

ARTICLES

INDIA'S SHAME

SEXUAL SLAVERY AND POLITICAL CORRUPTION ARE LEADING TO
AN AIDS CATASTROPHE ■ BY ROBERT I. FRIEDMAN



CAGES ON FALKLAND ROAD AT NIGHT

BOMBAY

MIRA WAS 13 YEARS OLD when a small, nervous man from Bombay came to her remote village in Nepal looking for domestic servants. He was offering 600 rupees a month, or \$20, a fortune to subsistence farmers scratching out a living in this tiny, landlocked Hindu kingdom in the Himalayas. Mira's father wanted his oldest unmarried daughter to go with the man, but Mira countered, "I can do a better job, Papa. Send me."

Not only had Mira never gone to school but she had never ventured beyond her tribal village. She imagined that Bombay would be a magical place filled with Hindu movie stars and gleaming palaces. She knew that if she stayed at home she would become a burden to her father, who couldn't afford to pay a dowry to a prospective bridegroom's family. It is still common for Hindu brides who renege on their dowries to be drenched in kerosene and ritually burned to death.

Mira was bundled off in the back of a produce truck, which made the long, winding trip to the Indian border, and then south to the great commercial port city of Bombay. Mira soon found that she wouldn't be working as a domestic servant at all. Her father had been duped into giving her to a trafficker in female flesh. Mira was delivered to a brothel on Bombay's notorious Falkland Road, where, in an area as vast as Manhattan's Central Park, tens of thousands of young women in brightly colored saris are displayed in row after row of zoo-like animal cages.

When Mira, a sweet-faced virgin with golden brown skin, refused to have sex, she was dragged into a torture chamber in a dark alley used for "breaking in" new girls. She was locked in a narrow, windowless room without food or water. On the fourth day, when she still refused to work, one of the madam's thugs, called a *goonda*, wrestled her to the floor and banged her head against the concrete until she passed out. When she awoke, she was naked; a rattan cane smeared with pureed red chili peppers had been shoved up her vagina. Later, she was raped by the *goonda*. "They torture you until you say yes," Mira recently recounted during an interview here. "Nobody hears your cries."

After the rape, "I put on cheap makeup and moved into a cage where I was forced to solicit," she says. The madam told Mira that she had been sold to the brothel for 50,000 rupees (about \$1,700), and that she had to work until she paid off her debt. But girls like Mira are given only a fraction of their fees and then have to pay the madam for rent, electricity and food. Typically, it takes up to fifteen years for them to purchase their freedom. During that time, if the young woman doesn't succumb to AIDS, malaria or TB, she is a sex slave. She is not allowed to leave the red-light area, which is cordoned off from the rest of Bombay by a well-organized army of pimps and goons. And if she were to escape, where would she go? In a conservative, patriarchal Hindu society obsessed with caste and racial purity, she would almost certainly be shunned by her family for being "polluted." In Mira's case, her freedom was purchased by a client who became her pimp. Today, at the age of 35, no longer a prostitute, she runs a small tea shop in a teeming Bombay slum.

There are more than 100,000 female prostitutes in Bombay, Asia's largest sex bazaar. Ninety percent are indentured slaves, with as many as half trafficked from Nepal, according to human rights groups. Twenty percent of Bombay's commercial sex workers are under 18. Child prostitutes as young as 9 fetch up to 60,000 rupees, or \$2,000, at auctions where Arabs from the Persian Gulf bid against Indian men who believe sleeping with a virgin cures gonorrhea and syphilis. "There are lots of rich men in India who can afford to buy virgins so they won't get AIDS," says Maureen Aung-Thwin, a Human Rights Watch official. "Men brag about it."

Actually, more than half of Bombay's prostitutes are infected with H.I.V., according to Human Rights Watch, which says that

India's red-light districts are the primary vector of its spread into the general population. With as many as 10 million prostitutes, India is in the throes of an AIDS pandemic, and Bombay is the epicenter. India's illicit flesh trade, then, is not just a daunting human rights problem but the source of one of the world's worst health crises.

