



# THE LIVING IN THE SHADOWS

Forty-year-old Maya G was trafficked at the age of 11 and forced to become a sex worker. When she was 16, her current partner, a taxi driver, rescued her. They now share a one-room home with their four children in the second-largest red light district in Kolkata and Maya works caring for the children of sex workers at an NGO called New Light [Karen Dias]

An exploration of life in the red light districts of Kolkata.





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One of the oldest neighbourhoods in southern Kolkata, Kalighat is a place of pilgrimage for thousands of Hindus. Worshippers of the fierce goddess Kali flock to her temple by the banks of a canal that feeds into the Hooghly River. The main street leading to the temple is lined with sweet shops, tea stalls and general stores. The anonymous, narrow lanes that branch off it are unremarkable but for the small groups of women gathered near their entrances. Wearing bright lipstick and vibrantly-coloured *saris*, they wait languidly among the bustle. In the maze of alleyways behind them, an estimated 1,000 to 1,500 sex workers live and service customers from across the city.

This is Kalighat's red light district, where old women taking a break from washing clothes sun themselves in the pockets of light that filter through the buildings, while younger ones, dressed in short skirts and high heels, chat among themselves – watched from afar by their pimps.





Twenty-eight-year-old Rupa Das lives and works in a tiny single room in a Kalighat brothel. She became a sex worker after leaving her abusive husband eight years ago [Karen Dias]



Towards the end of a lane where old Communist party symbols vie for attention with new Pepsi advertisements, 28-year-old Rupa Das lives in a brothel with 17 other women. Each of them has a small room of their own but they share the two bathrooms and single toilet. Rupa pays anywhere between \$16 and \$25 a month for her room, depending on the time of year and the amount of electricity she consumes.

She came to Kalighat with her two children a little under seven years ago after leaving her abusive husband, and now lives in the brothel with her new husband and 10-month-old baby. Her eldest two live in a shelter for the children of sex workers.

“My mother visits sometimes,” she says. “When I first began working, she complained heavily, but I explained to her that it was the only way for me to support my children and her. My husband doesn’t have a problem either. He’s unemployed and knows the money has to come from somewhere.”





Thirty-five-year-old Jahana Begum has been a sex worker in Kalighat for nine years in order to support her two sons. She lives and works out of a single room for which she pays the brothel owner around \$16 in rent

[Karen Dias]



“I don’t have any parents, any family, not even a birth certificate. What other choices do I have?”



