



Red Light Despatch

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My Dream

By Md Kalam

Forbesganj, Bihar: My name is Md. Kalam. I am from Nat community. My sisters were prostituted when I was a child. They educated me so that one day I would stand up against the traffickers. I joined Apne Aap as an activist after I finished my graduation in the year 2004 and started working in the red light areas in Forbesganj. I began to get girls from the red light area into school and organized their mothers to say 'no' to pimps and customers. I also investigated who the traffickers are so that complaints could be filed against him and put them in jail. I have testified against traffickers in court, and I have already helped many women and girls to file complaints against traffickers. I was also stabbed once by traffickers for appearing as witness in court.

My dream is that no one from Nat community is ever prostituted and has to live in RLA. I am trying to turn the two RLAs where my family still lives in Rampur and Khawaspur in Forbesganj into non-red light areas and safe space for women and girls.

Ironically, this June I was arrested on false charges of trafficking and was kept in jail for 5 nights with criminals and I was humiliated and shamed. If society rewards an anti-trafficking activist like me in this way, how are we going to protect the girls from being sold into prostitution?

NGO Claims Bihar Police Harassing It

By Anand S.T. Das, Age Correspondent, Patna

Anti-trafficking NGO Apne Aap has accused the Bihar police of harassing its members and falsely claiming that several girls of a residential school run by it were forced into the flesh trade.

The NGO, which works in Araria, one of Bihar's poorest districts, has approached the National Human Rights Commission and National Legal Services Authority seeking protection of its members against alleged police harassment, and a thorough inquiry into the role of Araria superintendent of police Shivdeep W. Lande.

"No recorded student of the Apne Aap-run girls' hostel has been found in the flesh trade. No student was missing from the Apne Aap KGBV for five years," said Ruchira Gupta, founder-president of Apne Aap Women Worldwide, a grassroots movement working to end sex trafficking.

The police earlier this month

alleged that 10 of the 24 girl students at KGVP were missing for five years, were found to have been pushed into the flesh trade. These girls, the police claimed, were among 25 girls rescued in raids on theatres at a fair in Forbesganj in February. Apne Aap, however, said no such raid was ever conducted by the police. The only girls who had left the hostel in the past five years had been withdrawn by their parents, it added.

Ms Gupta accused Mr Lande of falsely adding the names of two Apne Aap staffers, Soumya Pratheek and Manish Swarnkar, to an FIR filed in February following the alleged raid, and then arresting Mohammad Kalam, the NGO's prime investigator. She also accused the police of wrongly picking up a 14-year-old daughter of an Apne Aap staffer from her home at midnight.

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Vicious Backlash

by Malini Bhattacharya, Frontline Correspondant

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In Bihar's Forbesganj, social activists fighting a community's custom of pushing girls into prostitution are intimidated.

Mohammed Kalam, who had been honoured for his work to check the trafficking in women, at a police training session. The police mysteriously arrested him for the same offence.

On the night of February 12, a raid was conducted by the police in a well-known brothel area of Uttari Rampur, Ward No.3, Forbesganj, in Araria district in Bihar. (Continued on page 4)

(Continued from Page 1 "NGO Claims Bihar Police Harassing It") Mr Kalam secured bail as soon as he was produced in court, but only after five traumatic days in jail. It is alleged that the SP, Mr Lande, went out of his way to humiliate Mr Kalam, even violating Supreme Court guidelines by parading him before the media with a rope around his wrist and handcuffs.

No charges have been filed against Mr Kalam, who was instrumental in putting 51 traffickers in jail and transforming the red-light area into a place where women learn to reclaim places of exploitation into safe spaces.

The NHRC has asked the Bihar police to submit a report within this month on these reported violations by Mr Lande, which led to further reprisals against Apne Aap. The SP reportedly sent two dozen policemen in uniform led by two DSP-rank officers to the

girls' hostel in Araria on July 30 in a further effort to discredit the NGO.

"Apne Aap has continued to demand action against the fair contractor, but the police reacted by intimidating Apne Aap," said Ms Gupta.

The police claims about girls being missing from the hostel and being forced into prostitution were refuted the next day by the district superintendent of education, who wrote in the hostel visitors' book that these claims were "fabricated" and "no girl was missing". The hostel is run in partnership with Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and UN agencies have recognised its role in the anti-trafficking campaign.

Mr Lande, however, claimed the NGO's allegations were "baseless" and that the police was investigating an apparent sex racket.

Public Arts Painting Project on Forbesghanj Railway Station

By Jill Pillay/Cape Cinnamon

Forbesghanj, Bihar: We took seven women from one of our three hand-made jewelry making workshops in Bihar, Forbesghanj and offered them both an employment and creative opportunity to make a difference in a public space. This is a geographical location where it is believed that mothers, brothers and potential husbands sell young children and teenage girls to traffickers.

