and I had to face a lot of trouble. I was only four years old when I lost the shelter and support of my father.

In this situation, Mother could not get any work and we were on the streets. We would sleep on the footpath. In the morning Mother would give me tea and bread from the cart and then send me off to wander with her women friends or to play with their children. At that time I did not have any inkling about what my mother did for a living.

As I grew older, my mother's worries about my future increased. She wanted to make me an engineer. She began to save up money for that. Gradually, her income increased, and we took up a rented room. She enrolled me in school, and I began to do well.

I was in Class 5. When Mother told me she had got a job in Sangram, I was very happy. I asked my mother what work she would do in this organisation. When she told me that she had to educate people about HIV, I really felt good - my mother tells people about horrible diseases and saves their lives. I was proud of her.

One day when I was studying, Mother told me that there was something wrong with her blood. I was very sad when I heard this. But I thought if I myself lost courage, who would bolster my mother? Mother cried all the time. She was distraught not because of her own illness but because of anxiety about her

children. She was worried sick, but I reassured her.

I passed Class 10 with the first rank in school. The teachers held a felicitation ceremony for me; my name appeared in the papers. My mother had dreamt that my name would appear in the papers after coming first in Class 10. I had fulfilled this wish, and that day tears of joy welled up in her eyes. Then, my mother wanted to enrol me in the science stream, but due to money problems, Mother enrolled me in the night college in the commerce stream. But when Madam (from Sangram) learnt of this, she enrolled me for a diploma and even paid the fees.

When I learnt that Mother was a sex worker, I did not feel sad about that but only about the fact that Mother had to take that path for my sake. Mother's parents were responsible for this, because they never loved my mother - when she was just five years old they enrolled her in a boarding school. When she came home for the holidays, they would get her to do the housework. They never treated her like their own daughter. When she got married and visited her parents with my father they threw her out of the house. My maternal uncles - her own brothers - also turned their faces away. Mother came to Sangli in such circumstances. And after my father's death she had to take this path to look after me.

Such is my mother - living only for my happiness. I pray to God that I get such a mother in each of my future lives. That's all. I feel like talking about my mother. I have a lot to write about her but it is such that is better not to put it down on paper. Because the love one feels for one's mother is in the mind; it cannot be shown to anybody else.





My little doctor

Laxmi Shinde

I am a prostitute, but I was keen on becoming a mother. I had my first daughter in 1992. I was a seasoned prostitute, but who knows what happened when I put my baby to my breast to feed her. Some big change happened inside my head. Till then my husband was foremost for me, but now my child was the most important soul. I changed. I arranged for doctors and lawyers for the baby. I began to save up money ... But this happiness did not last long. The baby died.

I have two daughters and two sons today, but I have not given birth to them. It is they who gave me a lot. I love Karishma a lot. She is not my daughter, but my trusted friend. She is 10 years old. She is in Class 5. She does badly in her studies, and does not participate in competitions. But then how much time do I give her?

I kept her with my sister. Now she has got third rank in her class. I had many vices, but she saved me. She is like a guru to me. I am going to teach her English. I am HIV-positive, but this little one is my doctor and my medicine.



What a life my mother led!

Umesh Kale

Our mother was living in Gokulnagar with a Muslim man. Mother would tell us to call him Papa. But as soon as I spoke to him, he would beat me up. Our grandmother enrolled my brother and me in school. When enrolling us she was totally drunk. In the space for my father's name, she entered the name of the Muslim. The teacher would ask, "If the father's name is Muslim, there how are you a Hindu Mahar?" What could I say?

From the time I was born till the age of five I lived with my grandmother. I came from Karnataka to Sangli for my schooling. At that time Mother was living with a man. Mother asked us to call him Papa. But why should I? I would not even speak to him. In front of my mother and other people I would refer to him by name. He would get very angry. Because I was dark he would call me 'Darkie'. He favoured my brother and sister. And the two of them would call him Papa. I would get very angry with him. Later he began to abuse me.

But our mother took a house for us in a new locality. She felt that we should not live in Gokulnagar, where we could pick up bad habits. All our relatives from our village (uncles, aunts, everybody) lived here. They used to speak well of us. After a day or two, when Mother would return to town, she would buy provisions, utensils, butter, clothes, etc, and give all this to them. It was for this reason that these people would frequently come to Sangli and display a lot of love when Mother visited the village with us. When we went there, we would take foodstuff for them. When we reached there they would give Mother an oil bath and massage her feet. When we left, Mother would give them money.

My grandmother came to the school to enrol me and my brother. She used to drink. When entering my full name in the school, she used the Muslim man's name as my father's name, but used my maternal uncle's name for my brother and sister. This was a terrible thing - I didn't like it one bit. Whenever they would ask me my full name in school, I would give only my name. When the teacher would ask my father's name and I replied, he would say, "But this is a Muslim's name. Then how is your caste Mahar?" Then I would say, "Sir, at the time of entering the name, this name was entered by mistake." When giving our address we would mention Gokulnagar. We would only say that we lived in a new settlement. Because once I said Gokulnagar, everybody would know that my mother did business there and the boys would tease me. So I hid it all, in the fear that they would say something. When we returned home after school, that man would not let us go out to play. He would only make us study. Mother would keep us with that man and go to Gokulnagar. Then that man would make me study without giving me dinner. He would beat me a lot. After studies, he would give us dinner and get us to sleep. He would make us draw the sheet up over our faces. He would not let us watch TV. I would not say anything after Mother returned; if I did, he would beat me. On holidays





he would tell me to study. Then he would lock the house with me inside and go out.

My grandmother was drinking a lot, falling down all over the place. After some time she fell sick and died; we then sold the house in the new settlement and came to live in Gokulnagar. I would go to school from there. My mother and that man (mother's *malak*²) were playing cards. When we returned from school she would give each of us five rupees and tell us to go to the restaurant and eat something. We would do as Mother told us. We did not know when their card games would end. Sometimes they would play through the night, sometimes they would finish at two a.m. My mother would play in these games with borrowed money. But she never let us face any difficulties though the debts kept mounting. Then Mother thought that it is better not to keep us here, better to keep us far away. A customer was coming to our house during that time. He said, "There is a good boarding school in our village. Enrol them there."

Our mother went and saw the boarding and enrolled me and my brother there. I did not want to stay there. We were crying and pleading with Mother but she said that we must study there and did not take us back with her. She took loans for us and made us study there. We got used to the boarding school. All the children lived together.

In the boarding school there was a large chart listing all the kids' names. This chart was in the hall. Our names were on this chart. Each of us bore a different father's name. Then all the children began to tease us. When Mother would come to the boarding, I would tell her not to chew tobacco. After this, Mother stopped chewing tobacco altogether. She would not come with her *pallu* draped over her head as women traditionally do. Sometimes that man would also come. After he left the children would ask me who he was, and I would tell them he was my father. The man who had got us admitted to the boarding school was employed as a teacher there. He used to visit our house as a customer. When we would bump into him, he would ask us, "Is there any new girl in the alley?" We would be very angry. We would say that we don't know anything, and we would go

away. That time I used to feel very bad. The thought that doing business is very bad would come into my mind. I wrote my Class 10 examination. I failed and returned home.

When Mother asked me to start work, and took me to Sangram, but they did not give me work and insisted that I go to school. Mother began to fall sick. Then her blood test was done. Mother said, "I have got HIV. I don't know when I will die. So you will have to look after your brother and sister." Mother was thinking a lot. That man was silent. Now relatives and friends from home had stopped visiting us.

I was the eldest of three siblings. Then all the women got together and convinced Sangram to give me a job in the organisation. The condition was that I go to night school alongside the job. I was 16 years old when I started work. I was the youngest in the organisation. There was nobody to make lunch for me to take when I went to work. Mother was very sick. Even then she would somehow get up and pack lunch for me. My sister was very small. I would have to wash the utensils and clothes myself. The neighbours would help me out. Then my great-aunt came and began to look after us. She started packing lunch for me. She also looked after Mother. Mother became very sick. The women in the alley started a fund and gave the money to Mother. When her *malak* began to quarrel, they turned him out of the alley. Mother would babble in her 'sickness'. Blabbering away, she died one day. None of her relatives bothered to visit us.

I passed Class 10. Mother had left some debts, which I am now repaying from my salary. I have to run the household now. The entire responsibility is mine. I don't want any of this, but who do my brother and sister have besides me? Now I have learnt that without Mother there is nothing. From this I realised how much effort Mother had made. She slogged doing business so as to bring us to this point. Nobody can take Mother's place.

Now in college I tell people, "I live in Gokulnagar." I tell them my exact address. The organisation supports me a lot. I am preparing for my Class 12 exam. Nobody can take Mother's place. I have learnt this only now.

²Malak (owner) is an expression often used to describe a man with whom a woman in prostitution has a long-standing relationship. Even husbands are often so described in patriarchal terms.



Sahib, why won't a mother do instead of a father?

Arjun Ananda Pujari

My mother is a sex worker. I have an elder sister. When I was small, my mother went to enrol me in school. Then in the school they asked my mother for my father's name. At that time, my mother brought a man along and entered his name as the father – because we don't have a father. My mother is also my father.

Mother used to suffer a lot, but she kept me and my sister in a hostel. When I remembered Mother, I would feel like crying. My sister would try to console me, but I could not rest without Mother. I would run away. When I started school and the teachers would ask us to call our parents to the school to meet them, I would tell Mother. If Mother didn't have the time, I would take Grandma. At that time, many people in Karad knew Mother. How to take her to school was becoming a big issue.