Currently, there are an estimated 5 million H.I.V.-infected people in India. Dr. Subhash Hira, an Indian-American who runs an AIDS clinic in Bombay funded by the University of Texas, predicts that there may be as many as 20 million by the year 2000. However, if the virus continues to spread at its present pace, doubling every year, by the end of the decade 160 million Indians—one out of every six—will be H.I.V. positive. In Bombay alone,

AIDS will kill 10,000 people a month by the end of the century, says Dr. I.S. Gilada, a leading Indian AIDS expert. India, the world's second most populous country,

will squander the hard-earned gains it has made on health care and education since winning independence in 1947. Its economy, already tenuous, will collapse, and AIDS will pull the country into a black hole of despair unlike anything seen in this century.

Most of India's national politicians and public health officials are in a state of denial. And in Bombay, top politicians and police officials don't care because they are in league with the mafia that runs the fabulously lucrative flesh trade, exchanging blanket protection for cash payoffs and donations to campaign war chests. The corruption reaches the top rung of the ruling Congress party in New Delhi, which faces national elections this spring. Pure greed aside, many politicians view sex workers as an expendable commodity. One magazine publisher in Bombay told me that AIDS will benefit the country because it will depopulate the vast underclass.

Surveying the bleak panorama of sexual slavery, corruption and neglect, Dr. Hira predicts nothing less than a medical holocaust. Hindus, Hira reminded me during an interview, ceremonially burn their dead. In ten years, he says, Indian "skies will be black with ashes" of AIDS victims. "Crematoriums will be working overtime."

Bombay is a paradigm of urban decay; one-third of the city's 20 million people are homeless, either living on the streets or in squatters' camps built atop putrid landfills. The clammy air is thick with oily black smoke and industrial poisons. The ocean is used as a cesspool; the drinking water is fetid. Last June, a radioactive leak at the city's nuclear power plant contaminated the drinking water of outlying villages for more than forty-five days. The bleak Victorian architecture of neo-Gothic spires built by the British casts a Dickensian gloom over this sprawling Asian slumtown. Bombay has 100,000 people per square kilometer, and during rush hours a lone pedestrian can get completely turned around and carried off by the human tidal wave of commuters rushing to catch jam-packed trains to the far-flung suburbs. Aldous Huxley aptly described Bombay as "one of the most appalling cities of either hemisphere."

Built on a thin expanse of land that juts into the Arabian Sea, the city also has great wealth. Fortunes have been made in real es-

Robert I. Friedman is an investigative reporter whose work has appeared in numerous publications, including *Vanity Fair*, *New York* and *The New Yorker*.

tate, which is now more expensive per square foot than in New York, Tokyo or Hong Kong. Bombay is India's commercial center, generating 35 percent of the nation's revenue. More than 5,000 industries lure millions of migrant workers from as far away as Bangladesh, swelling dilapidated hostels with hundreds of men to a room. The city is also the center of India's powerful and pervasive mafia, which finances everything from political parties to "Bollywood," Bombay's flourishing film industry. Added to this mix is the most combustible communal politics on the subcontinent. Bal Thackeray, the saffron-robed leader of the fanatical right-wing Shiv Sena Party, which controls the state and local government in a coalition with another extremist party, is a self-confessed admirer of Adolf Hitler. He has called for the 'expulsion of Bombay's large Muslim community as well as its migrant workers. In late 1992 and early 1993, anti-Muslim pogroms resulted in more than 1,000 deaths.

The pogroms were spearheaded by the Hindu underclass. The children of the upper bourgeoisie, who speed around Bombay's congested streets in Jeep Cherokees with tinted windows, have decidedly different interests, however. A recent survey at a well-to-do suburban high school found that 70 percent of the students wanted a career in organized crime. "Good money and good fun," said one student.

But nothing is less glamorous than the mob-controlled red-light district. I spent nearly a month in the area, talking to commercial sex workers, madams and Indian wiseguys. It is usually closed to outsiders. Several years ago, a Dutch doctor compiling an ethnographic study of the area for the World Health Organization was kidnapped by the mafia. He was released unharmed three days later and warned to stop probing the links among politicians, the mob and prostitution. The doctor fled Bombay. As for the Indian press, it is toothless. "Journalism in India has always been considered a gracious form of clerkship," wrote V.S. Naipaul. Many journalists are also on the take.

The mafia has a lot at stake. Publicity about AIDS has already cut into its profits, and the mob is keen to avoid further scrutiny. Although prostitution is legal in India, brothel keeping, living off the earnings of a prostitute, soliciting or seducing for the purposes of prostitution are all punishable offenses. There are severe penalties for child prostitution as well as the trafficking of women. But as I was to learn, anything can be bought in the tenderloin district—from black-market kidneys and corneas for transplants, to newborn babies. "There are a lot of perversions in India," says Sujata Anandan, chief political correspondent for the Bombay newspaper *Indian Express*. The city's red-light district may be the most perverse three square kilometers on earth.

