

The Daily Star WEEKEND MAGAZINE

The Way of All Flesh : Within the Walls

By Rahat Fahmida and S. Bari, reported by Ehsanul Haque, our Narayanganj correspondent.

Bernard Shaw attacked it squarely in "Mrs Warren's Profession." A Narayanganj brothel landlord holds it responsible. Outraged neighbours claim it is blameless. Their subject is not prostitution — it is society. A society which looks conveniently the other way till its own profit is in danger.

On October 20, this year, the world's "oldest" profession took a new twist. As neighbours besieged a brothel of Tanbazaar and Tantipara, prostitutes in turn demanded their rights. Allegations were flung about in a whirlpool of self-righteous posturing: members of the Un-Islamic Activities Resistance Committee are ex-extortionists; the prostitutes are being greedy and uncooperative; landlords and police are conniving together.

When committee supporters encircled the brothel, the police department arrived to protect the prostitutes. The government, finding itself in an awkward position, mumbled about rehabilitation and appointed a probe board. A leader emerged from among the beleaguered women. Rita Khanam and her colleagues maintain that they are adults consenting to sexual contact; and refuse to compromise till all the prostitutes in Bangladesh have access to rehabilitation.

Meanwhile suspicious fingers were pointed at the sudden awakening of Tanbazaar's social conscience. Prostitutes pay landlords, the police, even city authorities. One of the links in this underground chain broke down; and the eviction uproar is merely retaliation.

What comes to the surface of this seething mass of cor-

ruption is the need to take stock of our social tenets. When young Shab Maher was beaten and put on a train to die, Bangladesh clucked its tongue at the sad reality of prostitution and promptly forgot. Beauty parlours and physiotherapy clinics, in Dhaka city itself, continue to operate as fronts for business in sex.

When brothels are raided, the women are supposedly rehabilitated. But no amount of training in basket-weaving and embroidery or working in a garments factory will absorb prostitutes into a "better" life. An alternative equivalent income source is still hard to come by. If a woman sells her body and earns enough to own

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a VCR and gold jewellery, she may not think it worth her while to toil away for a pittance.

The term 'rehabilitation' expresses strong prejudices against women in prostitution and reflects at least a paternalistic 'top-down' approach. Prostitutes are considered 'fallen women'. Therefore, having been rescued, they have to be 'upgraded' and prepared for becoming normal members of society again. Of course, the same rule does not apply to any of their male customers.

Due to this misconception, the present rehabilitation schemes function as punishment for women. Consequently, prostitutes are afraid to go through this scheme, which they under-

stand as a kind of detention for a period of at least one year before they are allowed to return home.

Procurers and brothel keepers can, therefore, successfully threaten prostitutes under their control with the feared conditions of life in the rehabilitation centre. Instead of requesting intervention and assistance from the authorities, prostitutes fall victim to the procurer's arguments by claiming — often contrary to the truth — during police investigations, that they are not forced into prostitution, but engage in it by their own will. This answer will largely minimise the danger of their being placed in a rehabilitation centre. Unfortunately, the authorities cannot take legal actions against procurers and brothel keepers.

The truth is that in a world where misery and unemployment prevail, there will be people to enter any profession that is open; as long as a police force and prostitution exist, there will be policemen and prostitutes, more especially as these occupations pay better than many others.

Literature has made the pimp a well-known figure. He plays the part of protector in the life of the prostitute. He advances money to buy clothes, afterwards he defends her against the competition of other women, against the police — sometimes he is a policeman himself — and against her clients, all of whom would be only too glad to use her without paying and some of whom would want to satisfy their sadism on her. To be sure of getting her money and to avoid rough treatment, the prostitute needs a man. He gives her moral support as well.