The children in school would ask me, "What does your father do? Where do you live?" I would keep quiet.

Studying hard in school, I finally passed Class 10. Till then if I faced any problems in school I would tell Mother. She is a sex worker. It is only now that I understand the difficulties she must have faced. My mother said, "You finish Class 10. Nobody in our family has done this. You must do it." I would get all school-related expenses from Mother. She would not let me lack for anything in school. She began to work in the organisation VAMP. Because of VAMP, my mother learnt to speak well. Now if anybody asks me, I just say, "My mother works in the organisation VAMP."

Before the Class 10 examination, my mother and maternal uncle came and met the teacher. They asked whether I was doing well in my studies. I passed Class 10. After passing, I filled the

³Local revenue official

⁴Girls dedicated to prostitution in childhood as part of a religious tradition are called devadasis.

form for college admission; but the college told me to apply for a scholarship as a Backward Class student.

I took my maternal uncle with me to the *talathi*³. When preparing the certificates, seeing the name on my declaration, the *talathi* asked me for my father's full name. When I was small my mother had entered my name as Ananda Pujari in school. But how was he to know my father's name? He told the *talathi*, "My sister is a *devadasi*⁴. This is the maternal uncle's name. Must we write his father's name?" Then the *talathi* left the space blank and gave us incomplete copies of the certificate. I asked the *talathi* why I could not get a certificate with my mother's name. He said you don't get it that way. You must put the father's name.

After this experience, with a friend's help, I met the magistrate. He also asked me what my parents do. You get a caste certificate on the father's name. Then I told him that my mother is a *devadasi*. Then he said, "Till now there is no such provision in our department to give the certificate in a woman's or *devadasi*'s name. For that you need a year-old domicile certificate. I said,

"We have come from Karnataka." To that he said, "Then it is difficult for you to get a certificate." I said that my mother has lived in Karad for the last 30-35 years. "The mother won't do, it has to be the father," said the magistrate.

Where am I to search for my father? When I find him, what if he belongs to a different caste? What about my college? Even in the field of education, they don't give admission to children of women who do business. He told us to bring the caste certificate of any person in Maharashtra with the surname Pujari.

What is my mother to do? She educated me, sent me to college. But what is a boy like me to do in this situation in our society? Whatever anybody may say about her, my mother supported me at every stage. I said I would do a computer course along with college. Mother immediately paid the fees. I am completing the course. I take pocket money from my mother when going to college. Sometimes, she shouts at me while giving money and asks. "What do you do with so much money?" But she anyway gives me the money. For me, my mother is God. She is supreme. Whether I get my certificate or not, I will study further.

BROTHER BORN AND BRED



Home is where Mother is

Mahesh Manji

When I was five, my mother enrolled me in Class 1. I sat in the classroom with my slate and a wire bag. I was very scared. I ran away from school and came home. My mother explained things to me and took me back to school. The teacher asked me, "What is your name?" I said, "My name is Mahesh." Next day I did not feel like going to school. I told my mother that I wouldn't go to school but she would beat me and force me to attend. Five years passed in this manner. I, my mother, my grandmother, sister and brother were all living in the Gokulnagar red-light area.

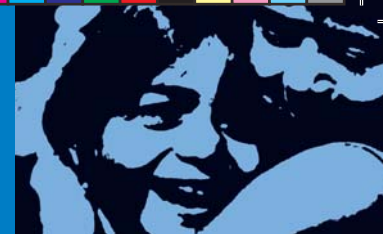
I did not know that my mother did business. I did not even know exactly what doing business meant. I was small, just 10 years old! My friends were also from the alley and lived in the alley. I knew nothing beyond the alley. My elder sister had been enrolled in a hostel. My mother and I would go to visit her. After some time, when I was in Class 7, I began to realise that something strange happens where I live. Men from outside come here, give some money, take a woman, go inside the house and close the door. The same thing would happen with my mother. Now I had begun to understand what they were doing inside the house with the door closed. When there was some problem in school, Sir would say, "Bring your father tomorrow." I could not understand how to bring my father to school. I would go and tell my mother. She would come, then the teacher would ask my mother something and my mother would answer. My friends in school would ask me why my father had not come. So one day I said that my father was dead. After some days they learnt where I lived and what my mother did. Then my friends

stopped talking to me. The thought came into my mind that my mother did something bad. I began to feel distaste for my mother. When anything hurt me, it was because Mother was bad. So I stopped going to school. I studied till Class 7 and did not go to school after that.

Tears came to my eyes when my elder sister and younger sister were also put into prostitution. I began to curse my mother. I did not speak to her for 10-15 days. My brother and I took a room in a slum away from the alley and began to live there. My mother took it to heart that I was not speaking to her. One day my mother was admitted to the clinic. Her condition was serious. I began to feel the lack of my mother. I became very uneasy. I went to the clinic but she would not speak. I began to cry. I thought my mother would die. I wanted my mother. I loved her a lot; it was only then that I understood what a mother means. Without a mother there is nothing. After some days she became well. She began to talk and move around.

I don't know how my mother entered prostitution. I also don't know how my elder sister got into it, but I know how my younger sister did. She had been married to a boy in a village in Karnataka. Her mother-in-law would beat her a lot. Her husband would beat her. Sometimes they would not give her any food; so my sister ran away and came home. After a year her husband married again, and so my sister was brought into prostitution. My mother entered prostitution for me and my sisters. If my mother had not prostituted herself at that time, we would all have been out on the streets.





Yes, I am the daughter of a prostitute!

Savita Santosh Awale

My marriage has been a success. I face no trouble from anybody. So I have been happy before and after marriage. With my maternal aunt's blessing, my household is happy.

Yes, I am a prostitute's daughter. I studied in primary school. My mother does business. The teachers in school asked me, "What does your father do" Without thinking, I answered, "She is a prostitute." The teacher said, "Don't you feel anything when you say this?" I said, "I have only told the truth." My mother died when I was in Class 6. But we three siblings never felt that our mother was dead, because my maternal aunt and grandmother looked after us just as my mother did. My aunt was also doing business. That is, she too became a prostitute. She never let us feel the lack of a mother.

In our neighbourhood and in society, nobody ever said that these are the children of a prostitute. If somebody asked us about it when we went out, we were not scared to tell them. We told them straight that our mother was a prostitute. They called us and made enquiries about us. My maternal aunt was my second mother. My aunt loved us more than she loved her own children. I never felt a sense of being different from others in society or

among our relatives. So I am proud and confident – I don't feel any shame to say that my mother is a prostitute.

When I came of age, I made one mistake – I got into a love 'affair'. I thought that if I raised the issue of my marriage at home, I would meet with a refusal. This had happened already. My grandmother was opposing my marriage, because she felt that I was the daughter of a prostitute. They will harass my granddaughter, they will send her back home, and she will also have to do business," she thought. My aunt cleared her misapprehensions. She told the prospective in-laws straight away, "Is it my daughter's fault if she was born in a prostitute's house? If this is what you feel, then you will be insulting me. Because she is a girl without a father or mother, I have raised her with more love and care than my own children. Nobody ever made her feel bad about this in society or among our relatives." My prospective father-in-law and mother-in-law heard what she said, and without any misgivings agreed to the marriage.

My wedding took place successfully. Nobody causes me any trouble. So I am happy before and after marriage. With my aunt's blessings, my married life is going well. I still say with pride and confidence that my aunt and mother are prostitutes.



I am proud of my parents

Babita Tarta

My daughter recently told me, “Mummy, the teacher in school has told us to write an essay about our mothers.” Hearing this, without realising it, I slipped back into memories of my childhood. At that time, my mother faced many difficulties in raising me and my siblings. My mother was a prostitute, but I feel that a mother is a mother. From the time I began to understand things, I never looked upon my mother with disappointment. She had courage. She would make us feel that there is nothing improper in what she does.

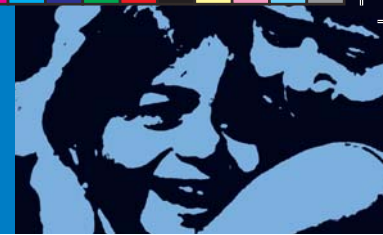
When I was little, we knew nothing about the world. Two brothers and two sisters, I, Mother and Father – this was our family. Father would always support all Mother’s decisions. He worked on a truck; he was always on tour. And in the evening, business would start up in the alley. Because the room was small, there was no place for us to sleep. So Mother would lay out the bedding at the side of the 100-foot road – we would have dinner and then go there to sleep. We would sit there and watch the card game going on nearby. Then we began to run a *paan* shop and started some small trading. It would be 1 or 2 a.m. before Mother could sleep. But Mother would tell us not to wake her up – there are five rupees by my head or wrapped in my sari *pallu*⁵, each of you take a rupee and have breakfast at Swami’s restaurant across the road. Then we would wash our faces and clean ourselves up a bit and go and tell Swami, “Hey, Swami, Mother has given us five rupees – give us each a half-plate of

*uppit*⁶ and a half-plate of puffed rice within that amount, else we will tell Mother.” There was a primary school near the alley, a short distance away. The lady from that school came to Mother and said, “Enrol your children in school.” Our mother sent us to school – and then we spent one day in school and four days bunking! Playing, crying, we somehow or the other passed Class 4, and then mother decided to send me and my elder sister to the hostel in Miraj. But my elder sister was very self-willed. She did not agree. I was admitted to the hostel by myself. Mother would come to visit me and give me nice clothes to wear and money to buy things. Then Father bought a rickshaw. Our situation improved a bit but Mother was worried – one room to live in, and the girls were growing up. She would think about this all the time.

