

FROM 'THEM' TO 'One of Us'

ANNAM SURESH

In a move more significant than rallies and TV chat shows, the setting-up of a high-level panel by the Supreme Court, headed by a senior advocate to set up a process of rehabilitation for one of the most violated and marginalised communities of women sex workers, will hopefully chart a fresh life for those who would



A HELPING HAND



It was not March 08, yet the Supreme Court directive last year to set up a panel to evolve a rehabilitation package for sex workers could well be a turning point for a million women trapped in prostitution with no way out and facing a grim future for their children too.

"Can you do something that the inclusion of new sex workers does not take place," Justice Misra asked senior counsel Pradip Ghosh and Jayant Bhushan, amicus curiae and members of the court-

appointed committee for putting in place a framework for identification and rehabilitation of sex workers, including transgenders.

The court said this in the course of hearing a PIL following the murder of a sex worker in Kolkata's Sonagachi red-light area. "Unless you have rehabilitation schemes, even if you rescue the sex worker, it will be of no consequence," the court observed.

The court has also suggested that the panel involve National Commission for Women, National Commission for Women and Child Welfare, *Bachpan Bachao Andolan* as well as the state and Union Territories, various NGOs in this exercise. Justice Misra said the formulation of plan for the rescue and rehabilitation of sex workers could go along with the concrete steps in this direction. She said that the court should have the satisfaction that if it was dealing with the problem, something positive and concrete should emerge in every hearing of the case.

Although there is no comprehensive rehabilitation policy for sex workers, the Ministry of Women and Child Development runs "Ujjawala", a comprehensive Scheme for prevention of trafficking and for rescue, rehabilitation and reintegration of such victims, through Non

like to exit prostitution and begin life anew. And make International Women's Day more meaningful, even if the programme is not designed to coincide with March 8 honouring the spirit of empowerment more than the day on the calendar.

When 10-year-old Asha (name changed) accompanied her aunt to see the Pujas in Kolkata, little did she realize that not only would she never see her parents again, but that her life was to change forever as well. She was not taken to the Pujas she was abandoned in Putul maasi's house. After two days of torture and starving, she realized that the only way to keep body and soul together was to do whatever the men many older than her grandfather, asked her to do. By the time she was 16, she was a seasoned sex worker, often training younger girls, while 'servicing' not less than a dozen men every night.

Over the years she has seen it all—drunken, violent abusive men who would torture her to an inch of death. The pimps, cops, local goons and brothel owners took away most of her earnings. The numerous pregnancies, some terminated, three yielding two daughters and a son. One daughter grabbed by the landlady and

sold into prostitution. Several episodes of sexually transmitted disease. And Now HIV +ve. A worthless husband-of-sorts who did nothing but live off her till he died three years ago. And a bunch of vultures waiting to take his place.

MOST STATE GOVERNMENTS, PUSHED BY THE SUPREME COURT ORDER, HAVE LAUNCHED PROGRAMMES FOR SEX WORKERS. LIKE HEALTH INSURANCE IN KOLKATA, HOUSING IN KARNATAKA, ANDHRA PRADESH AND TAMIL NADU, VOCATIONAL TRAINING IN MOST OTHER STATES.

At 35, Asha is spent, illiterate, unemployable and bankrupt. In addition, the ravages of age ensure that her clientele has thinned to a trickle of the lowest and poorest hardly enough to feed herself and her two remaining children, who she fears she will lose to prostitution. Asha is fed up, she wants to get out of this cesspool but has nowhere to go and

knows no other way to earn a living.

Across India there are millions of women who have been compelled by circumstances or forced into prostitution. Given an option, many would like to quit.

It is to facilitate such an option that last year the Supreme Court set up a panel headed by Mr Pradip Ghosh, senior Supreme Court lawyer, to discuss with all stakeholders and come up with a comprehensive policy and action plans from all states and union territories to provide viable options. While rescue frees sex workers from their immediate environment, only a sound rehabilitation policy tailored to meet their specific needs and future security can ensure not only that they do not return to prostitution, but that the next generation too is prevented from being forced into sex trade.