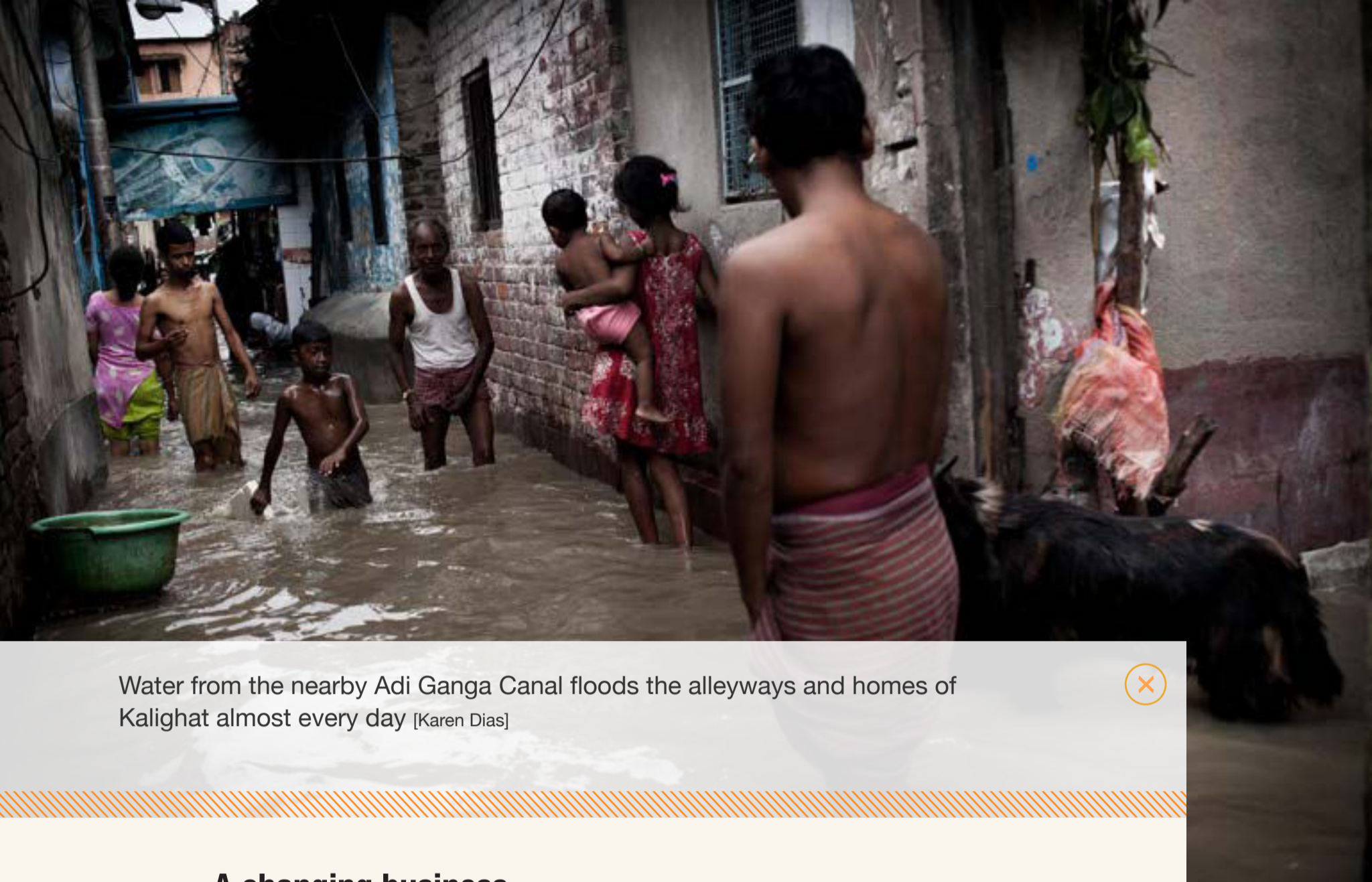
Thirty-year-old Rohima Begum, left, leaves her brothel in Kalighat. She was lured there with the promise of work as a domestic helper but was then forced into the sex trade. Her nine-year-old daughter, Neha, lives and studies at a nearby hostel because Rohima does not want her to be raised in a red light district [Karen Dias]



In the late morning a sense of urgency permeates Kalighat's shadowy lanes, as the sound of clanging cooking utensils and the smell of food wafts across the red light district. Meals are hurriedly prepared on the concrete landings that serve as kitchens. Then the children who keep watch for the water shout out their warnings, and, within 20 minutes, the streets are flooded to thigh-height.

Kalighat lies on the banks of a canal commonly called the Adi Ganga since it was the original course of the Ganges River. The canal is connected to the Hooghly, a tidal river, and the combination of the high silt content in the canal and the high tides causes havoc for residents. At every high tide, the banks are breached and water fills the lanes, crossing the thresholds of the homes. Belongings are perched out of the reach of the ravenous water, but dead insects, rubbish and sewage float through the alleyways. It takes a few hours to subside, raising the risk posed by water-borne diseases. But for the sex workers, it can also mean lost income as few customers venture through the floods.

Despite this seeming abundance of water, fresh water remains scarce. At the end of a series of cramped, winding passageways shrouded in a semi-permanent state of darkness, two rows of six rooms face each other. Outside each are buckets and bowls filled with water, for all 12 homes must rely on just two taps that only dispense water between 8am and 9.30am and again from 4pm to 6pm. Two toilets and one bathroom are shared between 40 families.



Water from the nearby Adi Ganga Canal floods the alleyways and homes of Kalighat almost every day [Karen Dias]



## A changing business

Maya G has lived in one of these single room houses for the past 25 years. Originally from the Murshidabad district of West Bengal, she was trafficked to Kolkata when she was just 11. Now a mild-mannered woman of 40, her face clouds over as she recounts some of her experiences in the city's brothels. "There was so much violence in the business back then. Rapes were repeated and brutal. Once they shoved sticks inside me and I had to get reconstructive surgery," she says.

She felt no hope that she'd ever escape that life, but a local taxi driver had other ideas. He hatched a plot to rescue her and five other girls from the brothel. Maya was 16.