The district is actually two interconnected neighborhoods in South Central Bombay sandwiched between immense Muslim and Hindu slums, the largest in Asia. It is just half a kilometer from two major railway stations, and twenty-five city bus routes ply the area. Interspersed among the twenty-four lanes of brothels are auto garages, small restaurants, thirty liquor stores, 200 bars and numerous flophouses, as well as three police stations (with 900 cops), massive tenements and a municipal school where the dropout rate is 95 percent.

The metal cubicles where the girls perform their tricks and otherwise live each have a pallet and are no more than 3 feet by 6.

There was little to prepare me for my first visit. Narrow lanes lined with wooden frame brothels and gilded balconies were clogged with taxis vying for the right of way with slow-moving ox carts. Sewers ran into the lanes, creating gooey ponds. Mounds of garbage attracted foraging goats and armies of rats. Children in rags played amid the squalor. Even in lanes where sewage was ankle deep, squatters were bivouacked in lean-tos covered in black plastic. People relieved themselves against buildings or in rodent-infested alleys. The stinging scent of urine trapped in the sticky tropical heat, the car fumes and the moldering garbage induced olfactory flashbacks hours after I was back in my air-conditioned hotel.

It was a Friday afternoon and I was being escorted by Shilpa Patil, a 30-year-old social worker who has spent five years in the red-light district, urging prostitutes to use condoms. Like all N.G.O. workers, Shilpa had to get the mafia's consent to work in the area, promising not to talk to the women about social issues and to ignore the rampant child prostitution.

"At first I was scared," Shilpa said. "But I got used to it. The women are eager for compassion and they have a lot of it to give themselves." The only thing that still frightens her are the eunuchs, and as we walked across what's known as Eunuch Lane, where more than 2,000 of them work, she steered me to the middle of the muddy road. "They demand things from you—condoms, free medicine—and if you can't provide it, they abuse you," Shilpa said. The eunuchs, some of them in short black leather skirts and others in saris, were virtually indistinguishable from the female prostitutes, except many more of them were extremely beautiful. The eunuchs, or *hijras*, have deep religious roots in Hinduism. As young boys they are abandoned or sold by their families to a sex cult; the boys are taken into the jungle, where a priest cuts off their genitals in a ceremony called *nirvana*. The priest then folds back a strip of flesh to create an artificial vagina. Eunuchs are generally more ready to perform high-risk sex than female prostitutes, and some Indian men believe they can't contract H.I.V. from them. The leader of Bombay's eunuchs, an obese transsexual named Guru-Ma, is venerated by her followers. Once Shilpa was forcibly whisked off the street by a eunuch to meet Guru-Ma, who sat in a tiny room like the Caterpillar Queen surrounded by disciples. "They are quite proud of their breasts," recalled Shilpa, who told me they enjoyed raising their saris and flaunting their bodies.

We stopped outside a brothel where Shilpa was warmly greeted by two teenage prostitutes picking lice from each other. One girl's long black hair was damp and matted. Shilpa explained that her scalp oozed from eczema, and that some Indian men believe that it brings good luck to sleep with the afflicted prostitutes. Infants with the condition are called "pus babies" and their parents often sell them to brothels for a premium.

Shilpa led me into a dank hallway and up a winding staircase to the second floor, where dozens of sari-clad prostitutes sat on wooden benches that overlooked a half-moon-shaped interior courtyard. There were twenty-five metal cubicles, each with a pallet. The cubicles, where the girls perform their tricks and otherwise live, were no more than 3 feet by 6. In one of them, decorated with a montage of Hindu elephant gods and movie stars, a

prostitute dozed while a toddler scooted across the floor sucking on a used condom. "The baby is H.I.V. positive," Shilpa said. "Her mother died of AIDS. The girls are raising her communally. All the girls want babies. It's their only sense of family."

