Chapter Four

No Answers – Just Discoveries

The discovery

Phoenix-like, he rose from the ashes to resurrect himself. Everybody's whipping boy suddenly refused to be persecuted any more and fought hard and successfully to regain his credibility as a person. This is not a story on celluloid but a true story of a boy born in the alley of a red light area in Kalighat. This is the story of Mrinal Kanti Dutta.

Mrinal Kanti Dutta today spearheads a movement for sex workers' rights in the city of Calcutta in India. Mrinal was born in the alley of the red light area in Kalighat – an illegitimate child of possibly an honourable citizen of the country. To shelter him from the wrath of the locals, his mother sent him to a school in an adjacent locality. But as it turned out, Mrinal found himself belonging nowhere. His education had separated him from the offspring of other sex workers but his identity kept him ostracised from the social mainstream. The potential that was created as a result of this strange 'mix' was recognised by the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, as it launched the STD/HIV Intervention project (SHIP) in the city. The SHIP, widely known as the Sonagachi project, started in 1992, experimenting in the area of public health to control the transmission of STD/HIV among the sex worker communities in Calcutta. During the course of the project, the focus broadened con-

siderably beyond disease control to address the structural issues of gender, class and sexuality. The project used three fundamental principles: Respect, Recognition and Reliance. The belief that sex workers can best work for themselves had refined their strategies. In fact, from the time he took over, Mrinal Kanti Dutta introduced a fundamental change in the organisation, i.e. the inclusion of sex workers in the key managerial positions of the project. Today, 25 per cent of the positions have been reserved for sex workers. 'Only if there is no alternative will outsiders be considered', he says. This approach in fact comes from the ideological base of the project. This ideological base questioned cultural stereotypes, social denial and human marginalisation in a manner that is democratic, not authoritarian, a manner which was not confrontational and yet challenges power structures, working through them and with them so as to strengthen them as partners. The issue of HIV/AIDS was used as the entry point for this social transformation. The project invited members of the sex workers' community to act as motivators and peer educators and Mrinal was the first to join. As time progressed, the STD/HIV Intervention Project gradually developed into a full-fledged movement for sex workers' rights. Today, a union of sex workers called the Durbar Mahila Samanvaya Committee (DMSC) has been formed and the so called 'fallen women', or street walkers, have graduated to becoming vociferous advocates of legislation and recognition of their work as a profession.

Starting as a helper in the STD clinic, Mrinal went from strength to strength as this movement developed and finally became the head of the entire project. Interestingly this happened on the same day that the first major political victory for the organisation was won. The first victory came on May Day in 1999, as the state government recognised the self-regulatory boards set up by the sex workers with members from the state government's Social Welfare Department and the state Women's Commission. The history of this victory is in fact a unique story.

Sonagachi

For 400 years Sonagachi had been known as the area where vice and crime prevailed. Young virgins were brought and sold; sex was bought, mostly with some kind of coercion; legendary dons like Biswanath Bhattacharya sent tingles of fear up women's spines as they approached a brothel owner and shouted, 'We will take a girl from your house along with two bottles of beer or else . . . '. In this area of vice and crime also lived Ansar Ali who everybody knew had 15 wives and yet remained free to terrorise other girls in the area. This was the piece of land, Sonagachi, where Shankari Pal reminisces sadly, 'We got only slaps. Shoes were thrown at us, cigarette butts were stubbed on our cheeks.' People from 'respectable' society came to Sonagachi but under stress, taking pains to avoid any kind of recognition. Interestingly Sonagachi was the land that laid bare human power relations and resultant exploitations in the crudest form possible. It was here that the most vulnerable of the girls rose over a course of time to become exploitative and distasteful power brokers in the form of brothel owners or 'malkins'. They shrewdly negotiated the sale of flesh in the midst of an environment loaded with risk and violence. To put it in another way, Sonagachi was a land of negotiations – where agreements were being negotiated day in and day out. It was perhaps this skill in negotiation that was used effectively by the SHIP project to transform and reform the balance of power relations in the two most insidious areas of oppression for women, gender and sexuality.