One day she said all this to her adopted brother. He too would make good suggestions to her. With money that she had saved,

⁵The end of the sari which is draped over the shoulder.

⁶Savoury porridge made of wheat flour



she purchased one-and-a-half *gunthas*⁷ of land. Who knows what ideas then came into her mind – she sold the rickshaw and began to build a house. She constructed four rooms. Then I did not return to the hostel. And Mother had taken loans which had to be repaid.

I was in Class 7 when Mother and Father put me to work in a *paan* shop. I would sit at the shop from 7-10 a.m. then go to school from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m., then sit at the shop again from 7 p.m. till midnight. Mother would sit on a chair opposite me. I would fall asleep in the shop. Father would get me a cup of tea and say, “Don’t fall asleep; if you do, how will we manage?” Then as the loans were repaid, Mother reduced my work of minding the shop. And I started living in the newly constructed house. Mother had hired a woman to look after us. She would visit us every 2-3 days and bring lots of things with her. Mother enrolled us all in good schools but never came to the schools because she felt that she spent too much time roaming around with the women in the alley. “If people see me, they might say something to my children,” she would think, and would never attend school programmes. If we asked her for money for school, she would not refuse, but she would never come there. Once there was a gathering in school, and my younger sister cried and told my mother that she must come because she was participating in the programme. Mother finally agreed to come. However she did not remove the *sari pallu* covering her face till she got back home. She never came to the school again.

There were frequent quarrels and fights in the earlier alley, so Mother left that alley and rented a room in another one. At that time our household situation began to deteriorate further. I was in Class 10. I failed one subject in Class 10. My elder sister had fallen ill, so she was also in Class 10 with me. Mother decided that there was no point in educating the children further since they had failed. Before that she got to know

Sangram, and Meena Seshu, who would come to the alley to distribute condoms. She gave Mother strength and told her to let the girls study some more. She took me to live with her. My mother gave me birth but Madam supported me and helped me get settled in life. She had three nieces staying with her for their education; she looked after me as if I was one of them. I passed Class 12. I learnt what the world was like while living with her. Madam has a very important place in my life after my Mother and I will never forget this. I did as she told me and passed Class 12 with good marks. My elder sister completed Class 14. My younger sister and one brother too completed Class 10. The youngest boy, though, dropped out of school in Class 8.

My maternal uncle's son had made a decision to marry me. For 2-3 years nobody would visit my in-laws' house. But after I had a daughter, their relatives gradually began to visit. Things were going fairly well. But my daughter was diagnosed with heart trouble. We took her to 6-7 clinics. When I approached Madam she made all the arrangements and got my daughter operated upon in time – she is now 9 years old. In this entire situation, my husband helped me in all possible ways and stood steadfast in my support without worrying about anything. By then, my brother too had started to understand matters and took on the responsibility of the entire household. He helped Mother and got my younger sister married.

Now we all tell Mother that your family is so large, why do you need any relatives? Even though she was herself a prostitute, my mother never tried to push us into prostitution. She would always take our own wishes into account. I always think that it is not Mother's fault that she is like that. She taught us to live well in society. Everybody's mother and father work at some profession or business to raise their children. I think that my mother did the same. I am proud of my mother and father.

⁷A *guntha* is one-fortieth of an acre



Now I will live only for Mother

Vinayak Jawahar Kulkarni

A large family house in the small town of Bagewadi. My mother Lata, father, two uncles, aunt, all lived together there. My mother had passed Class 10, so the entire family used to admire her for her education. She was also everybody's favourite. She would tirelessly do all the housework. Everything was fine. My mother was also content, happy and joyful. But this was not acceptable to fate.

After coming to Sangli from Bagewadi, she first lived in a small room in Shilangan Square next to the red-light area. Where did that woman go after that, why did she bring mother here? What was the benefit to her? I could not figure this out. Days passed. All alone in this strange place! Nobody of her own anywhere nearby. What to do to fill her empty stomach? Will anybody help? In this locality everybody only looks upon women with lust. After many difficulties, Mother had no choice but to accept the profession of a prostitute.

After living like this in Sangli for some years, she had to visit Bagewadi again. The occasion was my birth. I was born in Bagewadi. In Bagewadi they would ask my mother what she did in Sangli. Afraid, Mother kept telling them a false story about a job. When I was 8-10 months old, my mother took me and went back to Sangli. It was not possible for Mother to live in Bagewadi any longer. She wanted to return before the members of the household understood the situation. After a few years, Mother enrolled me in a *balwadi*.⁸ But they refused to admit me there on account of my surname, which was Kulkarni. She wanted to educate me, come what may. In order to do that, she changed my name and entered it as Kamble rather than Kulkarni in the

balwadi. A Christian social organisation helped me a lot in all this. There were facilities to study till Class 7 there. While studying till Class 7, I received a lot of help from this organisation in terms of clothes, books, educational expenses and other things. All my time after school was spent in the red-light area. But I used to prefer the school.

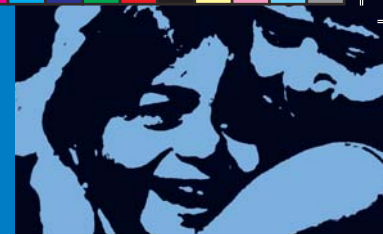
In the holidays, I would go to Bagewadi. After I passed Class 7, Mother was thinking about enrolling me in another school when she received a letter calling her back to Bagewadi. Mother returned with me to Bagewadi. After we returned, there were quarrels with people at home over the place she lived in and her profession. They told her to leave me in Bagewadi for my education. But Mother did not want to live away from me. And they refused to let her stay at home.

Mother had continuously faced problems in her life and now the family members were refusing to let her come home. They also broke off all relations between her and me. She was warned not to return to Bagewadi, and it was as if the sky had fallen upon her head. But I felt that the family should not face any trouble because of me and that it was proper for Mother to come here. One must bear what has to be borne. With this in mind, Mother took me back with her to Sangli, carrying her burden of misery.

While studying I would wonder why I had been born in such a household. Why did I not have the good fortune of a comfortable life like my friends? Why could I not live a life without worries like others do? My mind would be overwhelmed by such questions and I would rush out of the house and while away my time at the

⁸A kindergarten school





square with the other children. I would play with them, share my ideas with them, chat with them, listen to their ideas. I used to be happier among my friends. My friends would also include me in cricket and other games. None of them ever treated me badly. And in their company, I never felt that I was the son of a sex worker. My friends were my satisfaction, my joy. The Ganapati and Navaratri festivals would be celebrated in the square. I would participate actively in the celebrations. I had faith in God only because of my friends. I would always think that one day my situation would change and I too would live with dignity like others. But I never had such thoughts when I was with my friends.

I passed Class 8 and entered Class 9. Everything was going well. The teachers and students in school would always ask me about where I stayed and about my family members, but I was scared to tell them about my family. So I hid the true facts about myself. But one day the teacher grabbed me by my arm and extracted the facts from me in front of all the children. I told the truth. But I felt I had made a mistake by doing so, and so it turned out. Hearing the facts, the teacher hammered me in the classroom in front of all my student friends.

When the teacher, who performs the holy task of dispensing the gift of knowledge, behaved like this, I was very disappointed. I had not expected this from my teacher. I had expected support. But the teacher, who shows hundreds of students the right path, instead put obstacles in my path. My desire to learn vanished. From that day onwards the pull of school weakened. The school which I had always liked began to appear undesirable from that incident onwards. I failed in Class 9 and after some days stopped schooling altogether. Now that I spent a lot of time at home, I could not bear staying there. Unwanted thoughts would come into my mind. Seeing my desire to learn, my mother sent me to study in the village of the landlord of her rented room.

That village was Sabrangi (Taluka Athani, District Belgaum). I was treated like a member of the family there and I felt a sense of belonging. Since he owned farmland, all the family members worked in the fields. Since the position of the household was good, I had no worries. In my free time I too would work in the fields. I became a member of the household. I took admission into

Class 9 in Sabrangi. Finding a suitable environment, I developed a liking for learning. I began to learn. But at the same time, being away from my mother I missed her a lot. It was because of her that I was happily learning here.

I finished Class 10. After that, I began to do any work that I could get in Sangli. I began work in workshops and garages. I also came under the spell of some bad friends, and started consuming tobacco and alcohol. In the midst of all this, one day, under the influence of bad friends, I was dragged into a murder case at Samarth theatre, though I had nothing to do with it. At that time I suffered mental trauma, but who could I tell this to? The police locked me up along with my friends. My mother had got some support from me due to my return; that vanished again for some time. Now Mother had also suffered a mental shock. She could not think straight. Already walking on the path of suffering, facing numerous difficulties, she was confronted by a new problem. . And, when I was in jail, my grandmother died. Grandma's funeral rites had all been completed by the time my mother could get there. She had been given the news very late. Mother did not even get to see Grandma's face. The family members too did not let her enter the house. That day Mother bid her farewell from outside the house and returned to Sangli. Fortunately our landlord, who was like Mother's brother, gave us the house in which we lived. That house was Mother's only support. Days sped by. After 13 months I was acquitted and released from jail. Whatever support I had came from my mother. Because of her, I was declared innocent and released from jail. After that I went back to Sabrangi in Kamataka. While living there, I used to miss Mother very often. I had nobody close to me other than my mother. I wanted to live with her. In that period I decided that I would live with her, find some work, and live in happiness. After nine months I went back to Sangli. After returning, I would often be harassed by the police. They would pick me up at odd hours and take me with them for enquiries. After some days, I got information about Sangram. I began to visit this social work organisation frequently. I also wanted to work there. I got a job with them.

