

# BIRDS ON A WIRE

Meet the erstwhile red-light queens who have walked a tightrope between exploitation and a hand-me-down freedom. Finally free from their shackles, they are trying to find a place for themselves in a prejudiced world that refuses to practise what it preaches.

Text and Photographs by Shuchi Kapoor



Clockwise: Religious by nature, K begins her day with a prayer to the Sun God; she likes spending time with her neighbours in the brothel and her photographer son, Shankar

marie claire  
*Right to Respect*

**D**handba is at an all-time low in Kamathipura and Sonagachi. But whether it flourished once and flails currently, the fact is that the red-light district remains an indomitable reality. Be it in New York's Bronx area, Amsterdam's De Wallen, Tokyo's Kabukicho, Kolkata's Sonagachi or Mumbai's Kamathipura, red-light districts all over the world sustain many lives trapped either by a lack of money or choice. While brothels predominantly thrive on vulnerability and malice, there is also in some cases the lure of easy money or an addiction. A girl who made a conscious decision to step into this realm, scoffs when I ask about the shadow this will cast on her life forever. "What is 'forever'?" she asks.

Then there are the quitters. Rare stories of the ones that managed to get away. Or at least as far as was possible. Says one such survivor, "It becomes a habit, an addiction – not for the sex but for the money, for the sake of your kids, your future, for surviving the moment. In this business of flesh, one sags with the other. There are no locks on the doors; we are chained by our own needs at first and then our greed. Even if we want to change, the society and its convenient conscience that creates us, uses and abuses us, treats us like a disease. Tell me, who will ever give a job to a prostitute? Times have changed, but perceptions haven't. If there are ways to get in, there have to be ways to get out. Stand up and leave." These are three rare stories of ex-prostitutes who decided to call it a day, in search of a better life. They now work with different NGOs that help rehabilitate sex

workers. While some are a blessing, many others operate as personal profit zones misusing funds and taking advantage of the girls' situations, making token effort to distribute condoms and organise health check ups only to chalk up reports. They are often no better than the local mafia, which exists for a cause – that of keeping the business going. But are women always going to be relegated to the role of an object, and that being true not just for a prostitute. Because it isn't just the men who need to change their perception, the women also need to fight their conditioning. They need to take a pledge to educate and sensitise their sons and husbands. The prostitutes have replaced the red bulb with a brighter, neutral-tinted one. Isn't it time for us to do the same?

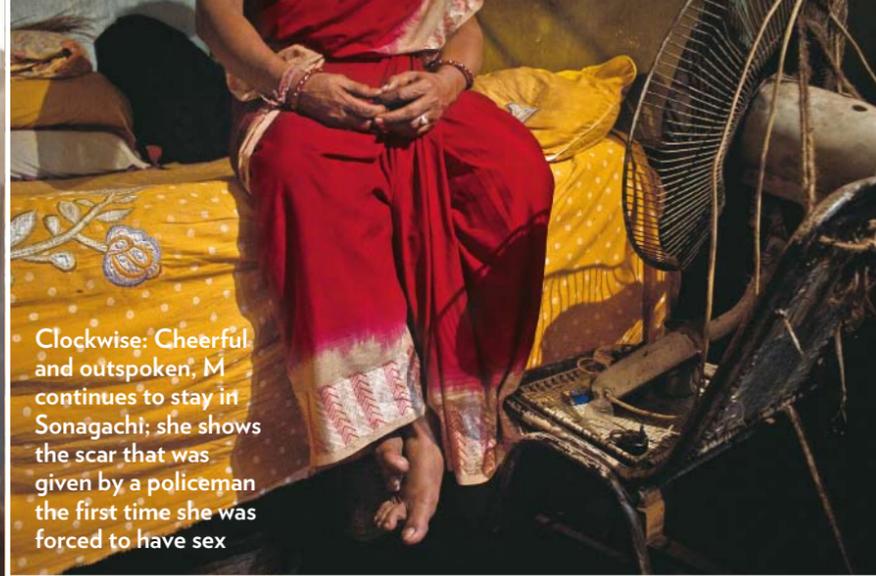
'IT BECOMES A HABIT, AN ADDICTION – NOT FOR THE SEX, BUT FOR THE MONEY, FOR SURVIVING THE MOMENT'