Negotiations with the self

The first sex worker tested positive in Calcutta in Kidderpore in 1982. Subsequently, other cases were detected in the adjoining red light areas of Chetla, Bow Bazar, Sonagachi, Rambagan, Sethbagan, etc. As prevalence rates rose to 5 per cent, the World Health Organization moved the focus of its interventions to condom distribution through peer motivators. The respect and recognition provided by the project to 65 peer motivators/

educators transformed the lives of the sex workers. They acquired information and knowledge along with the green coats and staff identity cards, which rocketed their esteem 'both self and societal'. The transformation, however, was a result of a well thought out and transparently executed process. A series of activities was organised with the aim of promoting self-reliance, confidence and social dignity.

From the very beginning, the project made it very clear to the sex workers that in no way would the rehabilitation approach be adopted. The project had not been established as a 'saviour' of fallen women.

The project provided the peer educators with every semblance of paid employment, e.g. uniform, identity cards, attendance registers that gave them social recognition. Writes Madhabi Jaiswal, 'The project has enabled me to face society with confidence' and Pushpa adds, 'This apron has changed my life, my identity, now I can tell others that I am a social worker, a health worker'.

A series of discussions was conducted in an open environment which raised critical posers for the sex workers, 'Why am I where I am?'. Answers to these posers were provided not by anecdotal rationale but by empirical evidence. A base line survey conducted by the project, using a participatory methodology, recorded that penury and deprivation, both social and economic, were the main factors that drove women into the sex trade. 84.4 per cent of the sex workers were found to be illiterate. Only 8.6 per cent of the sex workers had come willingly to the sex trade; the rest were there because of acute poverty, a family dispute or because they had been misguided and kidnapped.

And as the women saw their vulnerability receiving the support of a structural framework, they moved away from perceiving themselves as 'sinners and loose women'. Today Reba Mitra, a peer educator, emphatically demands that the sex trade be recognised. 'You see in the society, people are engaged in various forms of employment. For us this trade is also an employment. Why wouldn't the government recognise it? Who

says we are loose women?' Wonders Gita, 'Are we alone to blame? What about the men who come to us? Are they not also polluting the society?'. This awakening was a very significant transformation that the project had achieved. The sex workers of Calcutta had begun to challenge the age-old notions and were trying to reconstruct their identity. This was the first stage of negotiations towards safer sexual practices – a negotiation with the self.

Negotiations with the peers

Ironical as it may seem, as women in the sex trade were revisiting their own stereotypes and getting empowered in the process, an incident which precipitated their vulnerability occurred in the project area. In early September 1994, an NGO, with the help of the state government and the local police, forcibly collected blood samples from about 50 sex workers. Earlier they had dragged out a brothel owner to the local police station and threatened her with serious consequences if she did not co-operate with them in these research trials. It was at this juncture that the project saw that the empowerment of 65 peer educators, although a good beginning, still left large numbers of sex workers quite vulnerable. How would safer sex practices get entrenched with this as the backdrop? At the same time, this incident served as an eye opener to the peer educators who now began to view the whole issue within a framework of human rights. They began to feel that it was critical that an organised body of sex workers be set up to collectively fight such instances of assaults on their dignity and rights. The process of empowerment thus moved into the next stage of negotiations, from negotiations with the self to negotiations with the peers.

The ideology during this second level of negotiations remained consistent – the belief that sex work was an occupation and not a moral condition. And because sex work was an occupation, occupational hazards had to be identified and overcome. The occupational hazards were

