

The Savings Habits of Prostitutes in Kolkata Red Light Areas: A Comprehensive Study

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Abstract. This paper is an attempt to analyze savings system in Kolkata red-light areas in detail. It will also attempt to throw light upon various money lending systems and critically examine role of money lenders and dynamics of the operation system. This paper will focus on the transition occurred since 1994 in this financial sector of prostitutes' lives and the development took place since then. Role of Durbar (The NGO run by sex-workers) will be analyzed in this regard.

Keywords: Prostitutes, Red-light Areas, Savings Habits, Kolkata.

1. Introduction

Study of prostitution has been rendered more and more complicated than in fact it is. By and large it is due to preconceived notions as a result of social apathy. Unfortunately, the story of the prostitute has not been properly told in India. Even the radical historiographical schools such as represented by Marxist and 'Subaltern' historians while taking note of the marginalized sections such as peasants, artisans, tribal, housewives, working men and women in Bengal have not paid serious attention to the prostitutes.¹ It has begun to attract some attention in the recent past in the wake of global awareness of human rights and the struggles waged by different marginalized sections.

This paper is an attempt to analyze savings system in Kolkata red-light areas in detail. It will also attempt to throw light upon various money lending systems and critically examine role of money lenders and dynamics of the operation system. This paper will focus on the transition occurred since 1994 in this financial sector of prostitutes' lives and the development took place since then. Role of Durbar (The NGO run by sex-workers) will be analyzed in this regard.

In this 'study', I have used two terms 'prostitute'(s) and 'sex-worker'(s) frequently. In my opinion these terminologies are interchangeable. 'Prostitution/prostitute' denotes the phenomenon of 'violence' and 'sex-worker' denotes the sense of 'self-reliance' and 'self-determination'. When a sexual act is performed as work it also inherently implies a commercial purpose.

2. Savings Habits of Prostitutes

Most of the prostitutes lead life without having any definite aim or plan for the future. They are more concerned about their present life rather being bothered about the future which is full of uncertainty.² Usually no sex-worker can save for more than a month. After saving money for a month or so, invariably the news of her saving becomes known to all. As soon as the secret is out, either the *babu (fixed clients)* or the landlady grabs her money. If the entire money does not vanish too soon, it is spent on drinks. Some girls are more independent. They do not much care for the *babu (fixed clients)*, nor do they have any landlady to pay. Then again, they have a tendency to spend their money on drinks at the slightest pretext. If they are sad, to drown their sorrow they drink. So the money of a prostitute flies into thin air. It is eaten up by *Masi (madam)*, by *Babu (fixed clients)* or on drinking.³ Because of all these reasons the prostitutes are not found so much enthusiastic regarding the savings matter. They are more concern about their sorrows, happiness of their present lives. Women in this industry often bear the burden of debt. Most of the prostitutes fulfill their

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¹ Sumanta Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast: The Prostitute in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 2000, p.1.

² B. Joardar, *Prostitution in Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter-India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. p.121

³ Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005, pp.136-37.

family responsibilities by sending money to the village. They have to take care of themselves too. So, at the end, despite a considerable earning capacity, most of the sex-workers face financial problem and fail to manage savings. It is very easy to take loans in all the red-light areas, which are also an 'indispensable system' in the red-light areas. So, prostitutes are often subjected to exploitations of money lenders and other elements (*masis*, landlord, traders etc.) with regard to this matter. Before starting of the 'Sonagachi Project'* (1992) there were two types of economic exploitation going on (1) Dadon which includes three types of money-lenders (a) Kistiwallahs (b) Goldsmith or local Jewelers (pawn brokers) and (c) The Chotawallahs. The other was (2) 'Chit-funds'.⁴ Though, after the establishment of Durbar (The NGO run by sex-workers) these types of money lending systems are not that much prevalent in the Red-light areas but cannot be claimed that they are totally uprooted.