## Meet K,

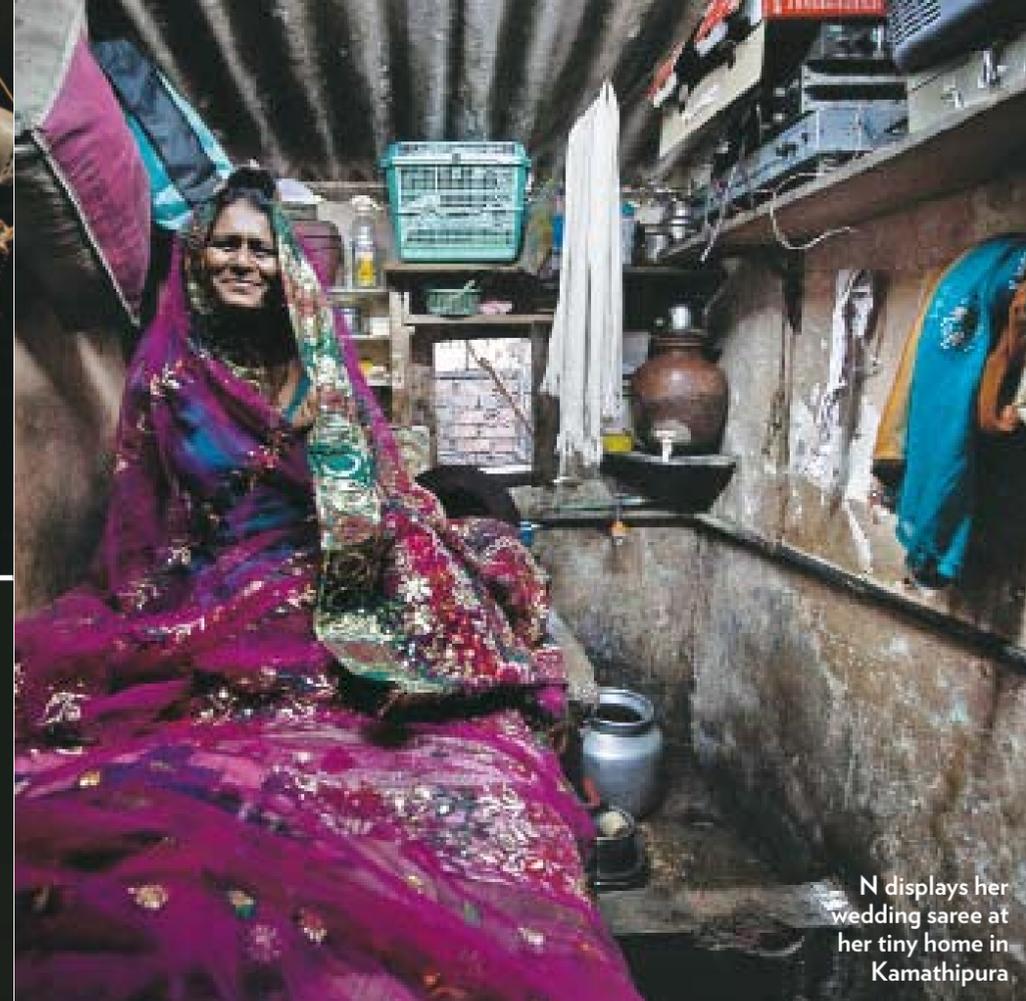
37, KOLKATA  
A wife at 14 and a mother at 15, K escaped an abusive husband and her life in Malkaangiri, a small village in Orissa, to come to Kolkata soon after her son was born. She doesn't remember her original address or even the route she took to the big city. She left her child behind with her mother and set off with a trusted friend in search of a job. She remembers her first customer as a good man who paid her despite not having sex with her. But this wasn't the case with the ones that came after. She started servicing about six to seven customers a day in order to

survive in the city. As time wore on, she felt more hopeless and stuck, and stopped thinking about her son. Until five years later, when her mother managed to hunt her down and brought her two-year-old son Shankar along. From then on, she says her sole aim was to make enough money to get out of the trade as soon as possible. In the interim, she met her lover Baapi, who helped her escape. Nineteen years on, they still live in a single-bed chamber in a red-light district. She works as a supervisor with an NGO called Freeset that makes and exports jute bags. Shankar never went to school but grew up to be a photographer and works with an esteemed photo agency in Kolkata. He tells a different, perhaps more

accurate version of the story. Baapi did get his mother out of the brothel and she quit being a sex worker, but he was also in a committed relationship with another woman. This was a jolt to Kavita, but she realised she didn't have much of a choice. Baapi would get drunk and beat up both K and Shankar. This led to an estranged relationship between Shankar and him. But K's job with Freeset changed many things. Over time, Baapi left the previous woman and is now solely with K. He has also stopped the physical abuse. Shankar hardly spends time at home, is usually reserved and goes about his own life and work. He wants to move out of this area and give his mother a better home. ▶



Clockwise: Cheerful and outspoken, M continues to stay in Sonagachi; she shows the scar that was given by a policeman the first time she was forced to have sex



N displays her wedding saree at her tiny home in Kamathipura

## 'LIFE NEVER OFFERS A PROSTITUTE A HOME AND HEARTH BUT DOES FIND HER A ROOM IN A BROTHEL'

### Meet M,

52, KOLKATA

Known as Mummy, Boudi or Didi, M is a vivacious and daring woman. Having worked as a prostitute for a decade, she now works as a manager for a residential school for poor and abandoned children in Kolkata. Her son's family live in a different locality, in a house owned by her. She lives by herself in a single room in one of Kolkata's smaller red-light districts. "While my children are very supportive, I want them to live a life free from my past. This distance is healthy. I know they are always there for me."