STDs/HIV, violence and sexual exploitation. Unless these were overcome the whole struggle of getting the sex trade acknowledged as a profession would remain futile. With this as the rationale, the peer educators moved from house to house in the red light areas equipped with accurate information on how to prevent STDs/HIV, how to access medical care and how to question power structures that promoted violence. The fieldwork began at 10 a.m. and continued until 1.00 p.m. Each group of peer educators (four in each group) contacted 40–50 sex workers and 10–15 brothel owners daily. They encouraged the sex workers to attend the clinic for regular health check ups; they used flip charts and leaflets for effective dissemination of information on STDs/HIV; they carried condoms with them to distribute to the sex workers. As the project progressed they monitored the use of the condoms by giving cardboard boxes to the sex workers for disposal of the used condoms. When asked about the rate of condom use and whether it had shown signs of progress, Kamala Mukherjee and Isika Basu reply 'Look at the dustbins in the area and you will get the answer. The cardboard boxes are there to show that the rate of condom use has definitely gone up.' And as these activities promoted interaction amongst the community the approach of the project expanded. The project had begun as a targeted intervention to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS, using the basic construct of a behaviour change strategy. But soon the main obstacles facing the successful implementation of the project were recognised as being socio-historical and not just behavioural. The social construction of sexuality, the lack of a social acceptance of sex work, legal ambiguities surrounding laws relating to sex work, were now recognised by the community as elements to be confronted, battled against and overcome.

This analysis became the anchor which enabled negotiation amongst the peers and brought them together to form the Durbar Mahila Samanvaya Committee. At that point, a leading daily, the *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, hailed this move with the headline, 'Sex workers form their own

organisation'. The move was hailed because it was radically different from earlier attempts in this direction. The earlier attempts at bringing sex workers together had named themselves as fallen women's organisations, e.g. Patita Udhar Samiti. These attempts disallowed new notions of self and only served to enhance guilt and shame amongst their members. Abha Bhaiya has very aptly remarked, 'Such attempts have been apologetic rather than liberating', and have remained in the periphery, away from the mainstream women's movements.

Some critical and strategic approaches were used by the project towards enabling women to empower themselves through a process of negotiations with their peers. These included:

- Building on the historical but latent vibrancy in the sex workers community. As early as 1980, years before the project had begun, Asha Sadhukan, together with Putul Singh, Pramila Singh, Manju Biswas and some others, had formed Mahila Sangha. Braving threats, they carried on a sustained campaign against 'Langra', a local don who extorted money from the sex workers and they finally drove the notorious hoodlum away from the area. The peer educators used this success to stir emotions and rally people towards a common objective. This coming together had a direct bearing on promoting safer sexual practices. The clients soon found that at least in some clusters they could not move from one brothel to another in search of condom-free sex. The conditions were the same in all the brothels.

- Making sincere efforts to respond to the perceived needs of the sex worker community as and when they arose. For example, though the emphasis of SHIP was to oversee the sexual health needs of the sex workers, it made arrangements to provide non-formal education to the sex workers as and when the demand for literacy programmes arose. Vocational training programmes were conducted for aged sex workers in 1996–97 to respond to the demand for security in old age. The Usha

Multipurpose Society was set up as a credit and savings society and this helped former sex workers with self-employment schemes and the community at large to be liberated from the exorbitant rates of interest that the moneylenders demanded. More and more women joined as they found the process meeting their needs.

- Creating space for expression through the cultural platform of 'Komal Gandhar'. Komal Gandhar is a cultural theatre group formed by the sex workers themselves. This medium expanded the canvas of communication within which negotiating safe sex had a critical niche. It enabled the sex workers to come together to negotiate jointly with the clients, the pimps, the malkins and the police, in an environment that was non-threatening. 'It has given us the space to say things that reside in our hearts.' 'This medium has been very effective in setting a code of health conduct for our clients.'

- Working against patriarchy, not against men. The peer educators conducted a client survey as early as 1993. The survey revealed that only 51.5 per cent of the clients had heard of HIV/AIDS but even this group lacked awareness regarding the use of condoms. Regular use of condoms was found in 1.5 per cent of these clients and 72.7 per cent had never used a condom. A meeting with these clients or 'babus' was organised by the project to build alliances to promote safer sexual practice. About 300 clients attended. The discussions that began at this meeting led to the opening of evening clinics for the clients, where they could receive free treatment, counselling and access to condoms. Socio-cultural programmes were organised to introduce safer sex and HIV/AIDS messages targeting the clients. Today the clients have come together in a support group called the 'Sathi Sangha'. This group supports the sex workers in motivating new clients to use the condoms and the clients group provides support to the sex workers in their efforts to eliminate sexual violence in the area. It is interesting to

note here, that a section of clients, or 'babus', had all along played a very significant role in the history of prostitution in Calcutta. During the days of the national movement in the early twentieth century, they inspired the Sonagachi women to raise funds to aid the freedom struggle.