At a Delhi workshop in February by this panel, the most vocal suggestions have been, not surprisingly, from sex workers themselves from different parts—narrating their traumatic histories and stories of courage, listing needs, expressing apprehensions and sometimes daring to dream.

The most common demand among all groups was a safe roof over their heads,

Governmental Organisations running 76 rehabilitative homes which can accommodate up to 3800 women across the country. These homes are expected to provide food, clothing and shelter, medical care, legal aid, education vocational training and income generation activities to provide the victims with alternate livelihood option. Further, rehabilitation is also envisaged reintegration of the victims into the society for which financial assistance is provided for setting up of Half-Way Homes and for restoration of the victims to their families. However, with over 15 lakh women and girls in prostitution, this is far from adequate and many of the homes are so heavily over crowded that the benefits spread thin, if at all. Moreover, most families of rescued girls reject them and they are pushed back into prostitution.

The court had earlier said that the schemes for the rehabilitation of sex workers should also include the marketing of the products made by them. In the absence of such an arrangement, things would get back to square one as they would not be able to feed themselves, it observed.

In the course of it meetings, the panel has also received suggestions that rescued girls should not be forced to return to their families since they could be pushed back into prostitution. NGOs as well as sex workers themselves have demanded housing, ration and voter ID cards, education support for their children (and for themselves if needed) vocational training and job placement and social

reintegration assistance.

There have been replicable good practices brought to the notice of the panel a laundry run by trained ex sex-workers in Goa, a restaurant in Mysore, beauty parlours in Delhi etc. Some women have acquired training in support functions in hospitals and schools, a few have joined the police while some have set up their own businesses.

In all these ventures anonymity has been of great help. In some instances, a few have joined together to set up business and live in close proximity to be of help to one another.

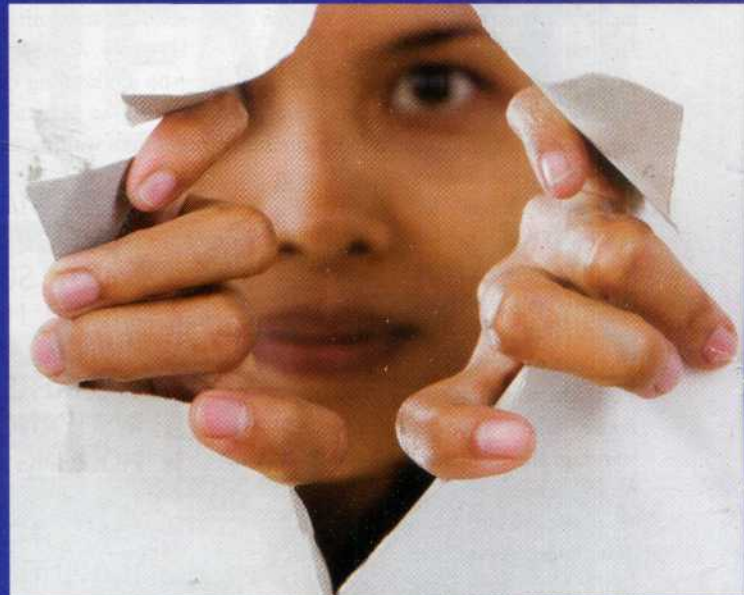
Karnataka which already has a rehabilitation and housing programme for *Devadasis* may extend it on a pilot programme for sex workers. Hyderabad already has such a plan, but the number in need of help far outnumber the aid available.

In addition, the central government will contribute Rs 10,00,00, the state governments Rs 5,00,000 and Union Territories Rs 2,00,000 each for the programme. The panel in coordination with stakeholders, activists and NGOs plans identify sex workers keen on quitting prostitution, provide vocational training to earn a dignified living and provide educational and other support, including shelter and legal help, in order to make it sex workers themselves the rehabilitation process meaningful.