Inside a large common room, a handful of young sex workers watched a movie on TV, while several others played cards on the floor. Shilpa told the madam, an older woman with a hard stare, that I was a social worker from America. Shilpa said I never would have been allowed to enter the brothel if they had known I was a reporter. Still, it is taboo for them to complain about their job. If they had, they would have been beaten after I left. But they freely griped about the cops, who receive weekly bribes called *haftas* from madams to look the other way. Cops often bust the girls anyway and shake them down for more money. "Each girl has several cops whom they service for free," hoping they are buying an extra insurance policy, Shilpa said.

The girls' sole escape is Hindi movies—mawkish soap operas in which cops and politicians are inevitably shown as shifty villains who get their comeuppance in the final reel. There are thirty-five cinemas in the area, and the prostitutes go several times a week. The movies cost a few rupees, or pennies, but they never seem to have enough for a ticket. Though on average the girls see six customers a day, who pay between \$1.10 and \$2 per sex act, the madam gets the money up front. By the time the madam deducts for food, electricity and rent, as well as payment—with interest—on her purchase price, there is almost nothing left. So to pay for movies, clothes, makeup and extra food to supplement a bland diet of rice and dal, the girls have to borrow from moneylenders at an interest rate of up to 500 percent. They are perpetually in hock.

The red-light district wasn't always a depraved slum. During British colonial rule, most prostitutes were Eurasian, and the ground-floor structures in the tenderloin weren't cages but rather well-tended bungalows that catered to European clients.

"The area began to deteriorate in the 1970s due to the prevalence of the mafia, political corruption and the easy availability of flesh," says Dr. Jairaj Thanekar, the head of Bombay's Municipal Health Clinic. It underwent further change in the 1980s, when Gulf Arabs started flocking to Bombay. They came for sex, and their tastes ran to children. "The mafia took the children into five-star hotels," says Dr. Thanekar, who wrote a classified report on the nexus between prostitution, the police and politicians in Bombay for the city government, which promptly shelved it. "The mafia paid the police and politicians a lot of money to close their eyes."

The "Tulasa case" momentarily put a crimp in child prostitution. In 1982, Tulasa was abducted from a village near Katmandu in Nepal and sold to a brothel in Bombay. The 13-year-old child was dressed in European-style skirts and blouses and taken to luxury hotels to serve mostly Arab clients until a suspicious hotel manager finally called the police. Hospitalized, Tulasa was found to be suffering from three types of venereal disease and tuberculosis. Subsequent revelations about police complicity in child prostitution rocked the political establishment. In 1985, India and Nepal signed a treaty for the rescue and repatriation of Nepa-

lese girls enslaved in India's brothels. Tulasa was sent to a sanitarium in Nepal and has repeatedly tried to commit suicide.

Publicity surrounding Tulasa's case only drove child prostitution deeper underground, though evidence of it wasn't hard to find. Shilpa led me past a brothel next door to a municipal school, where the faces of very young children peered listlessly from behind a barred second-story balcony. "I was never able to get inside that building," Shilpa says. "All the brothels have some child prostitutes. When we enter, they're hidden in attics or behind false walls."

We visited another brothel, made up entirely of Nepalese sex workers. They earn higher fees from clients, who find their golden skin exotic and

their personalities more docile than Indians. The madam invited us to sit in a small anteroom. Shilpa said she was 35, but she looked much older. "She's H.I.V. infected," Shilpa told me. I asked if she had stopped sleeping with clients or was at least using condoms. "I still see regular customers, and they don't like condoms," the madam replied curtly.

Then, from behind a soiled curtain, "Mila" appeared with a red rose. She had long black hair, luminescent golden skin and was wearing an elaborately woven yellow silk sari. She was beautiful. And not yet in puberty. Her eyes were wildly dilated, and she walked toward us like a sailor on a pitching deck. She was obviously drugged. She handed Shilpa the rose and went to a kiosk to fetch orange sodas. When she returned, she sat next to us like a puppy. We suspected she was about to be auctioned, no doubt for a large sum. "Arabs still come and pay a lot of money" for sex with children, Dr. Thanekar said after I told him what I'd seen. "Bombay is a flesh bargain" for them, he added. "We are concerned about child prostitution, but the government is not."

Murli Deora is a political powerhouse. A member of Parliament from India's ruling Congress party, he chairs two influential committees—one that sets guidelines for avoiding conflicts of interest and corruption in government, and another that oversees the awarding of government contracts. He represents the 2 million people of South Central Bombay, which includes the tenderloin as well as the city's poshest neighborhoods. "The poorest of the poor and the richest of the rich live in my district," Deora said during an interview in his office, where photos of himself with Vice President Al Gore and with Ted Turner and Jane Fonda are displayed as trophies of his far-reaching influence.