Negotiating for safety with structures

The pimps

Things were never smooth sailing in Sonagachi. There has always been an undercurrent of control by vested interests, the police, the criminal and political nexus. 'A red light area is indeed a vicious circle', explains Bhaskar Banerjee, a field administrator under the SHIP project. 'Here no one can live without negotiating with those elements. And none of the elements will allow anything that will harm their interests.' In Sonagachi, pimps were not isolated individuals. They were a well-knit panchayat like a network, led by mukhiyas or headmen. The project team met with the mukhiya to present a 'win – win' argument and negotiated the support of the pimps. It became clear that the mukhiyas did not want to support the project because the pimps feared that recognising that the HIV virus was present in Sonagachi would destroy their business. But when the project team composed of sex workers (who had an equal stake in ensuring that this business was not destroyed) explained that what would destroy the business was in fact turning a blind eye to the spread of AIDS, the pimps took it seriously and more or less agreed not to resist the campaign. Similar approaches were adopted with the police and the malkins.

The police

Training for police personnel was organised after a strong partnership was established by the project with the Calcutta Police Department. The role of the All India Institute of Health and Hygiene in building this bridge was phenomenal. Till the end of April 1986, about 180 police officers had attended these training programmes. This kind of orientation enabled the

police personnel to understand the 'risks' to their own lives and the lives of their families as a result of their sexual brutalities on the women of Sonagachi. This orientation, combined with the collective empowerment of the sex workers and the clients in the area, changed the state of affairs. 'The police has to think twice before hitting us', 'Aaj Thana Jane se Kursi Milte Hai, Pehle hamara case bhi register nahin hota tha', i.e. 'Today we go to the police station and we are offered a chair to sit, earlier they did not even register a case if we went to report abuse'. This qualitative indicator of success and empowerment, expressed by Putul Singh, the Secretary of the DMSC, brings out the extent of successful negotiations that have taken place between the sex workers and the structures in such a meaningful way.

The brothel owners

How do they measure their success in negotiating with the malkins? 'Well a number of malkins today keep condoms and along with the permanent clients or "babus" provide these to the customers as they come.' Other indicators include the provision of a few days off for the 'chokri', or young sex worker, especially when she is menstruating. This was not the case a few years ago. Bela didi, one of the malkins, informed us how she had opened an account in the Usha Co-operative Society for her chokris – a big stride of progress from the days, not too long ago, when Bela didi herself used to be paid nothing by her malkin. Bela didi had in fact lived in a bonded state of existence for 9 or 10 years where every penny earned was shown as used for repayment of the debt that she had incurred. What exactly was this debt? The price paid to the pimp to buy her (approximately $150), the money used to provide her clothes and cosmetics for her profession, the rent for occupying an area 10 ft by 10 ft in the brothel, and in addition, of course, food, water, electricity and medicines for STDs, etc.

From the periphery to the centre

The pattern of women's empowerment processes has been such that it has addressed almost every single development issue, be it trade, economy, environment or human rights governance. But what it has continually shied away from is addressing issues of sex and sexuality. In the last two decades HIV/AIDS has forced many groups to venture into the area of sex and sexuality, but the discomfort that most of them experience has kept the discussion at very preliminary levels, little able to contribute towards the transformation of vision, perception and attitudes related to morality and societal values. The SHIP project in Sonagachi has tried to emphasise that the struggle of the sex workers is not very different from the struggle of poor women in the informal sector. The struggle is essentially against patriarchy and domination. There are certain nuances in these struggles which are different, but the overall spirit and thrust remain the same. Both the struggles have questioned power relations, both have explored and identified vulnerabilities, both have tried to break down structures that are oppressive. The sex workers of Sonagachi have today re-examined their situation vis à vis mainstream society and have come up with some very powerful observations and insights. Mala Sinha refers to the women of mainstream society as well as the sex workers of her community as 'Dogs – it's just that one is a dog with a collar and one is without it'. Sadhna reflects on the similar levels of violence in the lives of women in mainstream society and women in Sonagachi. According to her, most relationships for women are abusive, the only difference is that sex workers can openly fight and throw the partner out, whereas a married woman suffers in silence. And as they explore edges over women in mainstream society, Minoti Dutt remarks, 'We are more liberated and free in many ways. Those husbands as passports to our identity are irrelevant.'