2.1. Dadon

2.1.1. Kisti System

The 'installment' money-lenders are known as '*kistiwallahs*'. The rate of installments in this *Kisti* system is like this: - If someone borrows 500 rupees, she would have to pay back at the rate of 10 per day for seventy-two days, which is 720 rupees with interest. Again, if any one fail to clear the loan in seventy-two days after the due date she will have to continue to pay a daily fine of rupees 5 per hundred. If it was 500, she will have to pay 25 as fine daily for breach of contract, over and above the loan amount. This fine is known as '*khelapi*' (*khelap* - failure to keep one's word).⁵

Girls from the various prostitute-colonies generally have to bear a perpetual burden of debts. Since they never have enough savings, they have to borrow continuously for medical treatments and other things. A class of money-lenders thriving in Harkata, Watgunge, Kalighat and Sonagachhi localities give loans at a high rate of interest. These loans are to be repaid within 72 days. Because of this tremendous financial pressure, the girls have to earn money even when sick or menstruating. Sometimes we hear about instances of suicide under unbearable pressure. But mostly women of very low income group only suffer this fate.⁶ The rules of *Dadon* are so intricate that it would confound anyone beyond limits.⁷

2.1.2. Pawn Brokers

If someone notices it will be seen there are many small gold shops around the brothel areas of Kolkata. The reason for mushrooming of this gold business was that, firstly, the prostitutes prefer to keep their savings in the form of gold jewelry, which they could use to raise loans in times of emergency, or keep for their retired life. The same shop owners would give them loan against the gold ornaments. In those days it was difficult for these 'fallen girls' to go to the banks to open accounts. They therefore remained outside the mainstream of society. The only more or less safe method of saving was by buying gold ornaments, or by 'opening a book' at the gold shop. This 'book' was a small 4 inch by 3 inch notebook bought from the stationers to keep their accounts. Even though it resembled a bank's pass book, it was by no way a savings account. Banks at least used to give interest at the rate of 4% on one's savings. These petty goldsmiths not only gave any interest, they even refused to sign the entries of money deposited in the 'book'. Entries were like this: 23.5.1984Deposited Rs. 400

There was ample scope for the moneylenders to cheat the girls at a later date; even though such instances were rare. Now let us see how they pawned their gold for cash. In case of exigency these girls used to keep the ornaments at the gold shop and take money as loan. In those days, the interest charged by the shop keepers was at the rate of 6 rupees per month per 100 rupees loan. That comes to a huge interest of 72% per annum. In some other case, the girl had to give in writing that if for some reason, she fail to clear the loan

⁴ Ibid. p.133. Sonagachi Project: This project primarily aimed to promote health awareness and provide treatment to sex-workers to reduce the probability of HIV and this was done through the sex-workers themselves who promoted the program and spread awareness. Eventually these sex-workers moved this project from just being health focused, towards empowering the sex-workers for a better tomorrow and demanding human rights protections.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Debrani Kar, *Kolkatar Nagarnati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd. Calcutta, 1995. p.68

⁷ Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005, p.133

amount within a certain period, the ornament would go back to the shop owner. Whatever was the current rate of gold on the day of taking loan was the basis of the amount of lending loan. The price or monetary value of the deposited gold jewelry would be measured or weighed on the basis/line of that current rate of the gold on that particular day concerned and half the value of the gold was the available loan amount. For example a girl goes with a gold chain weighing 1 *bhori* 4 *annas* (approximately 11 grams); and on that day the going rate of gold was 2000 rupees. Then the price of the chain on the day comes to 2500 rupees. The maximum loan amount available to the girl would be 1250 rupees.⁸

2.1.3. Chotawallas

Those who did not have gold, use to borrow money from 'Chotawallas'. In these red light areas, these *chotawallas* were usually the rich and influential men of the locality, like landlords, local *Dadas* or goons or their relatives. Before lending they used to get a white paper with a revenue stamp signed (thumb impressions in most cases) by the borrower. It would read as: *I, Ms. so and so is borrowing 5,000 rupees from this dada. I will repay him within such and such date. If I fail to do so, I am bound to give my such and such thing to dada.*

