

THE DIRTIEST OF TRADES

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hey forced us to drink beer and other kinds of alcohol. Then they stripped us naked and asked us to dance. After that, all of them took turns and 'worked' on us individually."

This is how Sahana, a 16-year-old girl from Dhaka's Tejgaon area—who was conned into going to India and later sold to a pimp there—describes just one of her many gruesome experiences last year.

Her voice quivers as she attempts to recall and narrate her story at a shelter house in Dhaka, where she has been staying since the first week of June, following her rescue. She is one of a dozen girls who returned to Bangladesh on June 5 this year. Like Sahana, most of the other girls too were forced into sex work.

The increasing number of trafficked victims returning from India in the last couple of years unveils a perilous issue that is only likely to get worse in the near future. There was a time when the number of Bangladeshi trafficked victims arrested in India was in single digits and the incidents were mostly confined to Kolkata. However, recent cases suggest that the web has spread all across our neighbouring nation.

According to the Bangladesh Embassy in Delhi, 164 victims have been repatriated in the first half of 2017 alone. That is more than twice the total figure of last year and already 33 more than the 131 sent back in 2015. Aside from the government, there are NGOs from both sides working together to send the victims back home.

One such NGO is the Bangladesh National Woman's Lawyer's Association (BNWLA) and it is in their shelter house that Sahana is currently residing.

The slight hesitation in Sahana's voice compels the shelter's caretaker, Najma, to step in and remind her that it was okay if she did not want to speak about her past. Sahana though, pauses for a bit and decides to continue. It is something that she has to do for the sake of her mother, she says later.

"I was in a relationship with a boy living in Farmgate. I used to meet him outside the parlour in Tejgaon, where I used to work. He told me to go to India with him. He promised that I would be able to work in a parlour there and earn more," she says.



PHOTO: KAZI TAHSIN AGAZ APURBO

"One day, I told the owner of the parlour that I had to recharge my phone and just left. We crossed the border that day and after a long journey, reached Surat (Gujarat) in the morning.

"To my surprise, he took me to a flat where there were many men and then he disappeared. There was another girl like me over there. They forced us to drink and then two of them did their 'work' on me. After that, the other girl and I cried a lot. We cried the whole week," she recalls.

After a week, the men took Sahana and the other girl to their first assignment. This time, the girls had to deal with 12 men. Again, they forced the girls to drink, made them dance and then raped them. It was over there that Sahana overheard one of the men saying that she had been sold.

"After they had finished, they were beating me. One of the men asked why I was getting beaten. The man who took me there said that he had bought me for two lakh rupees and that I wasn't behaving as I should. I needed to be worth the money spent," she says.

Sahana was sent to various customers. There were times when she was hit if she was not willing to have sex with her clients.

A few weeks later, Sahana realised that the only way to escape was to contact her mother in Dhaka. With the tips that she received from her customers, she managed to buy a phone. She then called her mother, who had by then filed a case against the parlour in Tejgaon in which Sahana used to work.

A few days later, Sahana's mother contacted BNWLA and gave Sahana their emergency number.

"I got a call from an aunty at BNWLA. She gave me the number of an Indian NGO. I contacted the Indian NGO but I could not communicate with the *bhaiya* there because I didn't know Hindi.

"So he asked me to give the phone to my customer and I did that. The customer gave him a wrong address and immediately after that informed my *dadai*. My *dadai* then decided to sell me to someone else," she narrates.

"By then I was really shattered. I really wanted to escape. We were waiting at the train station for my new owners and that is when I started crying very loudly. The police noticed that, took me in, and at the same time arrested the traffickers.

"It was over there that the *bhaiya* from the Indian NGO came, spoke to the police and explained everything," explains Sahana.

Sahana had to stay in a hostel in India for a year because of the cases filed against 11 traffickers. Eventually, she returned to Bangladesh on June 5. However, more trouble ensued.