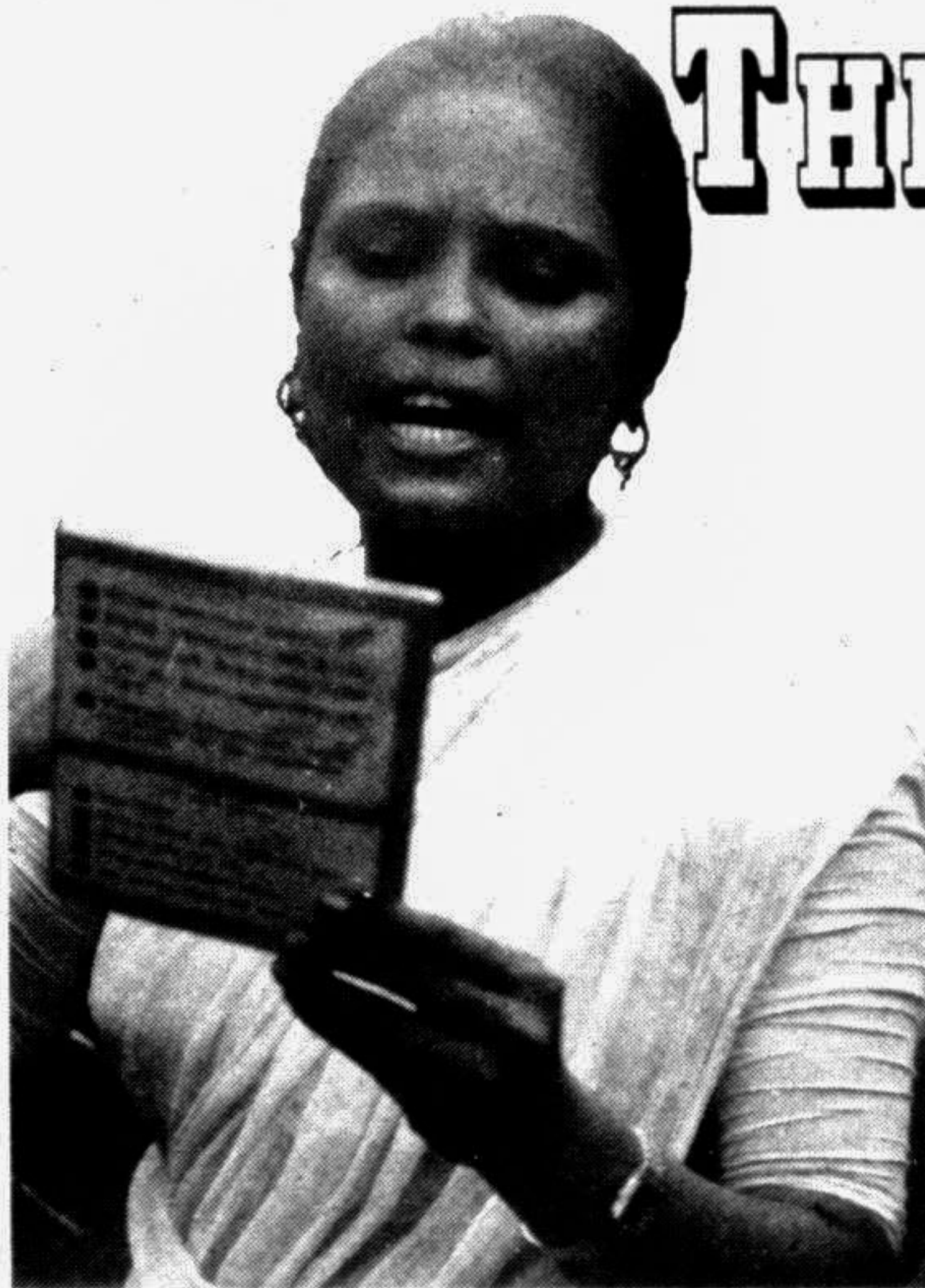
A case study of a family in prostitution, reveals the helpless situation. Jahanara Begum is about 50 years old. She has been in this profession for 40 years. All the female members of her family are prostitutes. This includes her daughter Rasheda 35, Rasheda's daughter Mukta 20. Since they belong to a lower grade of prostitutes their rates are much lower than Shilpi's and live in a squalid room which they all share for entertaining clients. Although they claim to be satisfied with their profession they are constantly threatened by police and local thugs and often have to give their services for free. When asked to comment on the present situation, Jahanara rather caustic reply is, "This is a business and the only way we can feed ourselves. You people are so good at criticizing us, evicting us but you never want to answer the question of how we will survive."