There was no mention about the interest. But in effect, the *dadas* would collect 2 rupees per day for 100; and that came to 730% per annum. Here too, the fine or payment for default was similar. If any sex-worker failed to repay on a certain day, her penalty @ 5 per 100 rupees would be added to the principal. For example, a girl has borrowed 1000 rupees. She repays a daily amount of 50 (20 rupees interest and 30 towards principal). After repaying for 5 days, her repayable loan amount come to the original loan amount less Rs.30 for 5 days {or, $1000 - 30 \times 5 = 850$.} For some serious problem if a girl fails to make any payment on the sixth day, her *Dadon* or loan amount would become 5 rupees per 100. That comes to 40 rupees for $800 + 2.50 \text{ for } 50 = \text{a total of Rs } 42.50$. In case of *Kistiwallas* or installment payment, there was a convenience. Once the principal amount was repaid, the penalties were deducted on a daily basis. But in case of *Chotawallas*, the penalty amount was added to the principal amount. So, or failing to repay on the sixth day, the principal becomes $850 + 42.50 = 892.50$.⁹ At this rate if anyone failed to pay the installment for 5 days in succession, one can imagine the consequences. Interest, and interest on interest, would bind the borrower in a perpetual debt-trap from which it was impossible to come out. All her belongings would go to the *chotawalla* one by one. And finally she herself would be reduced to a slave. As long as she lived, until she fell sick, all her earnings would go to the *chotawalla*. As long as she was not too old or till she had some flesh left on her bones, she had to 'work' for her moneylender and stand on the street from morning 9 to night 12 o'clock. There was no question of rest even for common cold, fever or menstrual periods. If she refused, the severity of punishment would be unimaginable. Thrashes and beatings with sticks were routine affair; there have been instances where hot chilly pepper was put inside her vagina in a most cruel form of punishment.¹⁰

2.2. Chit Funds

The most favorite saving-scheme of a sex-worker is 'daily collection'. Before this, the 'Chit-Fund' used to collect whatever amount they chose to pay for 2/3 years. After the end of that period, say on the 25th month they used to pay $\frac{1}{4}$ of the amount on top of the principal. And after 3 years, they would pay half the amount as interest. Like this tempting them with the assurance of paying $\frac{1}{4}$ or $\frac{1}{2}$ a rupee for every one rupee, these chit-funds used to collect money for years. Then, as the time for repayment neared, they put down the shutters of their office and vanished. Being illiterate, the women were unable to make FIR, social factors did not allow them to do much by way of demanding justice. They had no other go but to cry their hearts out. 'In this way in red light areas many Chit Funds have thrived, made lakhs of rupees and finally closed down and fled.'¹¹

⁸ Ibid. pp.133-135

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid. pp.135-36

¹¹ Ibid. pp.136-37

One chit fund which was not that much famous was the Monali Fund. This chit fund collapsed and resulted into 'losses of hundreds of thousands of rupees of sex-workers in the Sonagachi area'. After this incident sex-workers and other residents moved to the police-station and lodged a complaint but despite all efforts they never got their money back. It is very much easy to borrow loans and taking loans is intrinsically connected to the part of the system in the red-light area. Masis and land lords lend 'soft loans' and the repayment of that loan is subjected to the adjustment against the rent that is paid daily basis, with interest. Traders are also found to lend money/loan. The common interest on loans is 60 percent.¹² Excessive expense over income often pushes larger section of the sex-workers into debt. 'Traders going from house to house sell their goods-foods, clothes, jewellery – at a mark- up, and give easy credit with high interest to sex-workers.' Many women are indebted not only to money lenders and landlords but also to tailors, clothes sellers, food-stalls owners, dispensaries, cigarette stall owners and police as well as clerk of the court of the law.¹³