Unfortunately, the programme is not time-bound and runs the risk of stretching endlessly while potential beneficiaries wait forever. (AS)

RAPE OF THE SYSTEM

 JOYDEEP DASGUPTA *from Kolkata*



There is woman Chief Minister in West Bengal, yet women's condition is deteriorating in the state. In fact, Kolkata witnessed a gang rape of a woman recently. Rape, the word itself is full of humiliation, disregard and which reflects you are outcasts in a particular society. We are celebrating International Women Day on 8th March, every year and this year too. But do we ever follow the day in spirit? Questions are many but still unanswered.

Women in Bengal have always boosted themselves about their rationality and safety in Bengal. Even women in odd jobs like call centre and media boost of how safe they are in Bengal in comparison with other states of the country particularly Delhi. But the recent incident of gang rape in the heart of the city Park Street has raised questions and planted doubts in the minds of every woman in the city.

Kolkata, regarded as one of the safest cities for girls witnessed a first of its kind gang rape in the heart of the city, Park Street, which is now followed by a series of rape cases in and around the city.

First of all, people of the state and even the Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee and City Police Chief R.K Pachnanda were not ready to believe that this kind of incident may happen in the city, when the incident first reported and aired on a TV Channel, where the victim sat describing her ordeal one after another in a live show.

The 37 year old Woman alleged she was raped on the night of February 5th and filed a complaint in Park Street Police Station on 9th February 2012, but as she alleged the police rather than taking action started misbehaving with her, only after she came to the media on 15th February 2012, the police started the investigation.

Initially the police and even the Chief Minister of the state raised the question about the integrity of the women. Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee a woman herself, being the leader of the masses and the one

however small, where they could live with their children, without fear of raids, violence, and stigma. In fact, fear of perpetual stigma, affecting them and their children seems to be their greatest nightmare even bigger than starvation or HIV.

While governments and some NGOs have been mooted housing for sex workers, Shanta from Chennai and Jaya from Karnataka, both sex workers, strongly oppose such a move. "Grouping all sex workers together in one locality only perpetuates stigmatisation as our children and families will be identified as from a sex worker's colony" pointed out Shanta, adding that just the use of such an address would lead to ostracism and

denial of jobs and school admissions.

"We want to leave the past behind and enter the mainstream," says Jaya, who has managed to win a Bangalore municipal election and hopes to bring about some solid reforms for her sisters-in-trade.

In fact, destigmatisation and a transition to respectability seem to be top priority. Selvi escaped from a brothel and worked at a construction site, but returned to prostitution in less than a week. "After hauling bricks all day and paid less than half our due, we also had to provide free sex for the supervisors. So I decided I was better off as a prostitute" she seethes. I joined a hospital as an *ayah* and was trained to look after patients. Today even though I earn far less than what I used to

as a sex worker, I have a respectable job in a reputed hospital and wear a smart uniform to work. Soon I will train to be a nurse and move ahead. My three children have started going to a municipal school nearby and will never have to go through what I did."

For most, the rehabilitation process is not easy. When sex workers were evicted from Goa's Baina beach Tripti, Salma and Mariam approached an NGO which promptly contacted their families and urged them to take back the girls. Unfortunately, the village elders passed an order to boycott the families since the girls had brought shame to the community. The young women ran away with their children and rented a house in Madurai

who claims to feel the pulse of her people in Bengal is expected to be with the victim rather than questioning her integrity which went against her when another woman Damyanti Sen, DCP (Crime), solved the riddle after arresting two persons named in the case.

In recent weeks, Kolkata, has seen Damyanti Sen become, more popular woman than the Chief Minister for understanding the feeling of the women victim, which can be witnessed from people's reaction outside in the streets and social media like facebook and twitter, where people supported Damyanti Sen for taking drastic action in cracking the case. On the other hand, Mamata Banerjee kept mum and so did the Kolkata Police Chief after his subordinate cracked the case.