We provided each woman with a daily living wage, breakfast and lunch, refreshments and art materials.

Each Mudhubani design (which they had, on a smaller scale, painted onto Paper Mache sculpted necklaces, pendants, bangles and those crafted from dried out mango seeds) was enlarged and eventually rendered to a wall on the railway station in the form of a beautiful mural.

People watched for hours and we had to carefully mark boundaries between personal, painting and public space as people came so close it at times made the

women feel uncomfortable.

I watched how each woman's confidence increased and how the fear to initially be a part of the project diminished into thin air.

After painting I walked through the village and visited each and every woman in her home. Their children decorated my body with henna designs and danced for me, they cooked food for me, showered me with Chai and swarms of fellow villagers followed us through the mud, I felt like a village Apne Aap celebrity of sorts but this was not my deepest intention.

I sincerely appreciate and support the extension of developmental work from work space into home and community to help strengthen an inter-connected trail of energy. I wanted to contribute towards transforming their hearts and to shift their perceptions of boundaries. I longed for them to see how possible it could be to change a very ugly looking area into an extremely attractive one. For those who looked at them

within boxes, who assumed they could only be able to fulfill certain prescribed roles to feel challenged.

For me this concept is inspired by 'Ubuntu' a purely South African ideology which states that 'I am because of others and others are because of me'. This Nguni expression from South Africa, "addresses our interconnectedness, our common humanity, and the responsibility to each other that flows from our connection" (Nussbaum, 2003, p. 21).

The term recognizes the humanity in all individuals and thus calls us to treat and communicate with one another in a spirit of kindness and respect that, in some ways, takes The Golden Rule of "do unto others..." a step further. Not only do we want to be kind to another because we would hope that another would do the same to us, but with ubuntu, I am kind to another because the other is me and my humanity is tied to hers*.

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'Punished For Being A Girl'

By Jill Pillay/Cape Cinnamon

Forbesghanj, Bihar: I need to understand why your body is either assumed to be ripe for childhood marriage or prostitution. How few in-between options of these two extremes exist or are encouraged. How and why love marriage is frowned upon and once married how your body, soul, mind and spirit become possessed. How your every movements and contemplations are monitored carefully to a point of obsession... and education is viewed as a distraction to your domestic and sexual readiness for a lifetime of servitude to a man - in fact, all men. They just seek to use and direct the very essences of your flow to help release their own frustrations, whilst evoking their sense of superiority over you minus cultivating your rights to nurturing your own desires. This happens to an unhealthy extreme until all your spontaneous creative impulses are deadened - even questioned.

From birth you are perceived a burden, baby girls bodies discarded in rubbish piles alive surrounding the village hospital where your mother soldiered through her labor pains before releasing you from her womb. Because the bride prices needing to be paid by your family could impoverish them to a

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point where they will lose their houses and land and they are already living below the bread line. Traffickers make use of this opportunity and raise you via slavery from birth so they can better groom you for the sex trade: it's always easier for you to not bite the hand that feeds you, apparently.

If they steal you from home at an older age they threaten to kill you and your family for trying to pursue freedom from your imposed shackles. They bribe the police and media with money and gifts of sexual immoral human packages, to satisfy their lust for non consensual ejaculations inside somebody's daughter's previously undisturbed innocence. They are collecting stolen futures of underage virgins, born to be repetitively raped, for their economic stability; and this, their not only sexual but entire 'Being' abuse, they term their deserved livelihood options. Married slave masters and their greedy clients control your freedom. Your body is their playground, your mind and feelings are never important. You will always be punished for being a girl; that is why your eyes lay low, you hurry to cover your face with your sari and your body language can never be confident.

(Continued from page 2 "Public Arts Painting Project) Being able to co-ordinate the Forbesghanj Public Arts Mural project healed me as I watched how it touched all the women who were involved and their relevant communities; we shook people from their mundane expectations and that is always the start of a brewing revolution.

In the beginning women's eyes were always down especially when posing for a photo, there was this intense paranoia about being able to convince their husbands about why they should be allowed to paint, they were scared of fellow neighbors' reactions to their freedom in a public space. They did not understand why their creative contributions were even necessary. Over a period of four days this sentiment took a 360 degree turn, their paint brushes became like creative weapons and they became empowered.

I thank Apne Aap Women Worldwide for making this rare and life-changing experience a phenomenal reality.

* For more information, see "South African Ubuntu theory in cross cultural community development practice: An autoethnographic exploration", by Angela R Crist.

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(Continued from page 1 “Vicious Backlash”) It was led by the Superintendent of Police, Shivdeep Lande, himself. In all, 25 girls were rescued and a number of alleged traffickers were caught.