2.3. Usha Multipurpose Co-operative Society Ltd

With the coming up of the NGO, *Durbar* (run by sex-workers) during 1993 the situation started to undergo a dramatic transformation. Soon after the Sonagachhi Project started, under the guidance of the *All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health* (AIHH & PH), the combined demand of these social victims reached to them. It was approached by the sex-workers to them for somehow stopping the business of these exploiters. First it was planned to approach the banks and request them for co operation and somehow open bank accounts in these girls' names. After a few visits to the banks and talking to the Managers it was understood that they were not interested to open any account without a valid ration card. Then it was thought of L.I.C. But then if discontinued for some reason, it was very difficult to get back money from the L.I.C. Moreover, it was also realized that the mechanical, though systematic method of the Corporation would not suit these illiterate girls. *Durbar* was looking for something which would have flexibility as well as a personal touch of affection. From this requirement of personal touch and a sense of genuine sincerity, the idea of forming a co-operative evolved. It was assumed that this co operative would yield three benefits: (I) Firstly, since it would be formed by the sex-workers themselves, it would not only provide a safe place to keep their own money, (II) they would earn interest too. (III) Moreover, as the co operative would be their own, they would have a sense of personal involvement in it.

In the year 1994, the co operative was formed under the enthusiasm of Dr. Smarajit Jana*. First with six girls the co operative opened. For registering it as a society, it was named it 'Usha Co operative'. The very idea of opening a co operative by sex-workers gave the government co operative officers the creeps. The deep- rooted belief that prostitution was immoral made the idea seem ridiculous to them. But, after lots of efforts and continuous attempt to meet the officers and follow up the matter, finally with the help of Co-operative Minister Saral Deb during that time, in 1995, this 'Usha Cooperative' came into existence after the government amended the existing rules and the Co-operative department allowed the sex-workers to open a co-operative society of their own. After getting acceptance from the ministry level, the other officers of the department also became enthusiastic. It was their idea to change the name. They suggested that in future, under the same registration, the girls could start some business venture. So the word 'multipurpose' was added. The full name of the co operative was 'Usha Multipurpose Co operative Society Ltd.'¹⁴

In this co-operative system, 'Savings accounts', 'Fixed Deposits' and 'Monthly Income Scheme' have been opened. Moreover, there are 'recurring deposits' and 'daily collection schemes'. If any member needs loans, the society offered a loan up to 20000 rupees on a long term basis. At present (2005), the total number of members of this co operative has touched 7000. Not only that, today the yearly turnover of this co-operative is about 8.5 *crores* (85 million rupees), and its total assets is touching 3 *crores* (30 million rupees).

Other than savings and loan schemes, Usha co-operative has now started diversifying its activities into various other fields, like-marketing of condoms, fishery in Baruipur and general farming. It has also taken

¹² Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightholme, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta, Stree*, Kolkata, 2002, p.98

¹³ Ibid. p.95

¹⁴ Mrinal Kanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Durbar Prakashani, Dey Book Store, Kolkata 2005', pp.137-138. * Dr. Smarajit Jana – The Director of *Sonagachhi Project* under the guidance of *All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health* (AIHH & PH)

steps at starting some self-employment programme for the prostitutes who run out of business in old age. It has now made its own independent place in society. Moreover, in 2001, it was awarded the best co operative society by way of highest performance by women in the field of loan recovery. Once upon a time the various money-lenders like, *Chotawallas* and *Kistiwallas* used to exploit these girls, and they would run away from them. Now these sex-workers confidently resist their entry into the locality. They enlighten the newcomers and make awareness campaigns among women not to fall into the traps of these moneylenders. What is really to be appreciated is that these girls are now so conscious that they themselves made a rule that no one should unofficially lend money outside at a high rate of interest. Those who try to do so will not only be termed as filthy '*chotawallas*', they would be considered as going against the interests of 'Durbar'.¹⁵ Among various objectives, another was to secure the future of the children of sex-workers. Sex-workers desire their daughter not to come into the profession of prostitution and they think borrowing loan from Bank can secure their children's future. They think this step would surely offer the next generation the opportunity to live a healthy life.¹⁶ With a deposit of Rs.7,000 collected from 50 members, the society came up in less than a month's time on June 22nd June, 1995. It had a clause on its membership which said '*membership of the society is open to female individuals above the age of 18, including sex-workers and ex-sex-workers as well as sympathizers, competent of contract and residing permanently within the area of membership.*'¹⁷

