

The lamp of hope

In West Bengal, Kartik Puja is widely regarded as a festival of hope for women who pine for a child.

While Lord Ganesha's brother Kartikeya's popularity seems to be confined to the south – especially Tamil Nadu with its famous Palani shrine – few know that he is also welcomed fondly by the women in West Bengal's red light areas. Kartik Puja is the most important festival for the women of the night in a state that is otherwise dominated by the worship of his powerful mother.

"The whole world knows about Durga Puja in Bengal," says Amit Das, who is the son of a former sex worker, and is married to a sex worker. "But here, in the red-light areas, things are different. Even our festivals are a reflection of our lifestyle. Long after the bhadralok (genteel folk) have had their festivities – Dussehra and Diwali – we celebrate our very own Kartik Puja."

There is pride in his voice as Das says "our Kartik Puja." "This is our own Puja, and nowhere is it celebrated with as much pomp as in the homes of the harlots," he says.

One of the local boys sneaks up to the door of the chosen hostess who is usually fast asleep after entertaining her client, and leaves an idol of Kartik at her doorstep. The honoured hostess is usually a childless sex worker, pining for a child. Some sex workers believe that by looking upon Kartik as their child, they find an outlet for their built-up maternal feelings. Some others believe they might actually be blessed with a child. A few look upon him as a potential father for their child. This is ironic, since Kartik himself is considered impotent, which is



why he is more like a catalyst rather than a sire.

"Since it is a very special festival for us, we can often persuade our clients to be extra generous and many of them pay us much higher than our regular rates," Shefali says. "In fact, some of them would love to father a child on this night. This is a weakness many prostitutes will actually exploit."

The loudspeakers blare all night with Hindi film songs, while brothel madams and novices, children and grownups, pimps and Babus, moneylenders and rickshawallas, clients and relatives join in the revelry. "This is my son," says Sunita, pushing forward a shy four-year-old. "Two months after I was made hostess, I found him abandoned by another young sex worker. So I took him as the answer to my prayers and have named him Kartik."



While community is present in full force to participate in the celebrations at night, the morning after, it is the hostess alone who wakes up to stark reality. Often, many of them have to buy food and liquor, as well as clothes, fancy imitation jewellery and sweets, in addition to hiring the drummers who are a must at these soirees, the priests and the gifts for the madam or landlady, on credit.

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The hostess can remain trapped in this debt for years.

Minakshibai is past forty and childless. Age has shriveled her body and business. With few clients coming her way, she had taken in three girls who paid her half their earnings. But after a bitter quarrel, the paramour of one of the girls took revenge by placing an image of Kartik outside her house. "I had to play hostess," Minakshibai says. "That was three years ago, when out of the total expenditure of Rs. 4000, nearly Rs. 3500 was on credit. Today, that Rs. 3500 had gone up to nearly Rs. 10000, and I am still paying through my nose."

That problem is Minakshibai's. For now, Kartik Puja gives Shefali a chance to leave her harsh reality behind for a few hours. "In our life of make-believe, we have at least something that we can call our very own," she says, continuing to dance away through the night in clothes and jewellery gifted by her clients.



Kartik Puja is a festival of hope for the commercial sex workers of West Bengal

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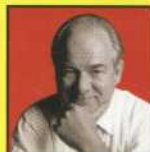


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