"Little did I know that he had actually fallen in love with me," she smiles. "So what if we didn't get married, he's no less than any husband," she adds, peering over his shoulder to check that he's cooking the potato curry for lunch correctly.



Many of the neighbourhood women who are still engaged in sex work scoff at her new life, but she has few complaints. “I have a wonderful family and my sons know about my past,” she says. “If I had stayed, I would probably be dead by now. Things are different now though. Underage girls are hardly trafficked anymore. Nor do the police bother any of the women. Durbar has changed the business.”

“There was so much violence in the business back then. Rapes were repeated and brutal. Once they shoved sticks inside me and I had to get reconstructive surgery.”

The Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DSMC), commonly known simply as Durbar, is a collective of almost 65,000 female, male and transgender sex workers across West Bengal. Headquartered in Sonagachi, Kolkata's largest



Sonagachi is Kolkata's largest red light district. With several by-lanes with multi-storey brothels, sex workers there can charge anything from \$2.5 to \$165 per client [Karen Dias]



red light district, where an estimated 9,000 to 12,000 people are engaged in the trade, it aims to empower and legalise sex workers. All those who work for the organisation are from within the community and, according to Smarajit Jana, one of the founders, nearly 80 percent of the area's sex workers are registered with it.

“Durbar helped us regain dignity by developing the term *jounkarmi* [sex worker] to replace the offensive slurs of *randi* and *khanki*,” explains Shefali Roy, the treasurer of the Durbar Central Committee.

Working in conjunction with the ministry of health, Durbar has been hailed by many for spearheading a successful, community-led programme to promote condom usage and HIV screening. Some





Thirty-two-year-old Priya Rai packs boxes of condoms for distribution to sex workers in Sonagachi. Condoms are sold at subsidised rates to sex workers in Sonagachi and some of the other red light districts in Kolkata

[Karen Dias]



of their subsidized boxes of condoms cost as little as six cents for a pack of 100. The result is that, at 5.2 percent, Sonagachi has the lowest HIV prevalence rate of all the red light districts in major Indian cities, according to research conducted by Durbar.

The conflation of trafficking and sex work is a subject of particular concern to Durbar, which asserts that a staggeringly large number of women enter the profession out of 'choice' - limited though their options may be - rather than as a result of force. A Self-Regulatory Board (SRB) comprised of sex workers and other nominated officials was set up in 2000 to combat sex trafficking in Kolkata. It seeks to determine the willingness and ages of the sex workers through counselling and X-rays and, where necessary, to repatriate those who are underage or have been forced into the trade.





Sex workers wait in the alleyways of one of Kolkata's smaller red light districts, Lebu Bagan [Karen Dias]



But while Durbar has firmly established itself as the self-governing doorkeeper of Sonagachi, some people are uncomfortable with it for precisely that reason. “We refuse to accept the term ‘sex worker’,” explains Indrani Sinha, the founder of Sanlaap, an NGO fighting against the trafficking of women and children for commercial sexual exploitation. “These women are being exploited and giving it institutional sanction is wrong.”

And not all of Sonagachi lies in thrall to Durbar. In certain brothels, room rents have skyrocketed to \$1,150 a month, while some of the women charge upwards of \$164 per customer and pay no heed to the organisation and its demands.

At the other end of the spectrum there are the flying sex workers – who arrive from the towns and villages outside Kolkata and stay for just the night. They rent a room only for the time that they are with a customer and can make as little as \$2 per encounter by the end of it.





Thirty-three-year-old Seema Das became a sex worker in Lebu Bagan after she was sexually abused by her employers while working as a domestic helper. She has the name of her second husband, Amit, tattooed on her right hand but he left her three years ago [Karen Dias]



Thirty-five-year-old Santosh\* has been renting out a room to flying sex workers ever since his mother died three years ago, leaving him as the sole resident of the house they'd shared. He has been a sex worker since he was 19, working in cruising areas and massage parlours, but no longer has to rely on this as his primary source of income. "I pay \$58 for my room and more than recover that cost by renting out to flying sex workers," he explains. "I only entertain two to three customers of my own in a week now. I can afford to be choosy."

## In the shadow of Sonagachi

The sheer number of sex workers in Sonagachi, the volume of money that changes hands there and the presence of Durbar, have made the area the focal point for any discussion about sex work



in Kolkata. Films, books and documentaries have sought to capture its secrets, while government efforts to prevent the spread of HIV/Aids have been primarily directed toward it. And it is in Sonagachi's shadow that the smaller red light districts – less infamous but more destitute – have often been hidden; the intricacies of the trade that plays out in them largely overlooked.