In 2004, the State Bank of India – the biggest commercial Bank in the country, encouraged sex-workers to open Savings Banks Account at its branches located in red-light areas. This one is a marketing exercise which doubles also social service. Instead of approaching the sex-workers directly, the bank staffs are approaching Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) to act as the via-media. On 30th June, 2004, over 300 sex-workers opened their savings account at SBI's Jorasanko Branch in Kolkata, located at the heart of Sonagachhi, the largest and oldest red-light area housing over 30,000 registered sex-workers. Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee (DMSC) had recommended their names. According to the Branch Manager of the Jorasanko Branch, Subroto Roy, the concessions offered to the workers included relaxation in the proof of identity norms. For these reasons, 300 sex-workers had been waived of these 'stipulation' as they were already recommended by the NGO which already had an account with the branch. Financial relaxations included cheque-book facility with a minimum deposit of Rs.250 instead of the usual Rs.500. In taking special initiative to interact with DMSC and getting these 300 accounts for the bank, the most credit goes to General Secretary of the Banks' Staff Association's, Ashok Dutta. He said, 'on the one hand, you can call it a social service. You can also say that this is an initiative by the SBI Employees to mobilize deposits.' According Ms. Sapna Gayen, the DMSC President of this time, 'right now, we have started this initiative only in the Sonagachhi area. In the next phase, we will take similar initiatives for sex-workers operating in other red-light areas.'¹⁸

Thus, sex-workers in Kolkata would no longer need to suppress information on their profession while opening Bank Account. Sex-workers have been forced till now to suppress their identity while opening bank accounts. In the profession column, they usually wrote 'house-wives or domestic-help', according to M.K. Dutta. SBI was planning similar campaigns in Mumbai and Delhi too. Sapna Gayen further said, 'sex-workers generally keep their savings at home or with a person they trust. By keeping the money in the bank, they can earn an interest as well.'¹⁹

3. Conclusion

This article focuses upon the financial aspects of the lives of sex-workers that regulate their life to a larger extent from various dimensions. Other elements e.g. *Masi*, fixed clients money lenders plays a big role to influence and regulate the financial aspects of sex-workers. Sex-workers become subjected to the economic exploitations of money lenders in many ways. But in course of time, with the rise of movement of sex-workers of Kolkata and establishment of Durbar – the NGO run by the sex-workers gradually infused a

¹⁵ Ibid. pp.139-40

¹⁶ *Santander Aloy Pherate Samabay Gorlen Jaunakarmeera*, Anonda Bazar Patrika, 18th August, 1996

¹⁷ *Red-light blues for money lending mafia*, Hindustan Times, Calcutta, 6th July, 1995

¹⁸ Sumanta Ray Chaudhury, *Bottom line: NGOs being roped in Special Concessions offered in Red-light areas: SBI Targets Sex-workers for Savings Accounts*, The Financial Express, 7th June, 2004

¹⁹ *Pass Book and a Passport to Dignity for Sex-workers*, Hindustan Times, Kolkata, 14th June, 2004

sense of self reliance among them which finally resulted into the formation of Usha Multipurpose Co-operative Society Ltd. in 1995. It gave sex-workers huge opportunity to opt for saving money under various schemes. It gave security to the life of sex-workers and their children. The self employment programmes for the sex-workers and other business ventures taken by them under the leadership of this cooperative made sex-workers more self dependent. It infused a sense of empowerment among them and helped them get rid of exploitation (partially) exercised by money-lenders. Usha Multipurpose Co-operative played the role of a mediator between marginalized section (read sex-workers) and conventional mainstream society. The landmark incident occurred in 2004 when a large number of sex-workers opened savings account in State Bank of India (the biggest commercial bank in India) located in Sonagachhi red-light area of Kolkata, disclosing their real identity as a sex-worker in sharp contrast to the early days when a sex-worker had to suppress her actual identity and pose false identity to open bank account. It throws light upon the progressive outlook of the society and upholds the empowerment of the sex-workers. The entire transition occurred with the establishment of Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee (DMSC) and the movement launched by them in order to secure rights of sex-workers.

Thus, the savings habits of the prostitutes of Kolkata reflect the transition of lives of sex-workers from the world of suppression to the world of empowerment.

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