I really got a lot of support and confidence from that organisation. It is difficult to express it in words. I work in that organisation till today and in future I will slog for it.



Neither is Mother bad nor is prostitution

Raju V. Naik

In any case, we kids from the alley have no status in society and do not understand anything of life outside the alley. We used to wander around in the alley itself, indulging in hooliganism. Then we would drink liquor. The kids would have affairs with women. They didn't even respect their own mothers. They would have fun on their mothers' money and would talk badly about their mothers. I too am a prostitute's son, but I could never say that I was a prostitute's son. Right next to the alley was my school, so everybody knew about me. When there were fights, the boys from outside the alley would say vile things. Their mothers too would fight with us and call us the children of whores. I would get very angry, I would wonder – why was I born to this woman? I would feel like running away from home, but where to run to? I was prone to anger, but Mother would pacify me. "See, if they call you a whore's son, behave in such a way that they do not say that." This would get me even more upset.

I started college but did not show even one friend my house. But I would visit my friends' homes. This made me feel upset. I have had so much education, but Mother never let me lack for anything. The other children would bring food from home. But my mother had no time. She would give me ten rupees daily. I would bathe on some days and on some days wouldn't.

I passed Class 10 and Mother was thrilled. She bought me a moped. But when I realised that Mother gave money easily, I got into the habit of lying to extract money from her. I could not understand that I was cheating her, and myself too. Due to this kind of behaviour, I failed Class 12. I left college and began to do whatever work I could get. I would force people to give subscriptions for the Ganapati festival celebrations, and if they protested I would curse and abuse them.

I had a friend named Sarja. He too was the son of a prostitute. One day he told me that there was an organisation called Sangram. "They work on HIV. Will you work with them?" I agreed and went to the organisation. There, we were forced to think about issues like whether a prostitute is good or bad, moral or immoral, about patriarchy and matriarchy, and other similar matters. And then I asked my mother why she entered prostitution. So my mother told me, "When you were born, I didn't have a rupee to put against your forehead. All I had was mother's milk – our situation was that bad. I did this to fill your stomach and my stomach, and to meet our needs." Then I regretted my line of thinking. Now I feel that whether my mother is a prostitute or whatever else, to me she is my mother. She has never caused me pain till now. And she has given me all that I need in life; I am proud of my mother.





The Mother here...and the Mother there

Anita Meenakshi Kamble

My mother is my mother because she gave birth to me. My mother is a prostitute. Earlier that would enrage me, because people used to look with contempt at my mother. They would abuse her. They would ask me, "Why does your mother live in a red-light area?" I would keep quiet, not answer them. I was born in a private clinic. For one year I lived with my mother in the alley. After a year I lived with Mother's *malak* as part of his family because Mother felt that the environment in the alley would influence me adversely. I was in Class 5 when I understood what a prostitute's alley is. I felt bad when people called Mother a prostitute. Presently I live in the house of my second mother. She loves me a lot. She has taught me good habits from the time I was small. She wants me to study a lot. I have three brothers and one sister too. I am the youngest. On my mother's side I have a brother. He is married and lives in the village.

My mother does all the spending on clothes and other items. The expenses for my education are borne by my other mother. Mother works hard for me. She covers the expenses of my aunt's children too. If I want something, I first demand it from the mother there. If she refuses, then I demand it from the mother here. I place similar demands on each of them. When I visit my friends, both the mothers tell me not to stay away too long. If I want to go somewhere, I tell both before going. On school holidays, I come to the mother here; on other days I stay there.

Of late the mother here says that we will go back to the village when I finish my education, but I don't agree. My wish is that

the mother here should come to the mother there and that we should all live together. Anyway, both my mothers visit each other and watch out for the other's welfare. I call my father Bapu. Father and the mother here used to quarrel frequently over his drinking; but I have never seen father quarrel with the mother there. Today he no longer has any vices. If the household there faces a problem the mother here gives monetary help. When there is a big celebration at home, we all come together. I feel very good at such times. When the mother here and my father quarrel, the mother there fetches me from here. At that time, though, I only cry. The mother there says, "Why do you trouble the girl on account of a quarrel between the two of you?" I plead with her. Then the siblings come here and mollify the mother here, and then everything is fine again. My old friends know the mother here as my mother; but I introduce her to new friends as my maternal aunt. The reason for this is that she used to come to the school from the outset. The mother there, though, doesn't even step out of the home. But the mother here takes me out, to the cinema and market, and even to the village.

When I was in Class 7, I was washing the utensils at the home of the mother here. My class teacher was passing by at that time. Seeing him, I was afraid and ran into the house. The whole night I worried about what he would say. Next day I went in fear to school. The teacher asked me, "What were you doing there?" Then I said that my maternal aunt lives there. He said that's okay and didn't say anything further. Even if my mother is considered bad by other people, she is good because she is my mother. I like my mother a lot.



You can't see heaven unless you die

Aarti Muke

I am now studying in the first year of the BBA course. Actually, I faced a lot of difficulties in the course of my education. The desolation of sorrow came often into my life. When I remember this, I feel that life has no meaning. Everybody feels happy when they hear the word 'Mother'. There is a lot in that word. Everybody has a mother, but in my life Mother is a little different. Mother is supreme, foremost, pre-eminent. I like Mother a lot. My mother is also very beautiful. Everybody likes their mothers; but looking at my mother from a different perspective, I don't feel any shame when telling the truth. I will tell only the truth.

One feels a little odd saying the word *devadasi*. When I was little, I didn't understand anything. Nobody understands things when they are little. Once I started school, I gradually understood little by little what *devadasi* is. When I was in Class 1, going to school, leaving my mother behind, meant that I would spend two hours crying. As I grew used to it, I made friends with girls and boys in school. All the girls would ask me for money and I would give it to them. Schooldays passed happily, with lots of fun and games. In Class 1, I had just begun to understand a little of what school is about. In Class 2, I had somewhat different experiences. These things began to appear very important in my life.

Class 3 and Class 4 are years of fun and joy. I was very joyful. Actually I learnt to face up to difficulties because of schooling. Earlier I had never thought carefully about this issue. When I entered Class 5, I felt that I am now growing up; I hadn't felt that from Class 1 to 4. Actually, in Class 5 veritable mounds of difficult questions began to pile up in front of me. There was a parents' meeting in school. The teacher told me to ask my mother and father to attend.

I said to Mother, "Mother, you have to come to school today for the meeting."

Mother replied, "I will not come."

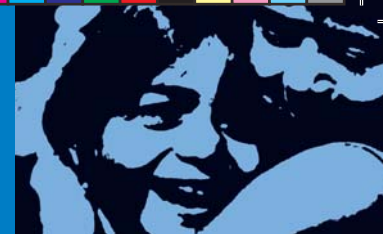
I asked, "Why not? The parents of all my friends will be coming; then why not you? Are you different?"

Mother said, "If I come there, everybody will recognise me."

I was surprised. "So what if they recognise you? You have to come!"

When I went to school I had only one thought in my mind – why did mother say this? I thought she would come; but this did not happen. She did not turn up. I felt very bad. Everybody's parents had come, but Mother had not. My girlfriends asked me, "Aarti, why hasn't your mother come?" I replied, "She must have had some work to do." Then the teacher came back. He asked, "Aarti, why haven't your parents come? Didn't you tell them at home?" I replied, "Yes, I did tell them."

I became very angry. I had been reprimanded by the teacher. Then my special friend came to ask me for money and I was furious. I said, "Am I very rich or something that all of you ask me for money?" She said, "But your mother is rich." When I heard this I felt odd. I felt bad.



The Class 3 teacher called me and asked, "Aarti, where do you live?" At that time, a friend who lived next door to me came up and said, "Sir, she lives behind the school." But I said I didn't. They she gestured to me to keep quiet, and I said that I did. "Why did you tell a lie," I asked her, and she said, "Then are you going to tell the truth that your mother lives in Gokulnagar?" Then she said, "So go and tell. Destroy your mother's reputation."

After this I set off for home. I stood at a corner with but one thought, "Why is my mother like this? When I reached the rickshaw stand I saw a woman go off with a man in a rickshaw. I found this filthy in some way. Standing there, I saw many strange sights. The big question was: "Why do so many men come here? Why are there only women in all the houses here? Why is this not the case in my maternal aunt's house? There they have fathers; uncles, brothers and the same is the case with my uncle's house. Then why is it different only here?"

When I reached home, there was a big crowd there.

When Mother saw me, she said, "Pinky, go out!"

I said, "I want to ask you why you didn't come to school."

When I said this, one man kept looking at me, which made me very angry.

Mother said again, "Pinky, are you going or do you want me to whack you with my slippers?"

Then I went outside. But these strange thoughts kept running through my head. These men sit outside with women, chew tobacco, roam around with women. All this seemed odd. I thought, "This never bothered me earlier, why does it bother me only now?"

Mother came. "Come for dinner", she said.

I asked, "Why didn't you come to school?"

"Didn't I tell you that people would recognise me?"

"So what if they do?" I asked.

Mother said, "How am I to explain to you?"

Then a man came there. "What's happened, aunty?" he asked.

"You stand right here," Mother told me. Mother went some distance away to speak with that man.

I said, "Mother, why do you speak like this? When I come home you tell me to go out. When men come you tell me to go. Why should I go?"

"You are getting too big for your boots," Mother said. "I will put chutney in your eyes and beat you."

