

FROM *CHUKRI* TO COMMUNITY LEADER

By Sita Devi

Munshigunge, Kidderpore, Kolkata: I was first a "Chukri" in the red-light area of Munshigunge. A Chukri is a new girl in a brothel. She is supposed to be a trainee prostitute. She is provided with a roof and two meals a day. The brothel manager keeps all the money that is earned off selling her to different customers everyday.

I was sixteen at that time, I think. I found the atmosphere very odd when I came here. I found the clothes I was given to wear very odd. I used to wear a sari, now I was given polyester pants and bra to wear. I tried to escape but finally I gave in. A few years later I was allowed to go home to my village in Bojerhaat but the brothel manager refused to give me any money for all the years she had kept me. She gave me a few things I could take home as gifts. The pimps and managers never give any money to Chukris, to ensure that we come back. I did.

When I became twenty or so, the clients became less. The demand was for younger girls. The brothel manager said she could not provide a roof for me any longer. I then became an "adhya." An *adhya* literally means half. I was allowed to keep half of what I earned but had to pay rent for my bed and for my meals. In the meantime, I had two girls and one boy. I did not know what to do next. We never had enough to eat or wear. The children would roam the streets when I was with clients. There was no room for them to sleep at night. My own earning was coming down.

Then I found a steady client, a *Babu*. We got "married", and I moved in with him. I became a domestic worker. I used to look after the whole family by working from morning to night. I got my

MY GROCERY STORE PAYS FOR THE SCHOOL FEES

By Seema Devi, Kiran Self Help Group

Forbesgunge, Bihar: I was a housewife but now I own a grocery shop. My husband is a barber. I used to be totally dependent on his income. I was not able to send my children to school or take any decisions in the house. We formed a self-help group of 15 women with the urging of Apne Aap about 18 months ago. We started saving Rs 1 and then Rs 2 a day. After a few months, I decided to take a loan from the group to start my grocery store. It now serves as a general store. I earn Rs 600 to Rs 800 per month from the store now. I have repaid the loan with interest to the group. With the money I earn, I send my children to school, pay their fees, buy their books and uniforms. Now people in my settlement respect me. I now plan to help other members also start small businesses. I want to shift my shop to the main road. I will be able to earn more there.

daughters married and my son trained as a carpenter. But I had no savings for myself. He would keep all the money.

I then heard that a woman's organization had started in our area, called Apne Aap. I went there and found other women talking about their lives there. Suddenly I found that we could share our pain and our dreams. I began to talk about myself openly and I felt free. I learned many new things. I collected all the women together and we formed a women's group. We decided to start saving our own money. We saved Rs 1 a day and Rs 30 a month each. We are poor so we were not able to save much but we saved Rs 900. We want to start some business of our own but how can we do so with such little money.

Our plan is that we women will run our own business. I want to start a laundry. We need a place for that, to dry the clothes that we wash. People are ready to give us their clothes. The fact that I am thinking of starting a business is a miracle. I have now moved out of my "babu's" house and stay with my sister.

My Dream

WE WILL HAVE A VAN TO SELL FOOD

By Jamuna

Munshigunge, Kidderpore, Kolkata: Our women's groups are making paper bags now. We get Rs 3.50 per bag. I want us to be able to save enough money from the paper bags manufacture to start a small catering business. Then when we earn more, we can buy a van and park it outside an office and sell food there. At the same time some women can keep some hens and start a poultry business. I have a lot of dreams. I have the courage to dream because of the group I have formed under Apne Aap. I am sure Apne Aap will also help to fulfill these dreams.

I CONVINCED MY SISTERS

By Ruksar Nat

Khawaspur, Forbesgunge, Araria, Bihar: I faced a lot of difficulties in forming a self-help group in the Khawaspur red light area. The first difficulty was to go to the homes of each woman again and again and make them believe that forming a group was possible. Then I had to convince them that if we each saved Rs 1 or Rs 2 a day, we would save a lot as a group and would not have to go to the brothel owner or money lender for loans. Once we had enough money, we could take a loan from our own group and start our own small business. If we met once a month, we would know if any our sisters fell sick or needed any help.