A wealthy industrialist, Deora built his career by catering to Bombay's moneyed elite. "My district includes the diamond district, and I help them a lot," he boasted. "The biggest clothes merchants in the world are in my district, so we help them a lot. My district is the main trading and commercial center in Bombay." As head of the Congress party in Bombay, Deora has political influence that stems in large part from his ability to tap into the city's great wealth, and he has become the party's most prolific fundraiser. "He keeps a very, very low profile, but everyone knows that his tremendous power is money power," says S.S. Tinaikar, a former chief executive of the Bombay Municipal Corporation, which runs the city government.

But I hadn't come to talk to Deora about his mastery over

'The mafia paid police and politicians to close their eyes,' asserts the doctor who wrote a report, quickly shelved, for the city government.

money and politics. I wanted to know what he was doing to stop the slave trade and prostitution that goes on openly in his district. Astonishingly, he insisted that the brothels I had just visited were perfectly legal and licensed by the police. Even after I cited the Indian law that outlaws brothels, Deora wouldn't concede the point.

"Child prostitution certainly is not legal," I pushed on. "Girls as young as 9 are working as prostitutes in your district. Why don't you have the police crack down on it?"

"The government is aware of child prostitution, but it's not doing much," Deora admitted tersely.

I asked if he knew that most prostitutes were indentured servants, and that many thousands had been shanghaied from Nepal.

I handed him a copy of a Human Rights Watch report documenting the allegations. Deora said he had seen local newspaper accounts about the report, which had been released in New York a few weeks earlier, but that he himself had never seen a sex slave. "People tell me about it," he said. "I don't think this can happen in India—that there are women forced to work as sex slaves; it's difficult to believe."

Well, then, what about the widely held view that prostitution is run by organized crime in collusion with crooked cops and politicians?

"I don't have any knowledge about that," he said with growing impatience. "I've never seen any corruption."

But South Central Bombay is home to the biggest organized crime family in Asia—and Deora is allegedly in the thick of it. It is run by Dawood Ibrahim, the John Gotti of India. A Muslim, he began his career as a humble kebab seller in a congested South Central slum. Today, his heavily armed gang is into everything from international heroin smuggling to financing political campaigns. In response to the lethal wave of anti-Muslim pogroms that rocked Bombay in late 1992 and early 1993, Ibrahim carried out a spectacular terrorist attack directed by Pakistani intelligence, Indian officials assert. On March 12, 1993, car bombs ripped through the city's swankiest hotels, the stock exchange and Air India's sleek downtown office tower, killing more than 300 people; 144 suspects were arrested, among them Sanjay Dutt, India's top male film star, and son of Sunil Dutt, a film legend and Congress party M.P. Lost in the massive press about the Dutt was the fact that one bombing suspect said in a signed confession that Ibrahim and Deora were close associates.

In the wake of the Bombay blasts, the central government assembled a blue-ribbon panel to investigate the nexus between organized crime and the political establishment. Released last July, the Vohra Committee report said what the Indian public had long suspected—that there was no longer any difference between the mafia and politicians. "This debasement of Indian democracy is neither new nor accidental," editorialized *India Today* after the report was made public. "Every mainstream party has links with criminals. From thugs who...run away with ballot boxes to dons who keep party coffers full." In 1992 alone, forty candidates in Bombay's municipal elections had criminal records. In Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, 180 of 425 legislators have rap sheets. When Sushil Sharma, head of the youth wing of the Congress party, was charged with shooting his wife to death last July, and

then of trying to cover it up by incinerating her body in a tandoori oven at a popular New Delhi restaurant, Indians shrugged it off as just one more example of political corruption. According to Indian press reports, Sharma ran a call-girl ring serving political big shots. (In the country's worst political corruption scandal since independence, seven Cabinet ministers have quit the government of Prime Minister P.V. Narasimha Rao since January for taking bribes and kickbacks for government contracts.)