I said, "Mother, tell me why these men come here and what women talk with them about and why they look at me like that. My friends say we are very rich. They say things I don't understand. What business is it of theirs?" I said, "I don't want to live here. First you tell me why you didn't come to school." Mother did her best to mollify me, but I kept on with my litany. Then that man came and gave her some money. Then I asked, "Mother, why do they give us money?"

Mother was silent, she was on the verge of tears. "What do I tell you?" she said. "All these days I hadn't had such a thought but now I wonder why I enrolled you in school."

I said, "Just tell me why these men come here." Then Mother said angrily, "This is a prostitute's house. Do you understand now?"

Actually, I understood only a little bit. Then I said, "Mother, you too are a mother. Then why have you done this? Are you dirty? Don't speak to me. That's why you were keeping me away all this time."

Mother asked, "Then should I keep you here?"

I said, "You should have."

Mother beat me. When she slapped me I began to cry. I did not want to stay there. I went to my maternal aunt's house.

I asked my aunt, "Please tell me why Mother does this."

My aunt said, "She didn't start of her own accord. She was forced to do this. Due to our poverty, she had to do it. It is because of her that we are okay now. She has helped your uncle – my brother – a lot. When we were small, we hardly saw any food. We were begging from door to door, but did not get any food. Your mother was so hungry that she began to eat groundnuts from a field. The landowner saw her and beat her with a sugarcane stick saying that she was stealing. Your mother was writhing in pain. The situation at home was very bad, so your mother took this path."

(I said to myself, "Why weren't you selected for this work? Why only my mother? Has she taken on the responsibility of looking after you?")

In the evening, Mother came to fetch me. I said, "No, I will not come."

Mother said, "Please come, I beg of you. Come, you have not had dinner."

Seeing this, I could not control my sorrow. I began to cry. I had to continue my education with my mother's harsh words and her character plaguing my mind.

That was when I decided to live with my maternal uncle. From Class 6 to Class 7 I lived there. But Uncle and I did not get along. Later in Class 10 I had to live with my aunt's daughter. Mother would drop in twice a day. I was feeling terrible – why has God written this in my destiny? Once I even went and cried a lot in front of God, "Why do I have to bear all this?" Being in Class 10, I now understood everything. Once I read an article on *devadasis*.

When I took admission in the high school in Class 8, the girls would sit around chatting. Once in the midday break one of the girls asked me, "Aarti, why doesn't your mother come? Only your father does." I said, "She has a lot of work at home". She asked, "Does she have a job?" "No, only housework." Then I got very angry with her and sat crying by myself. How do I tell these people? If I tell them, they won't accept my mother's situation. "Oh God, why have you done this?" So I cried a lot. The same thing happened in Class 10. Due to the board exams, there was a parents' meeting. When I told Mother about it, she said she wouldn't come. In anger, I retorted, "I know that, and also about all your exploits." When I said this, Mother got upset and began to cry. I mollified her later. Mother would visit me twice a day. I never suffered from a lack of things to eat and drink. Seeing the comfort I lived in, I would get angry with myself. On the strength of whose money was I enjoying myself? I would be furious with myself.

Mother would never take me with her to the town or to the market. This hurt me a lot. I would worry about this all the time. I would feel like committing suicide. Because it was all no use. Because I didn't have Mother with me. I have to live in somebody else's house. Though I have a mother, it is almost as if I don't. When writing poems, I would write down all the things I expected from Mother and all the desires. When writing about them, I felt as if I lived the experience. I would definitely get ten marks. When I passed Class 10, I was very happy. Because Mother had never been to school, she would never ask me anything about my schooling. That used to make me really angry. All the children's mothers keep their children with them, but I am far from my mother. I hadn't told my friend the truth about my situation. Because once the women from my alley were buying something in a roadside shop and said to me "You whore!" This made me feel very bad. I was so angry with Mother that I wanted to grab her by her hair and beat her. I said, "Why do you see them like this? And what is the meaning of 'whore'?" What is the relationship between the truth and this word. "Aarti, you don't know anything and why are you so upset? Or are they some relatives of yours that you are so concerned?" other asked. When I said yes, she looked at me. "Aarti, tell me the truth. Why did you say this? Because they destroy good households. My



brother went crazy over a prostitute and my sister-in-law sits crying at home. I cannot bear to see her pain. These women don't do any good to anybody. The word 'whore' suits them. Since I had to bear the trauma of being called a whore all the time, I don't tell anybody about my real situation. I try to forget all those things."

After I finished Class 12, managing in the midst of college life became very difficult. I didn't know what answer to give to the girls' questions. They would usually ask me such questions. "Aarti, they say you live in your sister's house. Why are you different from the rest of the world? We could never stay without our mothers." Hearing all this, I cried a lot. I was tired of inventing one excuse after another to tell them. I was sick of telling lies. Sometimes I would hate the school itself, but my goal is to get a good education and then live like a good person. Mother should not have to bear the suffering she has to put up with now. Though I am not a son, I am going to achieve all this. I do not see any need to tell people that my mother is a *devadasi*, a prostitute. One should never reveal the things that one wants to hide.

Now there are various facilities for *devadasis*, their economic problems are being tackled. Taking their difficulties into account, it has been shown that *devadasis* are victims of circumstances. The main thing is that only after becoming educated can we stop these things. Education helps a person to understand what is good and what is bad. My view is that the *devadasi* tradition must end. Show those who are *devadasis* a new path. Equip them to deal with society.

My mother is very mindful about my reputation. When I was in Class 12, I was cycling with four of my girlfriends. We had to stop at a traffic signal on the way. We stood to one side. I told them all, "See, that is my mother." I called out to her, but she pretended not to see, got into a rickshaw and went away. My girlfriends asked me, "Aarti, why didn't your mother speak? Why didn't you even introduce us to her?"

I understand why Mother went away without responding. They

will get to know where she lives and that she is a *devadasi* – therefore, to protect my honour, she did this. When I went home and asked her, this is what Mother told me.

I think *devadasis* impose their traditions on their daughters. Girls themselves become *devadasis* or due to being beaten at their husband's homes. Those who have only one daughter make her a *devadasi*, in order that she may look after them later. But my mother is not like that. My mother fulfills all my wishes. She keeps me at the home of other people and get me educated. She never tries to convince me who I am. Sometimes I forget that I am different from the other girls and boys in the alley. No boy or girl should be such that their mothers earn and they have a good time. The entire credit for my education goes to my mother. I am what I am today because of her. I still have many hopes for her. I want her to love me like my friend's mothers love them. I have never brought my friends home. They say, "Aarti never takes anybody to her home. Neither does she visit anybody." Because some girls would see our locality and say bad things – that's why I don't bring anybody home.

So what if my mother is a *devadasi*? I don't think she has committed a crime. Circumstances have made her what she is. I don't find these things bad, because I have thought about it – that if I was in the same situation I would have had to become like that. The only difference is that the world was different then and it is different now. We say that there are many good things, but only those who face the situation know about it. Saying things is easy, doing them is tough. Though I am studying for my degree now, I will never forget these things. These things will show me a path through life. These circumstances faced by my mother will make me enthusiastic about my education. When I am not in the mood to study, I think of these things and then study with determination. I feel very sad that I have not told any of my school or college friends about all this. Because they will never be able to understand. Nobody knows the situations a *devadasi* faces. Only those girls and boys who are themselves *devadasis* know about the situation. There is a saying, "You can't see heaven unless you die yourself." This is so true.



I will bring glory to my mother's name

Yellawwa Appanna Kenchkanawar

My name is Yellawwa Appanna Kenchkanawar. I was in Class I. At that time I did not understand things. Later I learnt that my mother was a devadasi. In my school I learnt that my mother does business. They didn't ask me anything, but they said that I was very smart and that they would send me to a boarding school in Kolhapur to complete my education. But my mother and aunt said, "Not now, we will send you later." So I remained here in the alley. My aunt has looked after me since childhood. So I call her mother. I call my real mother Laxmi. My mother has given me whatever I like; she always gave me love and affection.

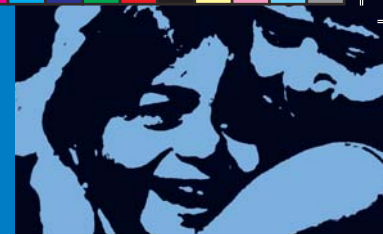
What if somebody asks me what my favourite thing is? I would immediately give the answer – my school! The school in Sangli city is very good. The name of my school is K.C.C. Primary School, Sangli. My school is opposite the Ram temple. There is an enormous tamarind tree in front of the school. All of us play in its shade. There are 15 classes in my school, with about 800-1100 boys and girls. My class teacher's name is D.B. Kamble. The name of our principal is T.K. Awale. Our teachers are eager to teach, and we are eager to learn. We have nine subjects in all. We play games like *kabaddi* and *kho-kho* on our playground. Republic Day, Independence Day, Christmas, children's meetings and the anniversaries of various great national leaders are celebrated in the school. Christmas is celebrated very nicely in our school. They hold competitions, and give prizes to the children. The gardeners in my school are very nice, my school is very nice.

In my family, I, Mother, Mummy, brother, niece and paternal aunt all live together. We are very happy in our small house. Mummy works and Mother also does business the whole day. Nobody in our house drinks, does mischief or beats others. Our neighbours too don't drink. No quarrels, no hullabaloo. So I have no trouble from the alley. But this alley appears bad to others, not to me.

I am a prostitute's daughter, I am very happy. Mother and Mummy slog the whole day and take great care of ensuring me a bright future. I am not sad because I am a prostitute's daughter, Mother and Mummy do not let me lack for anything. Mummy enthusiastically buys me clothes. So I have no sorrows. Mother and Mummy have brought me up with good values. Mummy keeps me very happy.