When I was forming the group, I was hesitant about approaching women older than me. I would go cautiously to the women and ask them to join the group and begin saving a portion of their earnings. They would say why? Our lives are going to end this way, why should we save. I responded by saying that yes we are all going to die but why suffer and die. What if you fall ill and suffer from pain? If you have some savings at least you can buy medicine for the pain. Some women listened and some agreed with me. I then told them I would come again. On the way home, I was elated that I had convinced some women. I also realized that I had the power to convince my sisters.

YOUR RIGHTS ARE NOT ALMS

By Seema Kumari, 11

(Sunita William Girls Group)

Babuan, Narpatgunge, Bihar:

Woman, your rights are not alms that you have begged for,
The suppressions of your dreams are not goals you aspire for
Free the wishes imprisoned within you
Let your talent soar in the world
Facing your problems is not difficult
Woman, your rights are not alms that you have begged for
You have yet to see how you will influence the world
You have yet to break your four walls to free the world
Your rights are not sins or crimes
Woman, your rights are not alms that you have begged for
Who turned your identity into being dependant?
You can change the story
And make yourself independent
Woman, your rights are not alms that you have begged for.

I STOPPED A GIRL FROM BEING SOLD

By Mumtaz

Topsia, Kolkata: They used to sell girls from the huts opposite my house. One day I learned that a girl had been sold. I went to the Apne Aap office and with Sahana didi's help we went and filed a police complaint and rescued the girl. I also told them that if they sold a girl again, the police would lock them up. Now no girls are sold from there.

I am a rag-picker. I earn about Rs 60 a day by picking garbage. I earn about Rs 2,000. I found the courage to oppose sex-trafficking because I learned from Apne Aap how to stand up to the beatings by my alcoholic husband. I learned at Apne Aap that we have rights and no one can beat us or abuse us. One day I just picked up a broom and beat my husband back. He got scared. Now he says I have four eyes and I can see everything.

All the women used to be beaten in our settlement. One man would not only beat his wife a lot but would also not give her food. Our women's group went and threatened him. There is less violence in our settlement now. Earlier we used to cry. Now we fight back.

Our group has also opened a bank account. We plan to start a business. We too can feed ourselves and our families. We will show the world what women are capable of. We can turn a red-light area into a non-red light area. We tell the men, don't say anything just read the posters at Apne Aap. I like coming here, meeting the women, talking. I found the courage to dream and the courage to fight back here. That is the biggest change in me. How many days do you live for? If we spend time crying, when will we live?

The world outside

PEOPLE DON'T SHOUT AT EACH OTHER

By Asma

Munshigunge, Kidderpore, Kolkata: Some girls from our brothel district have started working outside. Some are working in a petrol pump and some have started staying in a girls hostel. The girls are allowed to keep everything they earn. They take a bus to work. Some even have bank accounts and go to the bank on their own. They say the world outside is very peaceful. People don't shout at each other. No one abuses them.

HEROINES ARE NO DIFFERENT FROM US

By Neha Kumari (Indira Gandhi Girls Group)

Babuan, Narpatgunge, Bihar: Though the River Kosi is only twenty km from our village, I had not seen it in the twelve years of my life. I wondered what the river looked like, what the barrage would look like and what Nepalis would be like, who lived across its border. Our village is on the border of Nepal but it is a very isolated farming community. We don't even have electricity and the road to Forbesgunge is very far. We can get a bus twice a day to Forbesgunge.

Apne Aap decided that they would take all the girls groups to see the barrage to build our self-confidence and give us knowledge.

I was really amazed to see the huge bridge over the Kosi and how big the river was. I could not fathom how it came down from the Himalayas. I learned that seven rivers came down from the same place- Indravati, Sunkosi, Lihu Kosi, Duh Kosi, Arun Kosi, Tamar Kosi. All bring water

from the Kanchenjunga range. When it reaches the plains it merges with the Ganga in Katihar at Kursela. This is the river which flooded all our villages two years ago, displacing so many of us and killing our neighbours.