As the investigation into Sahana's trafficking ensued in Bangladesh, her traffickers were brought under the police's radar. As a result, her mother was threatened a number of times.

"They broke our milk and egg shop which my mother used to run. Now she is fighting alone. My mother left my father because he was a drug addict. My elder brother lives with my father and I have a sister who is younger to me. I really want to help my mother," she says.

For survivors like Sahana, the ones who are rescued and brought home, the struggle is far from over. A glimpse across the shelter homes of the country gives you an idea of the pain that they have to endure after escaping their previous life.

Sakanya Roy, who is currently Sahana's roommate at the BNWLA's shelter home, is HIV positive. She was tricked into going to India for a better job at a parlour in 2015 and subsequently forced to work in a brothel for a year.

Tawhida, who used to work at a well-known departmental store in Gulshan 1, returned to Dhaka pregnant. She is due in August. She is just 19.

While speaking to the survivors, you gradually realise that most of them are trapped in a vicious circle. Yes, they are back, but they don't really know what's in store for them next.

They are not sure if their respective communities will accept them. They are not certain if they will be able to earn money once they leave the shelter homes. The worst aspect is that they can't openly talk about the torture that they went through. These factors eventually compel many of them to return to India or to a new destination, putting themselves in precarious situations.

Take for instance, the case of 22-year-old Fargin Khatun. She

in Delhi and has been, along with the high commissioner Syed Moazzem Ali, strategising plans for the smooth return of the survivors, agrees that more work needs to be done regarding the rehabilitation of the trafficked victims.

"A majority of the girls are tricked into working in brothels in India. However, we have also found girls who willingly cross the border. We believe that these girls know from beforehand about the kind of activity that they will have to be involved in after reaching India. There have been cases where girls, who were sent back home, came back to India to work again," explains Mosharraf.

According to Mosharraf, visiting shelter homes throughout the nation has become a priority for embassy officials. "Our first step is to find out if the person actually belongs to Bangladesh. We generally come to know by their accent and the way they talk. After that, we take the necessary steps to give them the papers," he says.

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returned home and a few cases were also filed against the traffickers. While Thailand has already given verdicts, the mere investigation of the cases in Bangladesh is yet to be completed.

Another reason why so many traffickers find it easy to work in Bangladesh, according to advocate Salma, is the vulnerability of the Bangladeshi girls.

"In India, Bangladeshi girls are in demand in the red light districts because they are very vulnerable. Our girls are victims of child marriage, some of them are divorced, some have children and they need to take care of them, so they easily fall in the trap of the traffickers offering them a lot of money," explains Salma.

Apart from women, traffickers also target men who yearn for a better living. "They mainly come here as construction workers. They earn around Rs 700 per day and that means that they end up getting something around Tk 25,000 per month, which is good money for them.

"Most of them stay in places where the police are unlikely to

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JANE AUSTEN'S WORDS, IN NUMBERS

MALIHA KHAN

Jane Austen is seeing something of a revival, if that can be said of an eternally popular writer, this year. On the bicentenary of her death, she is set to appear on the new £10 note in England, replacing Charles Darwin. However, ardent fans worldwide have expressed outrage that her image appears to be airbrushed to look 'prettier'. The quote used along with her portrait on the note, "I declare after all there is no enjoyment like reading!" is also controversial as it was actually spoken, in the context of the book, by Caroline Bingley who is not an avid reader but is desperately trying to impress the uninterested Mr. Darcy.

The first female writer to be featured on British money, Austen's words and characters have gained immortality in readers' imagination and are relevant even 200 years later. Austen wrote her

Enduring word choices

Virginia Woolf famously observed about Austen: "Of all great writers she is the most difficult to catch in the act of greatness." With just six novels to her name, published over the span of seven years, what is it that makes Jane Austen endure?