Mother and Mummy don't let me lack for money too. Therefore,





BROTHER BORN AND BRED

I am going to fulfil Mother's wishes. Everybody in the house loves me a lot. Mother spoils me as much as I want. My sister accompanies me wherever needed. I like my niece a lot. She makes me laugh a lot. My brother teases me a lot. All these people make much of me. Everybody in this small house has a generous mind. So I am very happy in this small house. Mummy and Mother have great hopes of me. I will fulfil these hopes.

When I was in Class 5, I learnt who my real mother is. My real mother's name was written in the school attendance register. One day the teacher asked me my mother's name. I told him that my mother's name is Margawwa. But the teacher said, "Your mother's name is Laxmi." I came home and asked my aunt, "Who is my real mother?" At that time, my aunt told me the truth, that my mother's name is Laxmi. But I still call my aunt Mummy. If I have something personal to tell, I tell Mummy (aunt). Mother also spoils me a lot. But I tell Mummy everything. When I was small my Mummy took more care of me. The doctor had told my aunt that I would not live long. My aunt looked after me more at that time. It is she who brings me whatever I need for school. My real mother also takes a lot of care of me.

One day in school, while fighting with a boy, my lip was injured. At that time, my Mummy had gone to the village, but she kept enquiring about my well-being over the phone. Mother was taking me to the clinic. After that, I took my maternal cousin sister with me to school. She told the headmaster to take care. Now I am living with Mummy, Mother, my brother, sister, paternal aunt and my niece. Mummy has taken a separate house for me. Mummy and Mother want me to get a good education.

One day in school, a friend said after we had a quarrel, "This girl lives in a dirty alley." I felt very bad at the time. But now I don't feel anything. Because the place where I live is not dirty in my eyes. During the festival in the alley, I had performed a very good dance in front of the goddess. But next day the girls in school asked me, "Are you going to become a dancing girl in the future?" I was very angry and went back to school taking my sister along with me. She told them, "Those who dance in front of the goddess do not necessarily become dancers in the future." Then my friend admitted that she had made a mistake. She did not speak to me for two days.

I have a teacher who has helped me a lot. One day she got to know that I am the daughter of a *devadasi*. But she didn't bother about it and sent me to participate in dances and songs. She told me, "You learn and get ahead in life. Bring glory to your mother's name." She started taking tuitions. During the tuitions, the family of the teacher showered a lot of love upon me. The teacher made me very smart. I am very grateful to that teacher.

I don't feel sad that my mother lives in this alley. My mother works so hard to educate me. There is a big difference between me and ordinary girls. My mother works very hard. Mummy ensures that I always have things to eat. Due to Mummy and my mother, I never missed my father. I am very happy and content in this small house. My paternal aunt, Mummy and Mother – all these people in our small house have very big hearts. I am going to fulfil all their hopes. I will become a great person. I will bring glory to their names. All this while living in this alley!



The joy of motherhood

Nilawwa Siddareddy

I am Nilawwa Siddareddy. I have a daughter and two sons. I supported them through my earnings as a prostitute. I was illiterate. My husband had deserted me. I felt that at least my children should get an education.

I was pregnant. Everybody used to tell me to have an abortion. Then I sent a telegram to my father. "I want a child. If you refuse I will kill myself!" My father came immediately to Karad. "You didn't bother about your divorce, then why are you thinking of the child," he said. But I didn't listen. Then they took me to the village. After nine days I gave birth to a girl. The people in the village quarrelled with my father. "If you want a daughter then you will have to pay a fine to the community." They asked for Rs. 150. My father sold a brass pot and paid the fine. The women came to my house and bathed both of us for five days.

When my daughter turned two, they began to say that she should be married off to my cousin's son. But the son insisted that we show him the girl's father. Now where was I to get a father from? The marriage was called off. I was very angry. I decided that I would somehow or the other arrange my daughter's marriage. When she was four years old, I found a good family in Bijapur and arranged her wedding. My aunt said that the girl was still small. I said that I am an earner. My daughter is good-looking. Will she also have to earn when she grows up? But then who will get the money?

One year after my daughter's marriage, I had a son. I wanted him to get an education. Since we own a lot of farmland, he refused to study however much he was beaten or punished. Once he asked me for a rupee when I went to the village. I told him that I would give him ten rupees if he promised me that he would go to school. He quickly replied, "I don't want ten rupees. I won't promise you that, I don't want to go to school, I am going to do agriculture." Though we have a lot of farmland, there was no rain for years. I brought him with me to Maharashtra. He met a man who asked him whether he wanted to work. He gave him work. After that I had a third child and when he was a year old I sent him to the *balwadi*. He developed a liking for school and began to attend regularly. I was very happy. Now he is studying in Class 9. He went out of town twice through the NCC and won a prize. I felt very proud. Though I am a prostitute my son is so clever. He always wants me to appear and speak on TV. He wants everybody to know his brother. My children and my daughter's in-laws all know that I am a prostitute. They all behave very well with me. I have given my children my own father's name.





All my children bear my name

Suvama Ingalgawa

I have three children. Two sons and a daughter. My elder son studied till Class 10 and then left school. He is now a farmer. My daughter is 19 years old and my younger son is 18. My daughter is in Class 14. The younger boy's name is Lohit; he is in Class 13. From where am I to get a father for them? They all use my name.

Nobody in my household had ever been to school. My grandmother, mother, aunt, and aunt's daughter are all *devadasis*. Since nobody in my family was educated, I developed a strong desire to educate my children. I am prostituting myself and educating and raising my children. We are illiterate so we got left behind; but my wish is that they should become educated and get ahead, get good jobs. I did not allow them to fall prey to any vices. Whatever they asked for I gave them through selling my body. I worked very hard. I even worked at grazing sheep. Presently, I do business and satisfy mine and my children's requirements.

I very much want to get my daughter married into a good family and see her happily married. Lohit wants to start a business. All three of my children know that I am a prostitute; but they are proud of me. My daughter Deepa gives tuitions after coming back from school. The children of *devadasis* like me attend these

tuitions. She teaches them very well. She convinces them about the importance of their mothers. She also studies computers.

Presently Lohit is in Dharwar for his education. One important thing is that my name has been entered in the school for all three of my children. If anybody asks them, they say confidently that their mother is everything to them. "She is the greatest. That is why I have used my mother's name." They say that their mother is a *devadasi*. The three of them are a big support to me. I am very proud of them for having used my name in school.

My elder son Murgyappa goes to work as an agricultural labourer. He is not yet married. He too helps a lot with his sister's and brother's education. He also cares for me a lot. My daughter helps me in every difficulty. She tells me everything that happens in school. So now I understand a little bit about these things.

Lohit wants to study further. I have given Rs. 21000 to enrol him in the school. They said that they would give a concession of Rs. 2000 because he is a *devadasi's* son. If his wishes come true, if he gets a government job, then my having raised them and educating them with my earnings as a prostitute will bear fruit. All three of my children are more important to me than God. Due to the organisation, my desire to educate my children was satisfied.

BROTHER BORN AND BRED



In good shape for my son

Surekha Thorat

Which house is free of quarrels? Whose father doesn't beat up the mother? But I have seen with my own eyes my father sleeping in the inside room with his daughter. Fearful of being beaten, my mother would not say anything. Instead she would make me stay silent. Sick of my father's behaviour, I left the village and came to Sangli. I lived by begging. I started to prostitute myself. Now I have got AIDS. But my son is educated, he has made a name for himself. When I see him I forget all my past miseries.

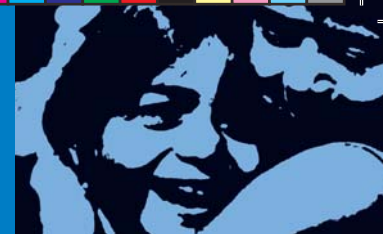
How should I tell my story now...

From the age of two years, I was in an *ashram*. Since the situation at home was bad, I, my brother and my sister were put in the *ashram*. My father would beat my mother; mother would leave the house. I studied till Class 9 in the *ashram*. After that my turn was over and my father took me home. I was doing the housework at home. My sister would go to work in the forest and come home in the afternoon; my father would also come home for lunch. In the afternoon, when we slept, my father would tell me to go and sleep outside. He would take my sister and sleep with her in the inside room. I saw this with my own eyes. And I woke up my mother saying that father is sleeping with *Akka* (elder sister). But my mother could not do anything with my father. She would be so fearful of a beating that she would tell me to keep quiet lest he beat

both of us. Due to this behaviour of my father, I left home and came to Sangli.

I didn't know anybody in Sangli. I came near Anand theatre. I had no place to sleep, nor even anything to eat. An old woman near Anand theatre told me she would give me a place to sleep, but I must bring some money for her. From where was I to get money? So I would beg and get a rupee or two and give it to that to the old woman. She would then give me a place to sleep. That's how I was living. After some days a rickshaw driver asked me to go with him to Chikkodi and said that he would marry me. So I went with him. But there was no marriage, nothing. Without giving me anything to eat, he found a clearing in a copse of trees and slept with me the whole night. In the morning he put me in the train. I had no ticket, no money. I came back to Sangli. I went to the river and had a bath. I





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scrubbed myself clean. I got goose pimples.