Most prostitutes are morally adapted to their mode of life. Not that they are immoral congenitally or by heredity, but they feel integrated, and with reason, in a society that manifests a demand for their services. They know very well that the edifying lecture of the police sergeant who registers them is pure verbiage, and elevated sentiments proclaimed by their clients outside the brothel do little to intimidate them. As a woman once explained that paid or not, she is equally called a whore, but if paid, an overpaid one; when she wants money, the man will pretend he did not think she was that kind of girl, and so on. Paid or not, it was all one to her.

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Innocence: A dancer at Tanbazaar



Spokeswoman Rita Khanam: Prostitutes find their own voice

Caught in the Middle

By Aasha Mehreen Amin and Ehsanul Haque

The story of Rita Khanam is a blueprint for almost every prostitute in Tanbazaar or Tantipara. It is a story of physical and psychological abuse coupled with poverty that has led thousands of women to choose prostitution as the only alternative, the only means of survival. For them life in a brothel is no worse than life outside it.

Rita begins her story from the time she is 16 years old living with her father and stepmother in Lakshimpur, Rajshahi. In 1984 after passing her matriculation examination from Ramesha Uchha Balika Biddaloye with a second division, Rita is driven by her stepmother's merciless torture to run away from home. She starts working as a maid for a businessman — Mr Rahman in Rajshahi. Her monthly wage is 200 taka. One night, Shumon, the son of her employer rapes her and this goes on for days on end. Rita does not dare to protest for fear of Shumon's threats and also because it would be her word against the son of a wealthy man. She has no choice but to stay on for she has nowhere to go. At this time, the story of the brutal killing of Shob Mehr in a daily attracts Rita's attention. This is the first time that Rita learns of what a brothel is. After being violated night after night Rita has become too desensitized to be shocked at such things. Instead she begins to see the brothel as an escape. She makes up her mind to join it.

The brothel in Jessore proves to be quite lucrative for Rita for she comes out of it with 2 and a half lakh taka and a husband Sheikh Sulaiman, a client she had fallen in love with. But hardly a year passes when, after the birth of a baby girl, the love of her life Sulaiman, metamorphoses into the cad in her life taking all of Rita's savings and 17 'bhoris' of her gold jewelry. When Rita can take Sulaiman's abuse, which included severe beatings, no longer, she decides to leave once more, this time to Tanbazaar. Sulaiman refuses to let her daughter go with Rita, and the child later dies. She has been living in Tanbazaar ever since.

In the present crisis Rita Khanam has been chosen by the other prostitutes as their leader and representative, a position she has lived up to with strength and determination. In an exclusive interview with The Daily Star she talks of the present situation at Tanbazaar.

Daily Star: What is the present state of the prostitutes?

What steps are you taking to help yourselves?

Rita: It is terrible. We are in an abject condition. There are no clients for days because they are either threatened or beaten up by the 'mastaans' hired by the resistance committee. This is our only means of livelihood. We don't even have enough food to eat and the money is running out fast. We are also being constantly threatened so we are accumulating all the knives, botis and boiling water we can find to defend ourselves. We are also seeking protection of the law. A case has been filed at the High Court against the resistance committee and I have sent many letters of appeal to organisations such as Mahila Parishad and even to the Prime Minister.

"If the government does not help us we will go before the Prime Minister and commit suicide in front of her."

— Rita Khanam

DS: What about the towns people? Is there a change in their attitude towards you?

RK: The people have been very supportive. They think we should have a rehabilitation scheme guaranteed to us before we are evicted. Even people from different 'jilas' have expressed their concern and sympathy for us.

DS: Were any of the members of the resistance committee your clients?

RK: Of course. Each one of them is a scoundrel. The chairman (Al Haj Khawja Mohiuddin) himself used to have a mistress Shabana, at home who was originally a prostitute of Tanbazaar brothel. A few days before the movement (of the resistance committee) he sent her back to the brothel, Jahangir (secretary of the committee) has a 'raang mahal' where he takes his mistresses whenever he needs his 'entertainment'. His favourites are Nazma and Surya.

DS: So why should they want to shut down the brothel?

RK: Every month they use to take toll from us. It was when we stopped paying this that they started this movement. The amount of this 'chanda' used to go up to 1 to 1

For the legal version of this case, please turn over to — Page-10.

Star photographs by Mohammed Kamaluddin

THE TANBAZAAR CYCLE

Chronology of Events

October 1991

* 18th — Leaflets calling the town's people to unite for eviction of the estimated 7000 prostitutes of Tanbazaar and Tantipara, Narayanganj, at different mosques after Jumma prayers. Tension starts! Police forces deployed at the brothel area. Turnout of clients at the brothels declines.