The Vohra report, however, failed to name names, spiking Indians' cynicism. So when a photo in an Indian newspaper showed Deora at his sister's wedding standing next to a grinning Dawood Ibrahim, Deora was able to put it to rest by saying he had no

Murli Deora, whose Parliament seat represents posh and red-light districts, said 'I don't think [sexual slavery] can happen in India.'

idea who the guy was when the photo was snapped. "It's a cop's job, not a politician's, to root out crime and corruption," Deora told me. "How am I supposed to know if I'm

talking to someone who is a criminal? And the very fact is, if they are criminals, they should be in jail. But I ask you, how am I supposed to know if someone is a mafia don?"

But in December 1984, Deora used his underworld connections to win his first parliamentary seat, according to veteran political journalists. At the time, Deora was the Bombay Regional Congress Committee Chief. His ward bosses canvassed the mob-controlled red-light district, a Congress party stronghold, doling out booze and saris to the prostitutes and cash gifts to the madams. Shantabai, the district's most powerful madam, who controlled the votes of as many as 10,000 pimps and prostitutes, told *Bombay Magazine* in August 1985 that "when big Congress *netas* [bosses] came to me, asking for votes, I agreed. I called all the girls and told them that Indira Gandhi [who had just been assassinated] was a martyr. She was a like a mother to us. So I asked them to vote her party." Even after goons from the rival Bharatiya Janata Party threatened her, she refused to switch her allegiance, telling them that she "worked for Murli Deora," the magazine reported. On Election Day, thousands of prostitutes were herded onto trucks and driven to polling stations by Congress party toughs. In Muslim neighborhoods, Ibrahim's gang stuffed ballot boxes for Congress candidates. Deora won in a landslide.

By the late 1980s, the Congress party's heyday was over; right-wing Hindu parties were gaining ground on the promise to end corruption and to expel Bombay's Muslims. Deora's seat was vulnerable. "Which is why he settled many Nepali prostitutes in the red-light area," as well as thousands of Muslim refugees from Bangladesh, asserts the *Indian Express*'s Sujata Anandan. Deora got them ration cards, the most important document in India, Anandan says. The cards allow recipients to obtain government-surplus grain and cooking oil, and establish legal residency and the right to vote. Deora was re-elected in 1991 by a razor-thin margin. While the influx of refugees and sex slaves increased the level of misery in the red-light district, it also kept Deora in power.

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Bombay's flesh trade has evolved into a highly efficient business. It is controlled by four separate, though harmonious, crime groups: One is in charge of payoffs to police, another controls moneylending, a third maintains internal law and order, and one procures women through a vast network

stretching from South India to the Himalayas. Of the four mafia kingpins, the most powerful is Mehboob Thasildar, the procurer of women, according to well-placed Indian government sources.

Rarely has the criminal/political connection been as starkly drawn as on the afternoon of February 14, 1992, when Thasildar threw a gala party to celebrate the opening of his new restaurant named after his wife, Naazma. The restaurant is on the ground floor of a two-story, blocklong bordello also owned by Thasildar, according to the property deed, interviews and court papers. In sheer size, it is one of the biggest brothels in Bombay, with more than fifty prostitutes. The seedy locale didn't deter Deora from presiding over the event as its guest of honor. Other Congress party notables on the invitation list included the Minister of Housing for the state of Maharashtra, two state assemblymen and Nosir Mehta, the red-light district's city councilman and one of the largest brothel-owners in Bombay.

Thasildar was only too happy to talk about his work as a ward heeler for the local Congress party when I phoned him at M&M Textiles, a large fabric shop that he owns. "We did the crucial work in getting Mr. Deora elected," he said. "Yes, we raise money for the Congress party. We raise blood. We give free blood to poor people. We find places to live and jobs for the poor. And we help get votes."

He became suddenly silent when I asked him if he owned Naazma. "Why do you want to know about Naazma?" he asked before hanging up.

Next I called Thasildar's lawyer, whose name I had found in court records. "He built the restaurant," admitted Sheralli Laiwalla. "He owns the whole block. It's the red-light district. All prostitutes work there. Why do you want to know?"

Moments after my conversation with Laiwalla, Thasildar phoned me back. "How do you know me?" he asked in amazement. We agreed to meet the next day in the coffee shop of a five-star hotel, but he failed to keep the appointment.

One night Shilpa took me to meet Brij Mohan Sharma, the mafia don who runs internal security in the red-light district. Sharma is a large man with long gray hair piled on top of his head and tied in a bun. He wore a white, floor-length cotton blouse and a silver bracelet on one wrist. We sat in a small milk shop where the walls and floor were encrusted with filth.

