

## India's Other Virus Human Trafficking And The Spread of HIV

By Michael Parker

**News Update** received by email from the author.

On Monday, 21 August, Seelu (main character in story) was at New Delhi station and walked right into the very woman who had trafficked her. She immediately rang Shakti Vahini (an NGO active in anti-trafficking, HIV prevention and health outreach) and managed to keep the woman (Rukmani) distracted for an hour by feigning interest in buying girls herself, before Shakti Vahini arrived and an arrest was made. Shakti Vahini told me she handled the situation with great presence of mind. The incident was on that night's TV news and in the next day's newspapers.

<http://www.hindu.com/2006/08/22/stories/2006082222330300.htm>

The case against Rukmani and the brothel to which the girl was sold is very strong as Shakti Vahini has a lot of supporting evidence.

But the girl's nayika (controller inside the brothel) has apparently since died, so action will probably be taken against the brothel owner. But the big scoop is that a diary was found on Rukmani with details of all sorts of contacts in Delhi's and Mumbai's red light areas to whom she has allegedly confessed selling girls. Because the Indian Home Minister's constituency includes the district in Maharashtra where this woman operates, Shakti Vahini is now writing to urge him to launch a full scale investigation of all the girls that have disappeared from that area, on the strength of this find. So this chance encounter may come to have very big ramifications.

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India's looming HIV disaster terrifies the rest of the world, and its potential to outpace Africa as the world's largest reservoir of the virus has brought out the big money to contain it. World Bank funds are flowing into HIV-prevention programmes. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation has committed \$200 million to galvanize leadership at the institutional level and change behaviour among high-risk groups. The Clinton Foundation is assisting India's National AIDS Control Organization to train large numbers of doctors in the basics of HIV medicine and broaden access to treatment.



A commercial sex worker in Mumbai, India © WHO photo/P. Virost

And change is happening. Programmes to distribute free antiretroviral (ARV) drugs have been established and safe sex campaigns are gradually entrenching condom use in Delhi's GB Road and Mumbai's Kamatipura red-light districts-notorious epicentres of infection. But the spread of HIV is not merely a practical problem that enough condoms, drugs and doctors can bring under control. For underlying this epidemic is a phenomenon of greater magnitude and complexity which threatens to overwhelm the impact the Clinton and Gates Foundations' combined expenditures might make. This is India's vast, murky, semi-criminalized, semi-tolerated trafficking of girls from economically marginalized States into coerced marriages, forced labour and prostitution.

Trafficking is an issue that struggles for attention in India's overburdened social policy arena. While HIV/AIDS funding is becoming something of a "cash cow" for better positioned agencies in the field, according to a Times of India article, trafficking is an area of under-resourcing and government inertia. Yet, to the extent that trafficking is a direct contributor to the pattern of infection, HIV-control strategies require a distinct set of policy measures targeting its underpinning organizational structures. Identifying those targets and how to act on them has relevance for curbing the link between HIV and trafficking, not just in India but elsewhere in the Asian region, particularly in Myanmar, Thailand and Cambodia, where there are substantial movements of young women from circumstances of poverty into prostitution. How this transfer is effected may vary from country to country, but the mechanisms at work in India are far more widespread, recurring in neighbouring countries as well.

Take the case of Seelu, a girl in her early twenties who had been trafficked four years earlier to Delhi from Maharashtra. She had fallen ill with tuberculosis and was being monitored by Shakti Vahini, a non-governmental organization (NGO) active in anti-trafficking, HIV prevention and health outreach on GB Road. A seemingly unremarkable business precinct specializing in machine tools, pumps and presses, up to 3,000 prostitutes live in overwhelming monotony in this small area, with little hope of a future once they can no longer compete with younger recruits to the cycle of sexual super-exploitation and infection. The Delhi Government's latest survey puts the HIV-infection rate on GB Road at 12 per cent, considered to be an underestimate by many.