Everywhere the victim woman was questioned, she was again gang raped by the police, administration, and the government. Mamata Banerjee became uncharacteristically silent, since immediately after the incident came to light through a TV Channel, she gave her reaction that this is an effort to "malign" her government and that the details would be revealed soon.

Everything revealed, that the Chief Minister was wrong and the woman was right.

In 21st century we give big orations in the name of liberation of female folk but on what right has the minister had to ask this question was clear. So it was almost government certified that if you go to a night

club at midnight there is a legitimate possibility of rape and you should not shout about that. According to the law even if one is prostitute then also nobody has the right to rape her. Moreover one should not comment anything while the rape case investigation is on. But we saw that so called fire brand women leader and now the Chief Minister of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee did not think twice of maligning this woman's complain, stating her allegation as false.

Mamata Banerjee has high regards and appreciation amongst female folks in Bengal, the way she uses to jump up on rape cases when she was in the Opposition was remarkable. We all have seen her feelings for Tapasi Malik, a young teenage girl who was brutally raped and burnt to death in Singur near the Tata Motor site, but now the same Mamata has changed, and is this the *Parivartan* expected?

The whole incident followed by 2 more rapes in the state brought a different light to the society in Bengal. The moral ethics of the society disrespected, question on government and its governance were raised by the political parties sitting in the Opposition.

The civil society who talks of giving capital punishment to the rapist kept mum, the administration put a foot wrong for giving irresponsible comments from the other side of the system. Society is run by following the law. Only when the protectors and implementers of the law would take things seriously, the *aam aadmi* will get justice?

"WE WANT TO LEAVE THE PAST BEHIND AND ENTER THE MAINSTREAM," SAYS JAYA, WHO HAS MANAGED TO WIN A BANGALORE MUNICIPAL ELECTION AND HOPES TO BRING ABOUT SOME SOLID REFORMS FOR HER SISTERS-IN-TRADE.

cooking gas connections.

A further impediment to rehabilitation comes from pimps and madames who locate former sex workers and force them back to the brothels. The option to relocate to a new place can ensure anonymity and safety from a stalking past.

Most state governments, pushed by the Supreme Court order, have launched programmes for sex workers. Like health insurance in Kolkata, housing in Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, vocational training in most other states.

An even more important and monumental task will be to change the mindset of society, police and governments so that the survivors of one kind of trauma and their children do not end up in another, chasing receding dreams of minimum dignity and bare necessities.

(All names have been changed)

where they now stay with their children and Salma's aged mother. Two other women from Baina have joined them next door. They have managed to support one another using their hard earned savings to put their children through school. With little education, they have managed to stay afloat working as domestic maids, school *ayah*, shop assistant, municipal sweeper. "We do not want to approach the authorities our families have suffered because of the enthusiasm of some do-gooders; we cannot let our children suffer too" says Tripti.

"Here we are safe because no one knows us. We may even get married one day" says Mariam, the youngest. They have managed to get ration cards and

An Invocation

Dr Kiranbala Rath, a former Principal, Hirakud College, Odisha, while talking to *Uday India*, said: "In the age of yore, India had a culture where women were enjoying high adoration in the family and in the society. Besides being adept in academics, they had practised rare austerity. In recent past too, women in India had their strong foothold in nation building as well as in constructing their own families.

"But it is unfortunate that in independent India, women for some reason or other, had been suffering in their own families as well as in social life. It could be due to poverty, ignorance and lack of education. Save for some constitutional provisions and legal shield, women by and large are being

ignored and ill-behaved to the extent of criminal vulnerability. Often they are denied justice, equality and dignity.

"Women need to cultivate the courage and conviction in developing necessary aptitude to fight out this neglect. The society need to be educated so as to according them the right place they deserve. State need not be complacence in giving them solace, but should give them the right responsibility and the right honour.

"Women on their part too have to develop necessary virtues and self-esteem to invoke reciprocation among the other sections of the society and arouse their sense of empathy and reverence for womanhood."



**Xi's
CHINA**



**WAVERING
YEDDY**



**ECONOMICS
OF WATER**



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Bollywood
Divas



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