

Born into Brothels - Report

Since the early 1990s, there has been a noticeable rise in prostitution in the city of Kolkata. This is likely due to the economic instability and political unrest that has plagued the region for many years. Prostitution is not legal in India, and as a result, many of the women who engage in this profession are forced to operate in secret, often in tight, dark and dangerous alleys. Most of the prostitutes in Kolkata are from poor rural, or lower-caste backgrounds. They are often lured into the sex trade with the promise of good money, only to find themselves living in poverty and fear. Many of the women are susceptible to violence and abuse from both customers and pimps. In addition, they are at risk of contracting HIV and other comparable maladies.

Despite the dangers, many women continue to work in the Kolkata sex trade because they see no other viable option. They are also drawn to the relatively high wages that can be earned. Prostitutes in Kolkata typically charge anywhere from 100 to 800 rupees, which is considerably more than the average salary in the city. While the exact number of women involved in prostitution in Kolkata is unknown, it is estimated that there are tens of thousands of them. The majority of these women are desperately in need of help and support, but they continue to suffer in silence.

It is with this knowledge that I begin my exploration into the aftermath of Born into Brothels, the critically acclaimed documentary by Zana Briski and Ross Kauffman. The film follows the lives of children who live in Sonagachhi, one of the soi-disant red-light locales of Kolkata. The children are born into a life of prostitution, and the film follows their attempts to break free from the cycle of poverty and exploitation. The film is stark and unflinching in its portrayal of the lives of the children living in the brothels. The children face many challenges, including the risk of being trafficked, the dangers of working in the sex trade, and the difficulty of escaping the cycle of poverty. However, the film also provides a glimpse of hope, as the children attempt to create new lives for themselves.

I begin by exploring the lives of the self-proclaimed Brothels alumni after the fervour of the film had died out. In interview with the Chicago Reader and POV's Tom Roston, Avijit Halder explored the effect the documentary had on his life. Considered by Briski and her team as the most promising of the kids under her tutelage, Halder was given an opportunity to join an international photography workshop in Amsterdam. In 2004 with the help of financial support, he attended high schools in New Hampshire and Utah. On a grant from the Tisch School of the Arts and with

support from Kids with Cameras, Halder was able to study film at one of the most reputed institutes in the industry. He pointed out that, even though Briski and her team had not explicitly disclosed that she was filming the kids for a documentary he was not resentful as the end justified the means. Puja and Suchitra were pulled out of school and sent back into the brothels by their families due to abject poverty. Mint reported in 2009 that both of them had seemed better off than their peers in the trade of sex work, with Suchitra even getting married. Jezebel, the US-based news and cultural commentary website, followed up on the life of Preeti in 2009. She was 12 at the time of her participation in Briski's documentary. Despite offers that would allow her to pursue her studies in the United States, her mother refused to let her leave and eventually brought her into the folds of her trade. However, she was expressed contentment with the riches her life till then had brought her. She also noted that though she was in touch with her alumni friends, a couple of whom were studying with the help of Future Hope, many had dropped off the edges of the map. One common attribute to all these interviews was the conspicuous absence of hope among the respondents for the future of the kids at Sonagachhi.

In the aftermath of Briski's success, many Indian organizations were quick to point out the Indophobic and misrepresented nature of the film's narrative. The Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, a collective of sex workers from West Bengal who work on advocating the plight of their comrades and look out for their health, pointed out that the parents of the depicted children were portrayed as abusive and neglective. Though there certainly are instances in the documentary where slurs are hurled, the children are threatened with physical abuse, and the parents seem to be intentionally holding back their child from pursuing education, it must be noted that a large portion of such behavior is part of the accepted fabric of parenting among uneducated families in India - the problem is not endemic to the prostitutes' back alleys of Kolkata. The film was also heavily criticized for the stereotypical representation of the culture and the professed need for a white man, or a woman, for that matter, to bear the burden of uplifting the socio-economically backward sections of the populace. Another point of criticism, raised in *Against the Current's* July/August 2005 issue, for the documentary was its focus on individual solutions over wider, community level approaches. This palliative approach may be construed as having a greater political impact over the curative method, as the short term effects are better observed and can be considerably exaggerated.

In the recent years, with the pandemic induced lockdowns, better opportunities for the younger generations, and empowerment efforts by the community, one report suggested that only 65 per cent of the sex trade was now in operation. Risky borrowing had reduced after a cooperative bank was started.

In the closing statements of this essay, I would like to reference an interview conducted by the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime with Munni, a Bangladeshi teen who was trafficked into Kolkata and sold into sex trade. Girls in Sonagachhi desperately want to break out and hope for better lives for their children. They report that at a young age, they were broken as one would a horse. However, they cannot leave the trade as they have no options to fall on to. Many feel indebted to their madams, who took care of them from youth. The situation is bleak as the society would still label them a prostitute long after they had left that life behind. Did the documentary *Born into Brothels* have, at the least, a marginal impact on the lives of the denizens of Sonagachhi? Sure, it did. It was effective in bringing the squalor and misery of the place into limelight and was able to elicit some kind of patronage for the people. That is all one can ask of it. It would be unreasonable to expect it to have solved the sex worker crisis by now.

References

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