About three months later, I was surprised and shocked to find the name of Mohammed Kalam of Forbesganj mentioned as the person who had been arrested following the testimony given by one of the rescued girls.

Was this the same Md. Kalam I had met in January 2007 on my visit to Uttari Rampur as a Member of the National Commission for Women (NCW)? The Kalam I had known was a member of the marginalised Nutt community, which had been providing women for the brothels of Rampur for generations. Kalam had been raised by his two elder sisters, who had themselves been inducted into the trade at an early age but had vowed to make sure that their brother never became part of the vicious network of traffickers and pimps of Forbesganj. They had sent him away to be educated in a school. He had taken advantage of this opportunity and become the first graduate from the Nutt community in the area. He acquired a degree in law and came back to his birthplace as a social activist fighting against the exploitation of women.

When I visited Rampur, Kalam was one of the three teachers at the informal and unsupported primary school that was being run by Apne Aap Women Worldwide, a non-governmental organisation, in the area. There were 70-80 children attending the school regularly, and I was informed by Kalam and his colleagues that after a long struggle it had become possible to get two of the girls admitted to class V of a reputed school in the locality. They were running a Mahila

Mandal for the women of the locality and trying to prevent trafficking. Quresha Khatun, Kalam’s elder sister, played a big role in the Mahila Mandal.

My interaction with the people carrying out this uneven struggle with so much courage and determination did not end there. About a month later, I intervened with the district and State administration in a case where Apne Aap was trying to rescue a minor girl, the daughter of one of the members of the Mahila Mandal, from being trafficked by her adoptive father in Katihar. Kalam had led the team to the place where the girl was confined and thus made

“I was shocked by the extreme youth of some of the girls who were sitting in front of their small adobe huts on either side of the streets.”

her rescue possible. For his efforts, he was stabbed by some miscreants obviously associated with the traffickers. Subsequently, Kalam received recognition for his anti-trafficking work from various national and international organisations and was named in a weekly magazine as the anti-trafficking hero of 2008. He was also a resource person for the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime’s (UNODC) anti-trafficking training programme for the Bihar police. So, I could hardly believe that the same Kalam could have been arrested for being involved in trafficking.

However, a few days later, I got a call from Tinku Khanna, who had been working with the Apne Aap programme in Forbesganj almost from its inception. She told me: “Yes, this is the same Kalam you had met.” Tinku reminded me that when I had

gone to Forbesganj, an annual fair called Kali Mela was going on there and together with Tinku and her colleagues, I had walked incognito to the fair at sundown. I had been struck, I remembered, by the exclusively masculine atmosphere at the mela and the complete absence of women, children or families such as we find in rural fairs. I had written in my report about several tents openly advertising pornographic films. There was a Nautanki tent and I was informed that instead of folk drama performance, the tent was used for dancing sessions by young girls who were then inducted into prostitution. Even while we were walking down the streets, we could see men on motorbikes proceeding from the mela ground straight to the adjacent brothel. I was shocked by the extreme youth of some of the girls who were sitting in front of their small adobe huts on either side of the streets. Apparently, every year, at least eight or nine very young girls were brought to the mela and forced into the trade through a traditional ritual, missi mehendi. I had discussed the situation with the District Magistrate and the Superintendent of Police the very next day. As a result, the Nautanki tent and the film shows were closed down for a year. They were resumed when the District Magistrate got a different posting. Tinku said Apne Aap had filed two petitions this year regarding the illicit activities the minor girls were forced to engage in at the theatre at the fair and about their exploitation in the adjacent red light area. Acting upon the information given by the Apne Aap workers, the District Magistrate had instructed the Superintendent of Police to look into the matter.

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However, according to Tinku, the raid was conducted only in the red light area, while the mela was left undisturbed. Further, the usual protocol in this matter was not maintained since neither Apne Aap nor any other NGO was involved in the raid.

Tinku said they were shocked that together with trafficked girls, some minors living in the red light area but who were not engaged in the trade had also been picked up by the police.

The daughter of one of the organisers of Apne Aap in the area had also been picked up arbitrarily. Tinku said they were able to take the girl back into their custody but could not get the custody of the other rescued girls. She said they protested against the manner in which the raid had been conducted and against the inclusion of the names of two Apne Aap workers in the raid team, when the truth was different.

Apne Aap activists took exception to the Child Welfare Committee handing over six girls, three of whom had been proved to be over 18 years of age, to alleged traffickers who had posed as their guardians, despite repeated protests. The other 18 girls were sent to the Tatwasi Samaj Kalyan Samiti in Purnea. Surprisingly, according to Tinku, only six of them were kept back while the rest were arbitrarily handed over to their so-called guardians within a month. As Tinku said, "At least in six of these cases, the guardians have ensured that the girls go back to the sex trade."