Sharma's *goondas* patrol the area's lanes, bus depots and train stations to see that prostitutes don't escape. He settles disputes among gangsters, provides security for brothels and prevents common street crime, which is bad for business. He has been charged with disemboweling a man with a saber, but the case has been repeatedly postponed. Several years ago, he organized a labor union, ostensibly to protect the rights of prostitutes. Actually, it was just another way for the mob to keep an eye on business.

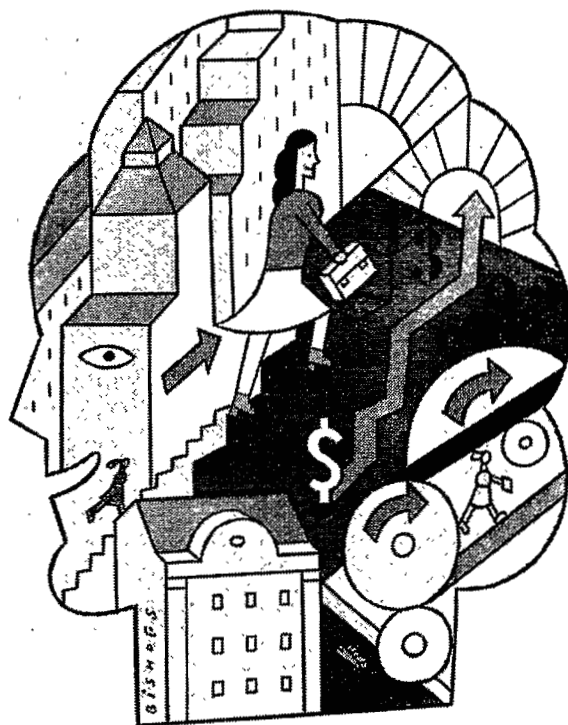
I had calculated that the red-light district generates at least \$400 million a year in revenue. I showed Sharma my math: 100,000 girls working 365 days a year, averaging six customers a day, at \$2 a trick.

"It's more than that!" Sharma scoffed, adding that the profits are plowed into gold and real estate.

I had been told that the mafia bosses had taken a keen interest in AIDS, since it has disrupted business. As head of the sham women's union, Sharma had attended an international symposium

Women Talk About Their Jobs and Their Lives

WORK MATTERS



by
SARA ANN FRIEDMAN

While the debate on women and work continues to rage in the media and in politics, this timely and powerful book lets women speak for themselves—in voices that are impassioned and alive. Sixty-five women working every imaginable job speak out on the challenges they've met in the workplace, the struggle to balance family and work, and its ultimate importance to their sense of self.

"Sara Ann Friedman creates a document of singular significance; she conducts these voices in an opera of laughter, outcries, shouts and declarations."

—Regina Barreca, author of *They Used to Call Me Snow White...But I Drifted*

Illustration: Muriel Bishel

IN BOOKSTORES NOW FROM VIKING



on AIDS hosted by the World Health Organization in Geneva in 1990. Wasn't he worried that the rapid spread of the disease would eventually force politicians to curb prostitution? "Politicians don't care about AIDS," Sharma huffed. "They say, 'Let them die, but give us the money. We want money.' Politics is a game of rascals."

But according to a classified report prepared by the Bombay Municipal Health Clinic, the mob bosses encourage H.I.V. screening in order to monitor the market value of the sex workers. If a girl is H.I.V. positive, she may be sold to a brothel in another part of Bombay and immediately replaced. "They look at girls as commodities," says the report. "If the girl is H.I.V. positive but young and beautiful—she is looked upon as a gold mine."

In July 1990, mob bosses permitted a charitable group called Savahdan to repatriate some 700 South Indian prostitutes to Madras, most of whom were H.I.V. positive. "It was perceived as a cheap way of getting rid of H.I.V.-infected girls," said the government report.

More typically, women too sick to work are cast into the street. Government hospitals won't treat prostitutes who are H.I.V. positive or who are developing the symptoms of AIDS, according to the report. In Bombay's J.J. Hospital, the largest medical facility in Asia, an H.I.V.-infected prostitute in labor was refused treatment even though she was bleeding and her condition was life-threatening. She delivered the baby in the brothel.

Madams steer sick prostitutes to any one of the red-light area's 200 unlicensed doctors, who give them mood elevators, IV drips of colored water or medicinal herbs. Meanwhile, the debt-laden prostitutes pay for their "treatment" with cash borrowed from mobbed-up moneylenders. And the mob collects a kickback from the quacks.