The girls are highly controlled through fear. "They are told these NGO people who come to the brothels can't be trusted, that if they go away with them they will just be sold again", Shakti Vahini's Director Ravi Kant explained the reluctance of trafficking victims to seek help. Outsiders are viewed with deep suspicion, the police, with outright apprehension. "They know the police take bribes from the brothel owners. They are told if they complain they will be taken to the thana police station and raped as punishment for making trouble." Seelu was particularly well placed to doubt the police: her brothel owner had had a long-standing affair with a local police commander.

"Once the girls enter the brothels, they are sold several times over", Ravi is talking about their udhar debt,

which increases exponentially as ownership changes hands-it's a contrived inflation. With little prospect of paying off, the girls are locked into years of servitude. To unravel the money nexus is to begin to comprehend the vested interests feeding off this system that block effective control of trafficking. After haggling down the starting price, a customer finds himself importuned over again for baksheesh, but the baksheesh is about all the girl will keep for herself. The rest of the money is entered into meticulously kept chits held against each girl's name: half will go to the owner, who has accounts to settle with building owners and hafta to buy off police and other officials to disregard the illegalities of the trade; the other half goes to the nayika.

It took Shakti Vahini a long time to identify Shobha, Seelu's nayika. Seelu kept her connection to Shobha well concealed for good reason: she was a figure of real power. A short, fat woman with gold jewellery and palpable air of command, fussed over by half a dozen girls, she took Seelu's money, beat her and never allowed her unaccompanied outside the brothel. Shobha was the key to understanding what Seelu was up against. The nayika, a term equivalent to boss lady, occupies a role absolutely pivotal to the brothel system. Usually older ex-prostitutes, they have survived by saving money and gradually acquiring girls of their own. Several nayikas might rent space in one brothel; the organizational effect of this is akin to cell structures used in spy networks to isolate individual operatives and frustrate outside penetration. The girls are not only physically and psychologically cut off from the outside world, but they are also divided amongst themselves by the pressure of competition with girls working for other nayikas.

Nayikas are also instigators and the end point behind the flow of trafficked girls, employing their connections to bring girls from their home regions. Both Seelu and Shobha were from the same town in the border region between Maharashtra and Andhra Pradesh, a major supply zone for trafficked girls. Nayikas pay the go-betweens, the dalaals who know where the vulnerable families are-whose crops have failed, whose breadwinner has died-and inveigle daughters away from gullible parents and arrange transport to Delhi. Little room for compassion exists in the relation of a nayika to the girls she controls. A veteran of a brutalizing system, she knows all their motives and evasions; her livelihood depends on working the girls relentlessly. It is a relationship that mocks calls to legalize prostitution in order to regularize their rights. Few of the attributes of a regular employment relationship can exist in this environment. As Seelu put it, "our lives are like of animals".

"If a girl stops earning, she won't last long in there." Ravi heard of one girl, who after breaking a leg was simply dumped on the street until well enough to resume work. Asked if she felt any obligation for the costs of her tuberculosis treatment, Seelu was scathing: "Shobha paid that money only because I made money for her. Girls who get sick and are not making money are left in a back room to die." This callousness is responsible for much of the HIV problem. "Meeri majboori", Seelu answered flatly when asked about her inconsistent use of condoms-an expression that conveys compulsion, having no option and by which she meant that Shobha would not tolerate displeasing customers who wanted to dispense with them. And if their nayikas won't educate them and back them up, where else are intimidated, barely literate young girls going to find the capacity to insist on safe sex with ignorant or uncaring customers?

Seelu had an even more compelling reason to obey Shobha. "A Nayika will work a girl for a few years when she is young and making a lot of money, then let her get pregnant and take the child and keep it. Once she has control of the child, the mother cannot run away." Seelu's two children were born before she was trafficked, in a young marriage that failed because her husband drank and beat her. Going against the tradition of arranged marriages had alienated her family, who were too poor anyway to be much support when her love-marriage foundered. So when Seelu was approached for a job as a domestic servant in Delhi, she had already fulfilled three of the disposing conditions for trafficking. "There are four main reasons girls get drawn into prostitution", Ravi explained, "poverty, domestic violence, divorce and desire for easy money. Poverty is by far the biggest cause of vulnerability." Within moments of arriving at New Delhi station, Seelu was driven straight to GB Road and her children taken from her. For a long time she held out, but alone in a vast impersonal city, speaking little Hindi, with no money and no way of finding her children, Seelu was utterly trapped.