Kalam was one of the key activists who had identified the traffickers and the girls trafficked by them. But three and a half months later, on June 1, he was called to the Forbesganj police station and was informed by the Deputy Su-

perintendent of Police that he was being arrested for being involved in trafficking. Apparently, one of the six girls languishing at the Purnea home had given a statement under Section 164 of the CrPC in which she had said that among those who had trafficked her there was one Kalam who had forced her to marry a married man named Gaffar, who had subsequently prostituted her. After being arrested on the strength of a first information report, which did not clearly name him or specify his role as a trafficker, a handcuffed Kalam was photographed along with the triumphant DSP, in violation of a Supreme Court order.

The media report quoted the Superintendent of Police as saying that Ruchira Gupta, the founder and director of Apne Aap, had threatened the DSP over the phone and that a station diary had been lodged against the NGO. The media report was later found to be without basis, but there can be no doubt that it was an attempt to intimidate the organisation because it was trying to find justice for Kalam.

Kalam eventually got bail and the bail order states that no significant or substantial evidence has been found against him. But, of course, the case against him remains, even while the other persons mentioned as traffickers in the FIR are still at large. There is also an ongoing campaign against the school run by Apne Aap, which has been brought under the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalaya Scheme after prolonged efforts. A part of the district administration has joined the campaign. Now that the school has found a footing in the locality and is benefiting children who had little access to education and were vulnerable to the vicious atmosphere around them, it would be a great pity if, on the basis of unsubstantiated excuses, it is closed down or

handed over to others without the same credentials as Apne Aap.

One does not know how this story will end, but on the basis of the data I was able to gather for the NCW report, I would like to express my apprehensions in this matter. The Nutt community was originally tribal and had at one time been forced to adopt a nomadic way of life. It was stigmatised as a criminal tribe by the British and became a so-called "de-notified tribe" in independent India.

While in States such as Rajasthan they have Scheduled Tribes status, in Bihar they are included in the Other Backward Classes (OBC) category but continue to be marginalised unlike some other OBC communities. Poverty and underdevelopment, even after they gave up their nomadic ways, combined with the uneven power structures in society, helped perpetuate among them the so-called custom of pressing their girls into prostitution, and eventually some of their settlements turned into red light areas and centres of trafficking. What is terrifying is that the so-called custom has turned into a lucrative business running into crores of rupees. Alternative livelihoods are scarce, and the strong network of traffickers extends right into the families and the community panchayats. Their settlements in Forbesganj, close to the borders of Nepal, Sikkim and north Bengal, are not just source areas but also transit and destination points for trafficking. The women not only are breadwinners for their families but are made to pay money from their earnings by a hafta system to people who run the trade, who include panchayat members, politically powerful elements and some sections of the police.

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(Continued from page 5 "Vicious Backlash") Any attempt to leave the trade could end in violence and even death. The violence is perpetrated not only through local goons but by the male members in the families.

In fact, it seems as if society at large is also putting pressure on the community so that it would be natural for all women to turn to

prostitution and all men to become traffickers and pimps.

In the community to which Kalam belongs, he is an exception. But neither his own community nor those who wield social and political power seem to be ready to tolerate exceptions. Paradoxically, Kalam would have been less exposed to danger had he got criminalised. Since this is a closely knit

clan, everyone is related to everyone else by ties of kinship, and Kalam, by remaining opposed to the exploitation of the women of his community, is committing an offence against his blood ties. But what is more unfortunate is that the social and political forces outside his own community also seem to be inclined towards perpetuating the fate of the Nutts.

Creative Writing

Responses from a creative writing workshop in Dumarbanna Middle School in Babuan,

Latta*, age 12

'Personal freedom is restricted by our families. Because of childhood marriage a girl cannot explore her own needs and that is why in our community women are so unhealthy'.

Jyoti*, age 11

'I can become a doctor, engineer, social worker, anything. After studying if I get a job I will be very happy. When I sing it makes me very happy, when I work at home or in the field it makes me very sad'.

Anju*, age 12

'Our country is undeveloped; women are not awarded any importance. At a very young age they are forced to housework, the pressure to do this is like butchering your head off with a knife. You should not be forced to do that. Eliminate childhood marriage, if we were allowed to study I would be happy so that we could do something good for our society. When I write exams I get bad marks and this makes me very sad, but I cannot help it because my parents will not allow me to study which is why my marks are always so low.'

Check back next issue for more creative writing from this workshop!

The *Red Light Despatch* is a monthly newsletter published exclusively by Apne Aap Women Worldwide. It compiles articles, testimonials, speeches and interviews by women participating in Apne Aap's Self-Empowerment Groups (SEGs) and other initiatives, as well as by staff members, volunteers, and media figures. The central objective of the RLD is to offer a space for the unique voices of our girls and women. The particular writing style has been implemented to best preserve the original tone of the speakers.

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