Though most experts believe India will soon be the AIDS capital of the world, the nation's annual AIDS budget is only about \$20 million, or slightly more than 2 cents a person. "India's rulers will not admit they have a health problem," says a U.S. State Department official. While India was accepting an \$85 million World Bank loan to set up a national AIDS control organization, the Indian Health Minister "was actually in Atlanta giving a speech to the Indian Medical Association and denying there was an AIDS problem," says Dr. Lyle Petersen, the former chief of the Seroepidemiology Branch of the Division of H.I.V./AIDS Prevention at the Centers for Disease Control. Petersen was recently in India working on the World Bank project. "At the same time I was over there looking at these figures coming out of India, and they were unbelievable," he said.

Consider a 1991 study by Representative Jim McDermott, a doctor who co-chaired a Congressional task force on the international AIDS crisis. McDermott estimated that Bombay's 100,000 prostitutes averaged 600,000 sexual contacts a day. At the time, 30 percent were H.I.V. infected, and the chance of transmission from an infected female to a male was 0.1 percent. On that basis, he projected that 200 clients were being infected every day, or 6,000 each month. More recent studies are even gloomier.

"The single most important issue right now in terms of H.I.V./AIDS is the fact that there is no treatment or preliminary care of any sort for people who are H.I.V. positive," says Sridhar Venkata-

puram, an AIDS expert at Human Rights Watch in New York. And that doesn't even begin to take into account the needs of the estimated 80,000 Indians with full-blown AIDS. And while Bombay is ground zero of India's AIDS pandemic, Dr. S.S. Salunke, head of the Maharashtra State Health Ministry, told me he recently banned AIDS education programs in public schools, bowing to pressure from conservative parents' groups. "Any health education effort brought by the government is criticized to the point where the state is almost paralyzed," says Dr. Hira.

It was a scandal at Bombay's premier blood bank, run by the Indian Red Cross, that undermined the public's trust in the medical establishment more than anything else. For years, Red Cross officials in Geneva and Bombay knew that conditions in the blood bank were deplorable, according to docu-

ments and interviews with Indian health officials. One senior Red Cross official from Geneva who inspected the facility wrote in an internal memorandum last year that conditions were as primitive as *Jurassic Park*. Rats scampered in the blood lockers; equipment to detect AIDS was often broken. Indian Red Cross officials were aware that poorly paid lab technicians were selling blood to the mafia that had tested positive for H.I.V. and been earmarked for disposal. Not coincidentally, dozens of children suffering from a form of inherited anemia who received blood transfusions in area hospitals supplied by the Bombay Red Cross were found to be H.I.V. positive this past summer. Consequently, the Indian Food and Drug Administration closed the blood bank. "It's scary," says Dr. J.N. Banerjee, an Indian Red Cross official and one of the whistleblowers. "No one knows how much bad blood is out there."

Project Child was set up in 1994 to provide daycare for the children of prostitutes. Situated on the rim of the red-light district, the Swedish-funded clinic provides hot showers, clean clothes and two meals a day for thirty-five children under 7. Forty percent are H.I.V. positive. Some have scabies, a few are malnourished and most have dental problems.

Sheela Remedios, the program director, welcomed me one morning just as the children were arriving. Huddled in small groups, waiting for a shower, they seemed very drowsy. Remedios explained that the children sleep at night under the cots their mothers use to service clients. "They are given tranquilizers to keep them quiet," she said. Even though Remedios and her staff know the prostitutes are slaves, they don't encourage them to flee because they too are afraid of the *goondas* "and the threat of physical violence," she said. And if they escaped, where to? "Will society accept them? Would I want one [to work] in my own house? I'm afraid she'd bring clients home when I'm away. So there is a real reluctance to rescue them."

In a 1995 survey of 200 prostitutes conducted by Project Child, not one said they wanted their own children to become sex workers. Yet more than 95 percent do, Remedios said. The kids in the clinic, however, had dreams like kids everywhere. One boy wanted to be a constable; another a shopkeeper. But one child, who had been repeatedly sodomized by his mother's clients, had made up his mind to become a eunuch. He had already been ritually castrated. ■

Bombay's astronomical H.I.V. infection rate hasn't stopped the state health ministry from banning AIDS education in the schools.

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