Six kilometres north of Sonagachi, in the industrial hub of Baranagar, 28-year-old Ruma Das waits for customers in front of her house. “I just refused a drunk man who wanted to have sex with me,” she says. “What’s the point when he’s going to take an hour to climax, but I’m still going to get my usual rate. Why should I spend more time for the same money?”

She lives in the small, dilapidated neighbourhood of Lebu Bagan (Bengali for Lemon Garden) in north Kolkata. Approximately 100 sex workers operate within its four crumbling lanes. But despite its long history as a red light district, Lebu Bagan remains a well-kept secret and knowledge of its existence barely spreads beyond its borders.

Kanan Dey has lived there for almost 50 years and believes its connection to the sex trade dates back even further. Now over 70, she was a sex worker until, at the age of 50, one of her customers fell in love with her and offered to take care of her financial needs.

*\*Name changed to protect his identity*



Thirty-year-old Aruti Satra stands in an alleyway in Lebu Bagan as another sex worker walks by with a client. Aruti used to work as a maid but says: “I can’t imagine leaving this line of work. I will probably be a sex worker until I’m too old to find customers” [Karen Dias]



“In my days, affection and money went hand-in-hand,” she says. “Now it’s all just sex.”

Her lover died eight years ago, and as her grown-up son has disowned her, she works as a utensil cleaner at a nearby restaurant to make ends meet.

In Lebu Bagan, the liquor store is where most of the exchanges take place. Local men come to drink bootleg alcohol on the cheap, while local sex workers gather, waiting for them to spend any leftover rupees on their services – two illegal activities flourishing in each other’s company.

Ruma moved to Lebu Bagan six years ago, after her husband abandoned her and their two young daughters. She has enrolled them in a hostel and is hopeful that they will find good jobs when they are old enough. But she has less hope for her own future. Her windowless room, painted in pale green and with a fluorescent tube-light as the only source of illumination, costs an exorbitant \$2.5 a





Seventy-year-old Kanan Dey became a sex worker after her husband left her at the age of 17. She worked in the trade until she was 50 and a customer who had fallen in love with her offered to take care of her financial needs. But he died eight years ago and she must now clean utensils at a restaurant in order to make ends meet  
[Karen Dias]



night. Unable to charge her customers any more than \$1.6, she earns just \$3.3 on an average day.

“Durbar doesn’t come here. Nobody gives us free condoms. We have to go and buy them ourselves,” she says, insisting that none of the women here have sex without one. And it’s a claim that’s easy to believe – used condoms dot the lanes and litter the open drain that runs the length of Lebu Bagan.

In a country where sex isn’t usually openly spoken about, conversations about the unconditional usage of condoms is one of the few things that unites almost all of the red light districts of Kolkata – from the more affluent corners of Sonagachi to the dimly-lit shacks of Kalighat. HIV-awareness is





Twenty-eight-year-old Bapa Dey, right, runs a stall selling boiled eggs and mutton dishes outside the liquor store in Lebu Bagan. He works as a personal driver during the day and runs his stall at night, when many of his customers are men who come to visit the sex workers [Karen Dias]



relatively high and the risks of not using a condom too great for most sex workers to contemplate.

Ruma doesn't know what her future holds but imagines that when she becomes too old to get regular sex work, which is generally acknowledged to be about 50, she'll become a domestic helper. But, to do that, she'll have to move away for, as she says, "people around here know what you do and probably wouldn't let you into their homes".

But while sex workers remain ostracised and marginalised, acceptance levels are growing. And, for some, it is simply a matter of making a basic human connection. Subroto Dey is an office assistant who has lived for his entire life on the main street just





Twenty-eight-year-old Ruma Das rents a tiny, windowless room near a liquor store in Lebu Bagan. She makes about \$1.6 per customer but must pay around \$2.5 for her room each night [Karen Dias]



outside Lebu Bagan. “Of course I mingle and chat with the women,” he says. “They’re my neighbours. I don’t look at them as prostitutes but as labour stuck in their situation. Some of them have nobody in the world, and when they die, it’s my friends and I [who] carry their bier to the funeral grounds.”