One day it was raining. It had been raining the whole night. I was getting soaked in the rain. A driver came there and took me to the stand for some tea and then took me to his village. I could not do the work in the forest that was required. Meanwhile, I got married. One day when I wore a Punjabi dress, my mother-in-law actually filed a police case against me. She even dragged her own son to the police station. "This woman is a whore. She prostitutes herself." That was the case she filed. They took me and my husband to Islampur. I was given a lawyer there, but I did not have any money. I gave him my earnings. I told him to get me released. The court hearings started; I began to attend them. And I was doing business on the highway. I would do business the whole night in trucks, and in the morning I would go to court in Sangli. In the midst of all this I became pregnant.

That driver came with me to the Civil Hospital and gave his name to the child. I gave birth to a boy. There was nowhere to bathe the boy. I would go to the river to bathe and then bathe my own son in the same river. The child would suffer but the job would get done. After some days I started prostituting again. I would sleep on the pavement. The police would ask me why I was sleeping there. "I don't have any place, so I sleep here." I would say. The police would give me some food. But eating like this never filled anybody's stomach. So I would cook and eat some rice in a vessel near the police station. I would send my son to the park with my girlfriends' children. After I had serviced one or two clients, I would take him something to eat. One day the women police caught me and my friends. I started to get worried about my son, but the police had not caught one of my friends. She brought my son to the police station. I began to cry when I saw him. But the policewoman said, "What proof do you have that this is your son? When you get a client she takes the boy and when she gets a client, you take the boy." The boy started crying but she would not give him to me.

The policewoman told me to give her all my money and to get Rs. 300 more the following day. Next day when I came with the

money, she didn't even let me enter the police station; she took the money outside and let me go.

When the child was about 6 years old, I took a room in the Wadar colony. And I enrolled my son in school. In school they asked him the name of his father. He told them the name but said that his father had died. What did he know? But kids are smart. He came first in class from Class 1 to Class 5 and I was very happy, because I am a prostitute and my son has come first. But how is my son to manage? The thought came into my head because I know that my report is positive. I would wonder whether to tell my son or not. My son finished Class 7. I told him everything, that my blood is infected. But this came as a shock to him. What to do now? He would worry about whether I would survive or not. After some days the women working in Sangram started coming to the village for information. But we would run away when we saw them, because we thought that they may be policewomen who have come here to catch us. But these women would explain to us that they worked in an organisation. "We give free medicine. Do you have any pain? Do you want condoms?" They even explained how to use condoms. We started attending meetings.

My son got the first rank in Class 11. I was very happy because I am a prostitute and I had never thought that my son would get the first rank. In school all the teachers felicitated my son.

Now I had to send him to college. He wanted to take Science. But I told him we couldn't afford it and that he should go to night school. My son filled up the form and Sangram paid Rs. 7500 as fees to the Engineering College. None of our relatives came forward to help. Even my own brother told me that it costs a lot. I got a job in this organisation. That's how I have managed to look after my son till now and educate him. This organisation belongs to us women. I am very proud of this organisation.

Because Sangram started, I got information about HIV. Else I would have died long ago. My son would have been orphaned. But now I am well enough to see him become a big sahib!



How is my mother different from their mothers?

Vijay Kamble

The mother who gave birth to me is called a 'prostitute' by people and society. I call her Mother. The word 'mother' has been given a lot of importance by these very people. The mother is foremost in the world. But they call my mother impure, saying that she does business, that she is a prostitute. I have a question to those who deem me and my mother impure. There is a man among these very people who had an equal role in my birth; but he is as yet invisible. So many others who have fathered children like me continue to remain invisible. Those who remain invisible live in the midst of society with their prestige intact, but they don't let us live. People are not even ready to accept that prostitutes and their children have a right to lead full lives and express their opinions. If anybody accepts this, they are proven to be 'fathers' and there is a fear of an upheaval in their original families, in society.

What I write is not meant to condemn religion or society. All I feel is that society should not condemn us for where we live and how we survive. If you want to enrol in a school, you need a father's name. But in our system the father is invisible. My mother is all there is. This is the actual situation; why not accept it? When I was to be enrolled in school, the teacher asked my mother for my father's name. Mother said, "I am a *devadasi*. I do not know who his father is and I don't want to affix his name." At that time it was the teacher's duty to enter my mother's name. Instead of doing that, he asked for my mother's brother's name and entered it as the name of my father. Why did the teacher do this? He did it even though my mother had told him the true situation. Anyway...for children,

the mother is a mother. She does whatever is necessary to raise her children.

My mother is great because when she raised me she would satisfy all my needs. Educational expenses, health expenses, proper nutrition and care as needed by a child, she provided it all and even arranged my marriage. She did this all by herself through prostitution. She shouldered her responsibilities. In the absence of a father, my mother carried out all her responsibilities towards the family through her earnings from prostitution.

In society, mother and father jointly raise a child, look after him and make him self-reliant, arrange his marriage – nobody says anything to them. I grew up and stood on my own feet due to my mother. But why am I described as illegitimate? What does anyone say about the fact that they take a contribution from my mother for any festival or programme? Those who collect the money know that my mother is a prostitute. But they take money anyway. Then why do they condemn me and my mother. She is treated badly because she prostitutes herself; but don't they know from whom mother earns money through prostitution?

There are many such questions in the minds of children like me. I don't expect answers. Society should accept the truth and change its mindset. There is love and respect in this world because there is a mother. My mother is also a mother. I love my mother a lot. So let all of us not fall prey to evil thoughts and let us love all of humankind. Let us think about how we can live with mutual respect. In other words, live and let live!





I am Kadubai's daughter

Laxmibai Yeshwantrao Jadhav

I was born in Husnabad town of Karnataka state. My mother died immediately after she gave birth to me. My father took me to his relatives. My relatives told my father, "We will not look after this girl." My father said, "I shall leave her in the orphanage in Pandharpur". On the way he stayed in Swati hotel in Barshi. The owner of the hotel, Deshmukh, asked my father, "Where are you taking this girl?" My father replied, "I am going to leave my daughter in an orphanage." Deshmukh said, "Let us hand over this girl to a person. But that person is a prostitute. She is in need of a baby. Is this person's profession acceptable to you? If you want we can hand her over, or else..." My father said, "If we give her to this person, at least she will get a mother's love, but I do not want her to be inducted into this profession." I was given to that person after preparing court adoption papers. My father left me with that person. Her name was Kadubai.

I would call Kadubai 'Mother'. This mother looked after me. She taught me good values. She educated me till Class 7. She got me married when I was 11 years old. Later I had two daughters. Around this time, my mother suddenly died. It was as if a mountain had collapsed on my head. I managed. I live in the same place till today. Till today I am known as 'Kadubai's daughter'. That is I am known as a prostitute's daughter.



Write your name

Narayan Surve

Teacher, write,
write your own name.

I will tell you the truth,
with goddess Mariaai in my heart.
Teacher, see her bunched-up hair
like a snake's hood...
It is the gift of God...of God.

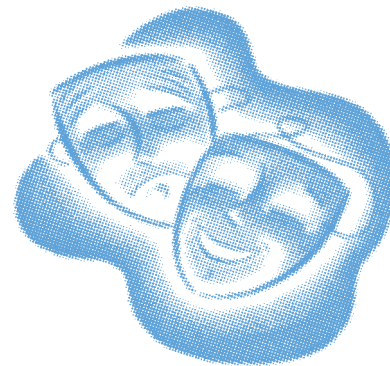
Teacher, the soil is rich
and fertile, but
unless it is ploughed
unless seeds are sown,
Does the plant grow? No? Tell me.
Then how will it do to write my name instead of the father's?
How will the child manage without the father?

Don't write the name of a God,
write only a human being's name...
What has God done anyway?
He has decreed all this.
Write your own name.

Don't ask my caste.
Teacher, am I the woman
of any one person?
We are not women from a nest,
we are not so fortunate.

He was born here,
he was born late,
no midwife, nobody to help.
The mind trembled...but then
found strength.

Fall at his feet, child
Fall at his feet,
But please write your own name, teacher.



Nirodhayan

Nandu Gaurav

This thing called Nirodh⁹ is not limited to a part of a man. It does not just block sperm and prevent fertilisation; it doesn't just prevent HIV/AIDS; it does not just kill pleasure. This thing called Nirodh is something that interferes with a man's masculinity. This thing – provoking curiosity and anticipation, secret, unknowable, exciting – does the job of reining in the male principle; eroding a man's masculinity.

...Isn't it then such a courageous, revolutionary act for a woman to say, "Not without a Nirodh," or "Use a condom!" But it is in this patriarchal culture that prostitutes, cast out from society, have launched a Nirodhayan¹⁰ to protect themselves and society. This struggle of providing condoms and publicising condom use is no longer restricted to the alley. This has become a fight to save the entire family and the social structure.

Bhimsha had been trying to placate Anita for the past two hours. Actually, all this pleading and begging doesn't suit Bhimsha, but how else does one convince a woman? Bhimsha is actually Anita's *malak* – a kept husband. He has a right over Anita. But for two hours she had kept him dangling. The rain dripping outside and inside the house Bhimsha's irritation rising.

"Hey, what am I telling you?"

"What"

"What do you mean 'What'? Come quietly now."

"Just go to sleep quietly. Don't act smart."

"Your mother's...! Bhimsha. I am Bhimsha! Your *malak*. Not a hundred-rupee customer. Come quietly now."

"Haven't I told you that you can't without a Nirodh? No means no!" Anita was firm.

...And then a point was reached where fire flared up in Anita's hut, right in the midst of all the rain.

"Asking your owner to wear a Nirodh, motherfucker, getting too smart, eh," Bhimsha was saying as he beat Anita. "Beat me, but I won't sleep with you without a condom," Anita was saying as she suffered the beating.