I felt if I had not come with my friends to see the river, I would have felt that heroines are different from us. After travelling out of my village and seeing the mighty river, I felt a great desire and curiosity to see the world. I saw some girls running small shops and thought girls can do anything.

THE IMPORTANCE OF OUR GIRLS GROUP

By Nazmin Khatun (Aruna Asaf Ali Girls Group)

Simrah, Araria, Bihar: I study in Class 8. I was very hesitant about forming our girls group. I also did not know many things before forming the group. Then I realised that it was to give girls from marginalized groups a chance to learn how to lead their own lives and also understand how to look after their own accounts. We were going to learn some vocational skills to be able to earn an income and also learn how to save the income. We also began to learn about laws related to children and how to protect ourselves. We opened our own bank accounts and learned how to keep our pass books. We learned karate, madhubani painting, wall painting, sowing and craft.

Then we had to pick a name for our group. We quickly started to read about women leaders and we were especially attracted by the female freedom fighters. Our group chose Aruna Asaf Ali.

I was elected as captain of my group. I was very scared when I was elected. But slowly now when I hold the weekly meetings of our groups I am surprised at my own capacity. Sometime I was not aware that I knew something that I find myself explaining to the group. We talk

about women leaders, our health, our rights and many other social issues like caste. We then learned how to work as a group and take on activities collectively. Now we feel that things are so much easier if you have a group.

Diary of a social worker

MY FIRST VISIT TO A RED-LIGHT AREA

By Mahesh Kumar

Najafgarh, Delhi: I was asked to visit to Prem Nagar Basti on my first day as community mobilizer for Apne Aap. Prem Nagar Basti is a small settlement off the Delhi-Jaipur highway of a nomadic group known as Perans who were traditionally goatherds. Now 102 girls and women in this community are controlled by 92 men who pimp them to the truck drivers on the highways. These girls are taken in groups of four and five in taxis to the dhabas (truckers stops) where they are picked up by truck drivers and other miscellaneous clients. Their earnings are the main source of income in this community.

I did not know how my family would feel about me going to this area, even for work. I had told them I was working for a Delhi-government project. They did not know this included brothel settlements. But I swallowed my hesitation and decided to follow my colleague. She was a woman and if she could do it, so could I.

I went to the Basti on my motorcycle. I found that the Apne Aap community outreach centre was in the heart of the settlement and I would have to park my bike outside. I saw many taxis waiting there also. I found the by-lanes to the Centre very dirty. I was a little afraid of leaving my bike outside. I also felt a little scared of walking inside the red light area. I did not look to the left or the right as I did not want my eyes to meet the eyes of any of the women.

At the Centre there was a meeting going on of 12 young girls. They had formed a group called, *Asha Ki Kiran*. I too sat down with them. We introduced ourselves to each other. Then we started talking. The girls spoke about their dreams, that they too wanted to study-somebody wanted to be a doctor, someone else a lawyer, someone a teacher. But society wanted to prevent them. They pulled them into prostitution. The girls put up a play in which they showed how people, who were

WE LEARNED ABOUT BANKING

By Juhi Nat

Simrah, Araria, Bihar: One day I went to the bank with Kamla Nehru Girls group members. I saw what a bank looks like. We learned how to fill a form. We also learned that a person has to produce some identity proof to open a bank account. Then they have to give their full address, photograph a letter from a guarantor. A person who is living away from the village can send his money directly to the bank account. It is always better to make a draft then carry cash if you are travelling. An ATM card can be used to withdraw cash from anywhere. We get interest if we save money and if we save for a few years then the money grows in the bank.

greedy for money sold girls. The play also showed how girls could resist this with a little help. I realised that women have to start facing problems at a very young age. Even as children, girls face physical, psychological and societal discrimination. This is why they end up exploited. I realised that these girls were like girls anywhere else. I wanted to help them achieve their dreams from the bottom of my heart.