M is like a don in her area because of her outspoken and spontaneous persona. She makes me sit comfortably on her bed, calls for *chaakna* and booze and lights up cigarettes for both of us. She recalls a time when her

mother served her less food than her brothers just because she was a girl, and a burden. She distinctly remembers her mother's demand, "*Khaana hai toh kama ke laao*" (Earn if you want to eat). At the age of 13, she escaped with a friend's husband, in the lure of a paying job. For someone who had never even seen a train, she was excited at the onset of this new journey in her life. She remembers arriving at a place where she saw these beautiful girls with powdered faces. When she complimented one, she found herself on the receiving end of spite, "*Mera kamaai par nazar lag gaya, ye randi kaban se aa gaya!*" (Where has this new prostitute come from? She is casting an evil eye on my business.)

She remembers the Madam and the man who brought her in; forcibly spreading her legs wide and inserting candles into her vagina to get her ready for clients.

Her next horrific memory is of a policeman

who not only raped her but used ropes and a *laathi* on her. He also brutally bit her thigh; she still wears the scar on her leg. She was then sent to jail for 14 days where she preferred to clean the toilets and press everyone's feet, failing which she was forced to have sex or lick the private parts of many men. "*Mooh se yahan chaato nahi toh tumbari g\*\*\*d faad dega,*" are words that still ring in her ears. (Lick here, else I will tear your a\*\* apart.)

Much later came Sapan, the love of her life, who bought her for the night for Rs 60, which was three times the usual rate. Sapan was an army man. He also helped organise a sting operation but her handlers hid their girls away in a space that the raid officers never found.

So her life continued in the same pattern, until she met Fazal, the man who finally got her out of the trade. He never officially

married her, even though he put *sindoor* on her forehead. "*Zindagi veshya ko sansaar nahi deta, baan ek alag kotba ya kamraa de deta hai.*" (Life never offers a prostitute a home and hearth but does find her a room in a brothel.) She soon found out he had another family and children. Time passed, and she joined an NGO that works in the red-light districts of Kolkata; with them she's personally helped 16 girls get married off; forced her own husband to convert his liquor shop into a medical centre for the girls; and went to head the same NGO. She even went to Geneva, on a scholarship, to present a case on the prostitution scenario in India.

But she left this NGO when she discovered their malpractices and caught them using the girls for personal gratification. She says she felt tired of trying to make a change. It was time to leave her old life behind. But the past continues to haunt her. "*Aaj humara naam hai, rutbaa hai, hum duniya ghoom ke aaya, itna log humko love karta hai, magar kisi ka vaastav uska peecha nahi chhodta. Aur vaastave mein hum randi hai, randi hai, randi*

*hai.*" (Today I am recognised, respected and revered. I have travelled the world, people love me, but the reality never releases you. And the reality is that I was a prostitute.)

M's son is from her lover Sapan. She met Fazal six months after her son was born. Sapan had offered to financially help her raise her son, but refused to accept M and his baby socially. M has a name tattooed on each of her arms – Sapan and Fazal.

### Meet N,

40, MUMBAI

Fondly called Aapa, N hails from a small village called Bhusawal in Maharashtra, and was brought to Mumbai at the age of 14, by a few neighbourhood girlfriends under the pretext of visiting the big fancy city. She has worked at Foras Road, Falkland road and different *gallis* in the infamous Kamathipura area. She remembers losing her virginity to her first customer after dating him for two months. She has worked as a sex worker for about five years and after a life full of heartbreaks and disillusionment, decided to

'WHETHER YOU STAY IN THE BUSINESS OR DECIDE TO QUIT, DON'T DO IT FOR SOMEONE ELSE'

settle down with a man who was patiently and persistently always there for her, even when she was in love with someone else. He helped her get into a local theatre company that stages dance performances, which was much better off than sex work. Ask him why he pursued her and his abashed reply is, "*Arre koi se toh shaadi banaati, hum ne hi bana liya!*" (She would have eventually married someone, so I took my chance!) He also adds that she is a very good dancer.

Today they live in a single room house, in one of the brothels of Kamathipura. He runs an electrical shop and for the last seven years N has been working as a coordinator with an NGO that deals with the health conditions of sex workers. She is also involved with the other NGOs in the area.

N puts her inevitable cynicism and experience in a sentence. "Whether you stay in the business or decide to quit, don't do it for someone else. Do it only for yourself. Family, friends, lovers, husbands, children – you cannot depend on anybody." This is also one of the reasons she hasn't had children. "The business has become privatised with the advent of cell phones. There are no tabs on the money that the girls earn or keep. They only need to pay the Madams who rent out bedchambers for the night. Many girls are moving to the city suburbs due to unaffordability of rents here or because they are infected. Many of us are being uprooted from these brothels, our homes, as many areas are being 'cleaned up'. No matter what we do, we are the dirt. We can wipe ourselves clean but who is going to clean your mind of preconceived notions?" ■