* 23rd — Tension mounts! Campaign over loud speakers begins to mobilise public opinion in favour of eviction. Un-Islamic Activities Resistance Committee holds a press conference, and decides to march on the brothels. Rita Khanam announces their decision to remain in place unless rehabilitation is guaranteed. Prostitutes hold a public rally and hand a memorandum to the deputy commissioner, demanding security. Police protection reinforced.

* 24th — DC assures prostitutes that illegal eviction will be resisted. Mid-night meeting between the local authorities, the UARC and the Home Minister.

* 25th — Clash between anti-brothel processionists and police forces after Jumma prayer. Over 50 injured. 17 arrested including two UARC leaders. UARC announces half-day hartal on October 31st.

* 31st — Half-day hartal not observed. Business resumes in Tanbazaar. But the UARC stalemate ensues. Brothel clients continue to be threatened by UARC.

"I Will Personally Rehabilitate Them"

Life in Tanbazaar is becoming intolerable, according to a local citizens' group. The Un-Islamic Activities Resistance Committee talks to the reporters of The Daily Star. Written by S. Bari

The Un-Islamic Activities Resistance Committee, partly men in their late thirties, met with the Daily Star to air their views on the brothel controversy. The committee, formed on October 20th, 1991, aims principally at removing prostitution from the Tanbazaar neighbourhood. Members are worried about the reputation of the area, and feel the presence of brothels is an unhealthy influence on their community. When asked why their concern has only now taken active shape, while the brothels are over a century old, Organizing Secretary Rafiqul Islam says: "We tried to get rid of them in 1985, but the military administration was an obstacle to our efforts."

This year, the committee encircled a brothel in order to force the prostitutes to vacate the premises. According to Secretary Jahangir Alam, an eviction notice was also served. Both the police and the brothel-keepers deny the existence of any such notice.

Committee member Iqbal Ahmed Shyamol, hidden behind a pair of dark glasses, told the Daily Star that the issue was embroiled in cor-

ruption. He alleged that the police department makes 3 lakh taka daily from the brothels as protection money. Referring to the affidavits produced by the prostitutes certifying that they are consenting adults, he said, "They just pay the notary public to give them a certificate."

The real motivation behind the controversy, the committee feels, is the power of the landlords, the owners of the houses in which the prostitutes practice their trade. Jahangir Alam claimed that one family controls the houses and has made millions in profit from rent. The family of Shahjahan and Feroze Miah now owns eight cinema halls and the Shamrat garments factory, "he said, referring to two brothers who are landlords in the brothel area. According to the committee and other locals, the family has made a fortune off prostitution.

Shyamol was particularly outraged at what he called, "the spread of this disease. There are so many prostitutes, and they earn so much and dress so well," he informed us, "we can no longer tell the difference between our sisters and

them." Earning power is a major thorn in the committee's side. The fact that the women in Tanbazaar and Tantipara own VCRs and fridges is a source of severe irritation to the members.

Faced with allegations that they were once not only clients but rent-collectors, and have now turned against the brothel-keepers because money was being withheld, the committee members became agitated. Both Rafiqul Islam, and Jahangir Alam categorically denied any such involvement. They asked for proof, in the way of receipts and documents. Such proof is not generally available in the profession in question.

The committee feels rehabilitation is not its concern; it also does not see any social guilt in the existence of the brothels. When asked if the brothels were merely meeting a demand and would close if demand could be stopped, members replied only that landlord Feroze Miah was exploiting the women. They did not comment on whether the rest of society was as well.

Jahangir Alam, however, offered generously to provide for the prostitutes. He suggested Zakat funds should be used, if not, he claimed, "I will personally rehabilitate them."



Five members of the Un-Islamic Resistance Committee

and half lakh taka each month. They are doing this just to get back on us.

DS: What kind of help do you expect from the government? What alternative do you have if this is not guaranteed?

RK: We demand that if we are to be evicted we must be rehabilitated and this means all prostitutes should be rehabilitated, not just those of Tanbazaar and Tantipara. If the government does not help us we will go before the Prime Minister and commit suicide in front of her.



Money changes hands

(Contd.)