

**June 19, 2006**

**Sonagachi's 'Agrey-Wali' (from Agra) has become Folklore**

**By Sudhir Mishra**

Kolkata.

'Agrey-wali' literally means "from Agra". This name itself is an identity. In Sonagachi, which is the country's biggest flesh-trade market, Neelkamal, a brothel, is a brand. And the 'Agrey-wali' are known as the most expensive sex workers.

This 'A-class' category of sex-workers, celebrate the birth of a girl. Few claim to have seen the Agrey Wali, but legends abound. People say they have never been exposed to sunlight. The biggest organization of sex-workers, the Durbar Women's Co-operative Society, which is actively working on HIV/AIDS prevention in the area, has not managed to reach these sex workers. Promotion of condoms, first undertaken by the 'Sonagachi Project' has not found many takers there.

Working on a 'Kaiser Health Journalism Fellowship', this correspondent reached Kolkata to study the situation of HIV/AIDS in the state. Even today the 'City of Joy' looks like the Calcutta painted in the literature of yesteryear.

There is something for everyone in this metropolitan city. Trams, taxis, buses and even pedestrians jostle for space on the same road. On the side, one can smell the delicious street food being savoured -- egg rolls, dry fish, and the famous Bengali sweets. Half-starved people pulling people on a rickshaw manually are a common sight. Poverty is all over. But then the city's metro train system offers a completely different view. And away from all of this are Kolkata's sleazy streets: There are thousands of sex workers trying to earn a living in Sonagachi, Rambagan, Bau Bazaar, Khideerpur, Kalighat, Laukharmath and Tollyganj.

The Sonagachi Project started in 1992 to help address the needs of over seven thousand sex-workers in Sonagachi alone. Mrinalkanti Dutta alias Bachchu Da, of the Durbar Women's Co-operative Society, says, "the situation of the sex-workers has improved tremendously from the time this project has started. They have their own bank and are free from the greedy moneylenders. Their children go to school. The local dons and the police also do not bother them. Health services are available for HIV/AIDS, STDs (Sexually Transmitted Disease) and other diseases".

But when asked about 'Agrey-Wali' and the Neelkamal brothel, even he fell silent. He simply said, "they are A-class sex-workers. They are in high demand as compared to girls from Bangladesh and Nepal". In fact, the Neelkamal brothel has always been an enigma.

Elorea, a social worker, associated with Kolkata Samaritans said, "I haven't seen such a beautiful woman in my life. Long, black hair, sharp features. I had gone there for my work while completing an M.A in Sociology", she said. However, it was very difficult to

get to them. Neelkamal does not interact much with outsiders. They have their regular clients and others are not even allowed around the outside of the brothel.

When asked for a meeting with them, officials of the Durbar Women's Co-operative Society, have always been unsuccessful. One of the office bearers said, "many HIV/AIDS programmes don't even get to see the dance at Neelkamal". A middleman remarked, "equipped with hi-tech facilities, this brothel is like a five- star hotel. As they hail from a tribal community from the outskirts of Agra they are known as 'Agrey-wali'.

This community traces their roots to mistresses of kings during the Mughal era. Through to today, they are said to have loyal clients. Customers are willing to spend more money in this brothel as compared to any other in Sonagachi. The real challenge, though, is the HIV/AIDS prevention programme. The local dons of this brothel do not allow NGOs (Non Government Organisations) to come anywhere near the place. So, Neelkamal remains the only brothel in which the HIV/AIDS prevention programmes are being conducted.