The Upshot, a data-driven venture of *The New York Times*, undertook a statistical analysis of word choices in 127 English novels published between 1710 and 1920. Austen's vocabulary, particularly in the earliest novels, was found to be more abstract, with words such as *affection*, *obliged*, *suffered* and *virtue*. Such words describe the characters' state of mind and their relationships with one another as opposed to words which focus more on the physical world and connect to the



She is tolerable, but not handsome enough to tempt me.



Jane Austen, from a drawing by sister Cassandra.

first and most famous novels *Pride and Prejudice* and *Sense and Sensibility* in her early twenties. Early manuscripts were rejected, however, and it was not until around six years later, that *Northanger Abbey* (then titled *Susan*) was accepted by a publisher for the price of £10. Today, Austen is the face of the £10 note.

Austen has been translated into approximately 40 languages. In the '90s, a wave of Austen screen adaptations including the famous 1995 BBC miniseries adaptation of "Pride and Prejudice" and the Ang Lee-directed film "Sense and Sensibility" in the same year further cemented the status of Austen as a British literary icon. A total of 31 TV and film adaptations have been based on and inspired by Austen's works.

senses—such as *close*, *dark* and *empty*.

Austen's word choices are also more every day—*awkward*, *sorry* and *suppose*—than melodramatic—*beheld* and *thee*. Another study comparing Austen's novels to other works of British fiction at the time and contemporary works, found that Austen used intensifying words like *very*, *much*, and so more often than other writers. This, according to the study, is what Austen utilised to set a tone of irony—a prominent trait of her writing.

Austen's naturalism meant that she captured daily life in 18th-century England and human nature in the middle and upper classes both accurately and strikingly. Dramatic events are few and far between, limited to an elopement or two. Austen had none of the supernatural of Charlotte

Brontë. But she did have the ability to relate to readers with wit and humour, with her word choices for one, her keenly intelligent perceptions on human nature.

Status and class in Austen

Writing in the Georgian era, Austen detailed the lives of the aspiring middle class and the wealthy. Austen's characters are initially defined by their monetary worth. Mr. Darcy in *Pride and Prejudice* for example has an annual income of £10,000. However, his reserve and pride soon make him unlikely among the Bennets and their social circle whereas Mr Bingley, worth only £4,500 in comparison, shines with his good looks and ability to please.

The wealthy in Austen's time are those who are independently wealthy or have no profession. Females, of course, rarely had the opportunity to earn. Jane Austen, together with her sister, had only £450 a year to live on following her father's death. The daughter of a vicar, Austen was from a middle class background like the Bennet and Dashwood sisters. *Sense and Sensibility*, the first novel to be published, made her £150. Posthumously, Austen's family attempted to portray her as an amateur writer with no interest in making money from her talents but purely for artistic fulfillment. The novel was published anonymously, as with most female

authors at the time, identifying the author solely as "a lady".

In Austen's novels, servants were mainly seen and not heard. Excepting Mr. Darcy's housekeeper Mrs. Reynolds, in a part of the book in which she extols her employer's virtues to a surprised Elizabeth Bennet, servants account for only 17 lines of dialogue. In total, servants speak 877 words across Austen's six novels. To put this in perspective, Lady Catherine de Bourgh, another minor character in *Pride and Prejudice* who is an arrogant example of the upper classes of the time, speaks 2383 words. As part of the same social hierarchy satirised in her books, Austen could not intimately know them and so, her novels did not have fleshed out servant 'characters'.

Similarly, Austen's writing is often criticised because it does not reflect the grim realities of England at the time—the empire's wars, slavery, or even closer evils such as the low average life expectancy or high infant mortality rate. Austen, however, preferred to write about the people and social relationships around her, which she so intimately relates to readers across cultures even two centuries on. Attempts to quantify Austen's words can go some way in explaining the enduring appeal of her words—such as this by Mr. Bennet in *Pride and Prejudice*, "For what do we live, but to make sport for our neighbours, and laugh at them in our turn?"