Over the last 7 years, the project has regularly celebrated International Women's Day, World Environment Day, World AIDS Day, participated in book fairs, flood relief programmes, sent delegations to Nepal and

Bangladesh, and to World AIDS conferences. During these exposures the sex workers have met with a range of partners from women's groups, government departments, media bodies, donors, etc. and have evolved the above-mentioned discourse on their situation within mainstream society. They have moved from the periphery to the centre, and in this process of negotiating their empowerment and safety have contributed very definitely towards maintaining wellbeing in the larger society. How have they done this? The Sonagachi movement has successfully intervened in stopping child trafficking in West Bengal. The self-regulatory boards set up this year are the mechanisms that enforce this. A number of children trafficked have been returned back to their homes and in this way the organisation is reducing vice and violence in the larger society. Thus persuasive, not confrontational, approaches have brought about real changes at multiple levels – the level of the self, the level of the peers and the level of deeply embedded structures. Their hand of friendship and support is now stretching further and further – 'even the housewives need to build their own organisation and join hands with us, otherwise they are not safe'.

Dreaming Utopia

The sex workers of Sonagachi had dreamed a dream 7 years ago. A dream to have a community sans violence, sans HIV, sans STDs, sans oppression. They had dreamt this dream at a time when it seemed utopian to most development workers. This was because the dream did not fit into the larger development context of the country and the region.

India in 1992 was entering its second medium term plan for AIDS control. The epidemiological analysis done by WHO at that point in time projected a bleak picture for the epidemic in the country. In 1994, at the World AIDS Conference in Yokohama, India was being projected as the AIDS capital of the world. With overall prevalence rates still as low as 0.8 per cent, the country was emerging with a sexual networking pattern that was quite alarming. The migration of labour both within and without, the

high proportion of a sexually active population, the widening socio-economic disparities, the vulnerability of a part of its borders to the drug trade, all pointed towards an explosive epidemic in the country. The high-risk behaviour studies commissioned by the national AIDS Control Organisation in 65 cities of the country in 1994–95 only validated and confirmed the above trends.

The existence of the above factors did make the dream of the women of Sonagachi rather unreal. But by 1996, research data in this oldest and largest red light district of Calcutta showed indicators that were different. The knowledge of STDs in Sonagachi improved from 69 per cent in 1992 to 97.4 per cent in 1996; the knowledge of HIV/AIDS rose from 30.7 per cent in 1992 to 96.2 per cent in 1996. Condom usage shot up from 2.7 per cent in 1992 to 81.7 per cent in 1996. The percentage of sex workers with genital ulcers decreased from 6.2 per cent in 1992 to 2.9 per cent in 1996 and the percentage of VDRL positivity fell from 25.4 per cent in 1992 to 14.3 per cent in 1996. Above all, HIV/AIDS prevalence levels plateaued at 5 per cent when other red light areas in the country were recording a rate of 55 per cent. In fact, on 18 September 1995, the *Telegraph*, a leading daily of the country, hailed Sonagachi as the biggest brothel in Asia, with a record negative growth rate of HIV/AIDS.

The dream in fact was not quite unreal. As we talked to the women of Sonagachi, it became clear that their dream was only partly fulfilled. They were still dreaming of a world where sex work would be recognised as labour, where a majority of them over time would have entered stable marital relationships again, where the world would have redefined sex and sexuality from a feminist perspective.

Sonagachi for me came to symbolise the very best in the human spirit's search for survival, for recognition, for respect. I left Sonagachi with a number of visions in my mind – an oasis in a desert, a flame continuing to flicker in a storm, a mountaineer scaling heights and worthy women carving a niche for themselves, declaring themselves as women of worth.