OUR GIRLS' GROUP TALKS ABOUT LOVE

By Naina Nat

Hasanpur, Najafgarh, Delhi: I have trained as a videographer from Sanved. Now I am posted to Delhi working as a youth mobiliser. I like the work. I first make friends with the girls. It is important that the girls feel I am like them. I first tell them about myself. They need to start talking about themselves without any pressure from me. That is when they will build trust. It is important to win hearts, only then can we work honestly with each other.

We sometimes talk about love in our group. Sometimes how Panchayats can take tough decisions against those who are in love. Sometimes, they may even use bullets against those who don't listen to them. We also discuss if the choices of girls are taken into consideration, when they are married. All this is girl-level talk.

After this we start talking about rights. We talk about how we can access our

rights. This is how we become friends. Then we talk about our dreams and hopes. But sometimes I wonder that if even small dreams and hopes of girls are not fulfilled, how will the big dreams be fulfilled. We can only have big dreams if our small wishes are fulfilled. And we can see that small wishes are fulfilled. For example, someone does not like sowing but likes dancing. They can only express this if someone listens and tries to help them make the choices they like. But if they feel no one listen to this, they stop expressing themselves and slowly their life itself gets suppressed.

I want the girls groups that I am forming to do it because they want to, not under any pressure. I ask them questions like this in our group discussions. I have just started working. I don't know a lot and would like more training on this, so that I can work correctly and with depth. Then trafficking will be eradicated from its roots here. I had learnt videography and want to use that as well. I will not make a personal documentary though, as I feel badly about it. Otherwise I will do my work honestly.

WE WILL MEET THE SARPANCH AGAINST CHILD MARRIAGE

By Gunjan Bharti (Bikaji Cama Girls Group)

Babuan, Narpatgunge, Bihar: Our group has decided to campaign against child marriage. Child marriage means getting married before your mind and body are ready for marriage. It means marriage when you are still a child. When a girl gets married, she loses control over who she is and suffers deep mental torture and physical assault. If the girl gets pregnant, she and the baby are both in danger of dying as her body is not ready for delivery. That is why there are so many deaths of girls and women in our society. Child marriage has been declared illegal in our country. Even parents and parents-in-law can be punished for this. Our group is going to spread awareness in our village and our school about this. Our group is going to visit girls who are being pressured to marry and help them report their own marriage to the police. We will also hold meetings with our village leader on child marriage and the head of our panchayat.

I GOT MY DAUGHTER BACK

By Ambaia

Topsia, Kolkata: Some people took my third daughter to sell in Bombay. I have eight children. My husband has passed away. He was not bad. He would not beat me every day but just occasionally. He would also share his earnings with me.

I clean people's houses to earn money. I also clean the Apne Aap centre. I love coming here. Here I can share my sorrows and laugh with other women.

My children were alone when I was out cleaning. Some people took my daughter away. I had learned at Apne Aap how to go to a police station. So I went, filed a complaint and got my daughter back.

Now my daughter and seven other children come and study at Apne Aap. They are not alone at home, while I am working. I remember, when Sahana di, used to just come and sit in our area, and call each child playing around the huts to her. She would tell them to bathe, give them oil for their hair. Slowly she was able to convince the children to come and study at the Apne Aap centre.

I WONDER IF WE CAN RUN THE NIGHT CRECHE

By Sandhya Devi

Munshigunge, Kidderpore, Kolkata: We used to have a "night crèche" in the red-light area, in which food was given. There was also a place to sleep at night and if we fell sick a doctor would come at night. In fact, we would even get medicines.

But since we closed the night shelter, the number of women who come for our meetings have dropped. I feel bad about this. They can learn so much by coming to the Apne Aap meetings. Women are losing out because of this.

I also wonder that were the women only coming to take something. Did they only come because of the doctor and medicine? Does that mean that the women will attend meetings only if they get something? I do not think this was correct. Women need to understand. We need to communicate that meeting each other, and sharing our stories is very important. It will bring out our inner strength.

Our Apne Aap colleagues are asking our self-help group to run the night crèche. They are saying we will give you the place but you run it. I wonder if we will be able to do so?