The Nirodhayan which had flared up in Anita's hut was raging in every house. Even if they reached starvation point, prostitutes were not sleeping with customers unless they wore condoms. Something strange, unnatural, was happening in Gokulnagar.

⁹Nirodh is a brand of condom manufactured by the government and distributed extensively by the government health machinery. It is available free or at nominal cost. Nirodh has now become a generic term for condoms in India.

¹⁰A campaign to promote condom use.

"Prostitution, like other occupations, is a way, a means of earning a livelihood. We don't do this work just for men's pleasure – for us it is a method of earning a livelihood. Through selling our bodies, we fill the stomachs of our children, raise them, educate them. Now we understand the difference between occupation and business. To call it a vocation means to pointlessly tie us to this work for our lifetimes. Because we can do this work only as long as we are young. Selling your brains and labour is no different from us selling our bodies. It is not proper that our profession is ranked low and we are not given any prestige. This money is earned from our sexuality which is an inseparable part of our femininity, and we have the ability to challenge the established order."

'Those' women had now begun to say chilling and incomprehensible things like this. This is shocking. Whatever you may say, they are only prostitutes. And they dare...? Society buzzes with such talk. By then these women have transgressed the boundaries, broken the mould. Now they come on to the streets. From the streets, they come to the square and say these things standing there. Our profession, our rights, our identity, our citizenship, HIV/AIDS, condoms... !

They speak openly. Earlier they felt that customers should

use condoms so as to protect themselves and society...now they know that if they are to save their own lives customers should compulsorily use condoms. No condoms...no sex! they tell customers firmly. The customers get angry and irritated but cannot refuse. They have no choice. Unprotected intercourse is the primary route for the spread of HIV/AIDS. Prostitutes fall prey to this disease due to lack of proper advice and information, and once infected die due to lack of proper treatment. They can give birth to HIV-positive children. They are prone to infection by this virus. These women become victims of this disease and the canard is spread that it is they who are responsible for it. But these women are successfully implementing the condom distribution programme for their own protection. They educate their customers about condom use and thus protect them from risk. That is why organising these women in prostitution can become an effective method of fighting AIDS. Once they realised this, the organisation Sangram from Sangli started working along these lines. Sangram's objective of setting up an independent organisation of these women was realised with the formation of 'VAMP' and the work of the movement, of condom distribution, began in 1996. By 2006, about 186 activists were engaged in the work of condom distribution. Lakhs of condoms are being distributed by these activists. Activist-prostitutes are the key to this Nirodhayan.





Thanks to my Mother

Sanjay Kagadi

I was born in the red-light area in Karad town. I am the son of a sex worker. As a child, I didn't understand what this meant. I started going to school, and made friends there. When I visited my friends' houses, their parents would ask me, "Where do you live? What do your parents do?" I did not know what to say. I didn't even know who my father was. I would just stand there in silence.

Due to this, I stopped mixing with friends. But I would go to school everyday. One day my friends saw me entering the prostitutes' alley. They followed me there, and the next day began to tease me, saying, "Sanjay lives in the prostitutes' alley. His mother is a prostitute. He is the son of a prostitute." They would not eat with me, they would not even play with me.

Then I would not feel like going to school. I would bunk school and roam around the town. I started hanging out with hoodlums. I started drinking and indulging in hooliganism. Police cases were filed, and the police began to harass me. I did not want to live anymore. But Mother and Durga Pujari took me to Sangram. It was due to my Mother that I came into this organisation and it transformed my life.



The Prostitute and Society

Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP)



When a policeman attempts to rape a tribal woman, there is an immediate outcry and everybody rushes to condemn the incident. But if the same thing happens with a prostitute, nobody thinks it is something worth bothering about. If a Dalit woman is murdered it becomes a big issue, but if the dead woman is a prostitute then nobody is concerned and the murder is written off as a natural death. It is as if there is an assumption that death is a prostitute's fate. The question then arises – why is it that atrocities on prostitutes are not considered atrocities on women?

Good and Bad

If a woman accepts the restrictions imposed by society and lives her life accordingly, then she is considered good. Such women even get some rights and privileges in society. In cases of rape, under the provisions of the IPC, the sexual history of the woman is discussed. Women are then classified as single, lesbians, prostitutes, witches, etc. and judged to be 'bad' women. A woman who has extra-marital sexual relations is considered bad, whether this be on account of sexual desire or due to the need to sell her body to earn some money. That is why there is no sympathy when a 'bad' woman is raped or otherwise tortured; in fact, everybody treats it as a criminal's just desserts and remains silent.

The stigma of selling sex

The woman who sells her body is considered bad. Prostitutes are considered to be suffering or victims of circumstances. They are called unchaste or evil. They are considered to be desirous of luxury or immoral. These women are considered to have evil tendencies and that they behave in a manner not befitting the socially acceptable behaviour of women. The belief is that such women who have taken the wrong path need to be reformed, and it is this strong belief which leads to them being threatened by the police, public opinion, policy and the law. They are rescued from prostitution and attempts are made to rehabilitate them. In other words, society takes on the job of deciding how these 'bad' women (as opposed to the 'good' women in society) should behave and live.

Prostitution and violence

Prostitution is violence because prostitution is a manifestation of the growing criminalisation of society. This is how society perceives the phenomenon. It is believed that all women are forced into prostitution against their will and that they are left with no choice but to have sex for money. The result of criminalising prostitution in this fashion is that the crimes and violence taking

place within the world of prostitution are not taken seriously. The sexual relations between a prostitute and a client are themselves considered to be a form of rape. In such a situation, nobody considers it to be a rape when a prostitute is forced to have sex.

The violence of stigma

The issue is not one of likes and dislikes or the use of force but rather one of how society treats these women. Even though conventional wisdom classifies women as good and bad, once women are classed as 'bad', they are considered to have transgressed social norms. Thus, even if they want to turn back, they cannot wash away the stigma, and it is this stigma that is their true punishment. In this context, VAMP's motto is : "Even though we bear this stigma, our lives are in our own hands. Let us dream of respect, let us live life to the fullest."

Violence and stigma divide women in prostitution from other women. Nobody is ready to listen to such 'fallen' women. Actually, people find it difficult to accept that these women can fight for their rights. Isn't this too another kind of violence? And it is due to this that women in prostitution find it difficult to fight for their rights.

We are increasingly troubled by the increase in violence on our daily lives and in society and we are trying to fight against them or changing ourselves to suit the changing circumstances. There are all kinds of preconceived notions about prostitutes and by trying to take their decisions for them, we are

perpetrating a kind of violence upon them. We earn money but are not allowed to live in peace. Society does not accept our children. Even if they don't get into prostitution, and try to earn money through some other activity, society continues to brand them as the children of prostitutes. We are not able to provide a life with happiness and respect for our children. Our health suffers and our children suffer from the stigma attached to this profession. They have to confront injustice at every turn.

Problems in accessing healthcare

Accessing healthcare is a big challenge in the life of a prostitute. She is vilified as a whore. Therefore it is difficult to get good healthcare. The situation in government clinics is worse. There she is asked all kinds of unpleasant questions. For example – how many customers do you get per day? What kind of sexual activity do you engage in? Often she has to have sex with a doctor, a ward boy, a X-ray technician or a social worker; else she is not treated. Many times doctors or their assistants insist on physical examination. "How can we treat you without a physical examination?" they ask. But they don't dare do such examinations for other women. It is as if doctors get an opportunity to touch these women anywhere under the pretext of HIV/AIDS. At many places, male doctors or nurses do these examinations with great interest rather than entrusting them to female nurses. This perversion of healthcare is a fresh example of violence and stigma.

Difficulties in the lives of children

A survey conducted in 1992 in Sangli by Sangram revealed that 2 per cent of women had never even seen a school. There were many children who had bunked school and dropped out early. The dropout rate was particularly high after primary school. Vijay Kamble from Miraj says, "One feels very bad when one's companions try to know about your background and start pestering you with questions. I was very disturbed when I saw my own teacher wandering around the alley in search of sex. I saw him from a distance and ran away. I then stopped going to school."

Renuka is another example of how society makes life difficult for such children. Renuka completed her M.Com. On the basis of her performance, she got a job in a bank. After she started working there, her colleagues found out that her mother was a prostitute. Then the manager and her co-workers began to pester her with questions about her mother. Finally, she got totally fed up and left the job.

Change in perspective essential

As long as we don't understand the phenomenon of prostitution, as long as we continue to look at it from the perspective of good and bad, moral and immoral – till then stigma and discrimination in their various forms will not cease. In fact, till we fail to understand that the prostitute is just another woman who works for a living, her troubles will continue.



Poems by Laxmi Shinde

Nest

Beautiful was my nest.
The householder of the nest was very clever.
This householder had one woman partner,
they had five chicks.
Society cast its evil eye on this nest.
There are too many vultures in this society,
these vultures destroyed this beautiful nest

The train of life

Our mother is the railway train of life,
facing many hardships, chuff chuff, puff puff.
Children are attached like coaches, quick quick quick,
the train of life runs, puff puff puff.
Getting the danger signal, the whistle blows, whoo whoo whoo,
As they learn the risks of life, the children are free, fast, fast, fast!

Mother

Mother gave birth to me,
this was a great favour
Some call her a prostitute, others a whore.
Tears come to her eyes.
Nobody will feel any pity,
no common person will feel sorrow.
Who is concerned about others?
What use are relatives and village folk?
A little stress on my body,
and she would feel the shock.
I tell this God again:
Give me my mother back.