Getting the message out: Shakti Vahini's health outreach workers provide HIV-prevention education to sex workers and their customers. Photo/Shakti Vahini

The Government's stance against trafficking is ineffectual and confused at the highest levels. The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act (ITPA)-India's principal legal response dating back to 1956-prohibits trafficking in persons, criminalizes sexual exploitation and enhances penalties for offences involving minors. Prosecutions of traffickers are rare, however. In the assessment of the United States State Department's Trafficking in Persons Report, the administrative machinery to support ITPA languishes. Police simply do not utilize all the ITPA provisions, diminishing the penalties against traffickers and brothel owners.

Trafficking is inherently an interstate phenomenon, but efforts to investigate trafficking across State borders are encumbered by lack of coordination among States' police departments. But where the subversion of government anti-trafficking measures particularly occurs is with the endemic complicity of lower-level law enforcement officials-the local police's accommodations with dalaals, border guards facilitating the interstate movement of victims, and police officers tipping off nayikas to impending raids for underage girls.

Investigations by Shakti Vahini, the anti-trafficking NGO, into the disappearance of an underage Assamese girl trafficked to Haryana reveals why the local police steadfastly declined to take action against the dalaal despite evidence of at least 11 girls trafficked by her. Lured herself from Assam on a pretext of marriage to a rich Haryana landowner, but sold instead to a landless pauper, she had turned this dismal experience into a skill of sorts, enticing other poor girls from her home region. The acceptance of bride-buying in Haryana and the large numbers of men ready to pay for brides made her services as a dalaal an avenue to social acceptability and income. However, her customers complained she was blackmailing them with threats to expose underage marriages-money she insisted was being siphoned by the police threatening to arrest her. This dalaal was effectively an agent of rent-seeking behaviour by the police.

Shakti Vahini's tactic was to work on Seelu's awareness. "Sometimes girls rebel against their nayikas. Once they find out about their rights, they begin to realize they can fight back." It was a confrontation with Shobha over seeing her children more often that pushed her over the edge. Seelu one day slipped away to one of GB Road's ubiquitous phone stalls and called Ravi: "I have left that place." It took Shakti Vahini another month to track down her children through their contacts. Girls like Seelu enter the world of trafficking through an act of casual deceit and, because of their social marginality and tenuous formal identification, exist in a zone of structural invisibility to the authorities, an indifference compounded by lax law enforcement that permits the trafficking market to flourish.

Constraining the market makers is essential to limit HIV propagating through the pathways of the human

trafficking trade. What Seelu's story illustrates is the urgency for incisive action aimed specifically at breaking the nayika system in the brothels, the nexus between nayikas and dalaals, and the complicity of local authorities. This needs to be made the focus of intervention right across the Asian region wherever naïve girls like Seelu take that fateful first step.

**Postscript:** *Had Seelu not called Ravi, she would probably now be dead. Seelu was subsequently diagnosed as HIV-positive. Her tuberculosis-the biggest killer of HIV-positive people in India-was resurgent because of the drug-resistant strains and insalubrious living conditions on GB Road. She is receiving free ARV drugs through the Delhi State AIDS Control programme and TB treatment through NGO Shakti Vahini, where Seelu is being trained to work on its sex worker outreach programmes as an HIV-role model and educator.*

#### Biography



Michael Parker is a policy analyst working in labour welfare regulation in Australia. With a background in applied economics and anthropology, he has had a long-standing interest in issues of development and social change in India and is researching Australia's increasing business expansion there.