

# Education as Rehabilitation in Apne Aap and Problems of Feminism in India\*

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**Abstract**—Among varieties of educational systems in the 21st century, there is one type of special education, a rehabilitation one. The following article deals with rehabilitation education aimed at the victims of forced prostitution, or CSE (Commercial Sex Exploitation), in Apne Aap Women Worldwide (AAWW), a registered charitable trust in India founded in 2002 by Ruchira Gupta, famous activist and fighter against sex trafficking and rape in India. AAWW has elaborated unique models of rehabilitation education highly estimated all over the world. It is a useful experience as Apne Aap has saved more than 20,000 girls and women, providing them access to basic human rights including education. The gender situation in India shows that involvement into the inter-generational caste-based prostitution from a very early age is a common practice for plenty of girls, so in that form women's discrimination and child prostitution are interlinked with illiteracy and depriving of education. Indian feminism and indigenous fighters for women's rights are overcoming the problems of deep-rooted tradition of women's humiliation, harassment, alienation and ever-lasting colonial impact on CSE in India. We can call Apne Aap practices rehabilitation through education.

**Keywords**—*women's discrimination; feminism; feminism in India; Apne Aap (AAWW); Ruchira Gupta; forced prostitution(CSE); child prostitution; caste-based prostitution; rehabilitation education; rehabilitation through education*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Among varieties of 21st century educational forms, i.e.: flipped learning, workplace learning, active and game-based learning, personalized learning, special education and others [1], there is also a rehabilitation education. One type of rehabilitation education aimed at the victims of forced prostitution, or CSE (Commercial Sex Exploitation) we can find in Apne Aap Women Worldwide (AAWW), a registered charitable trust in India founded in 2002 by Ruchira Gupta, Emmy-winning filmmaker [2], famous activist and fighter against sex trafficking and rape in India. Under the slogan "*Every woman free, every child in school*" Apne Aap's teachers and volunteers through organizing women, who have survived from CSE, into self-empowerment groups,

have created unique models and designs of rehabilitation education [3]. Introduction of these models has been a useful experience as for AAWW has saved more than 20,000 girls and women from CSE and provided them access to basic human rights including education. The humanitarian mission of Apne Aap and its President Ruchira Gupta has been highly estimated all over the world, including UN, UNICEF etc.

The purpose of my paper is to show that AAWW's mission through education is solving the problems of women's discrimination in India which have roots in dramatic gender situation caused by internal cultural and external political ("heritage" of British rule) circumstances. In general, I want to trace the aims and motives of actual feminist fighters for basic human rights. This paper continuing the topic of my previous article [4] elaborates further the problems of Apne Aap's rehabilitation education in context of Indian feminism.

## II. DISCUSSION ON FEMINISM IN GENERAL: LEFT, RIGHT AND MIDDLE WAY OF THINKING

When considering the feminism in India, you need to differentiate the levels of investigation. Firstly, dealing with feminism in general one have to put a question about main purpose of its movements and ideology — fighting *against* men/male chauvinism or *for* equal women's rights as human beings. On the second level of investigation we come to cultural and religious traditions, economic and political circumstances of a peculiar country (India) which permit and sanction women's discrimination in form of prostitution. The third level consists in tracing the ways and models of rehabilitation for women as victims of forced or traditional prostitution as a compulsory factor.

Firstly, considering feminism as an abstract notion, in general, we find that many feminist fighters admit CSE to be the exploitation and violence on the part of men. "Prostitution is exploitation" is their slogan with which many people will certainly agree. Andrea D'Atri and Laura Lif say, "Each year, between 1.5 and 3 million women and girls are victims of male chauvinist violence...Prostitution has become a major and highly lucrative industry" [5]. "Male chauvinist violence" is a significant term for the root cause

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of women's problems according to many feminist movements and thinkers. It means that the main and terrible danger for women derives only from men or their violence. We can call these thinkers "left feminists" for their basic intention for against men fighting. To my mind, to solve women's problems in general one have to search causes of gender inequality not entirely in all male population as enemies of all women, but to differentiate men and men's problems. In contrast to left thinking there is such an attitude to women's inequality as surrendering to and apologizing disastrous feudal atrocities towards women, that we can call extremely right position. Meanwhile the (golden) middle way of feminist ideology seems not to negate or eulogize everything that is male, but to differentiate men and call human beings for establishing ontological and social equality between man and woman. In this path works Apne Aap's campaign "Cool Men Don't Buy Sex", uniting men and women together in fighting for the rights of victims and survivors of compulsory prostitution [6].

Secondly, analyzing cultural and religious circumstances of CSE in India one have to be accustomed with Indian feminists and understand who fighters for women's rights indeed are. Nicole J. Karlebach reviewing several books and articles on Indian feminism draws attention to one uncommon position belonging to some Ram Bhola: "All men feel hungry for sex. Prostitutes prevent women from good families from getting raped. If prostitutes were not there, women would not be able to walk on the road... In fact, in my opinion, prostitutes are social workers, next only to mothers and should be treated with respect" [7]. Though prostitution is illegal in India since 1988, Bhola represents one of Indian feminist groups, which stands for legalizing and licensing prostitutes covering their motives by so-called caring for health and preventing the spread of disease. Speaking about man's insatiable carnal desire for sex, such feminists reduce man to brutal animal and consequently think that legalization of prostitution in India will protect society. Bhola is solidary with those who call prostitution "free choice" of women.

The view of Bhola for me apart from being foolish appears much more hypocritical. Nicole J. Karlebach considering a problem from juridical point of view asserts that Indian prostitutes pursue their profession under social and moral pressure, which claims the necessity of defending their human rights. Factually, Indian prostitutes are of very low status and cast, so they have undergone exploitation. Karlebach negates the positions of Bhola and criticizes free-choice prostitution in India [8]. Really, arguments from the side of Indian feminists (or, so-called feminists) for legalizing of prostitution as a social work or as manifestation of their freedom are absurd and deceptive. Karlebach also shows that the groups like Ram Bhola have connection with prostitution industry, brothel-owners, pimps and traffickers who do not at all address the fundamental needs of prostitutes; moreover, their interests are opposite. I fully agree with Karlebach who says that "prostitution in India cannot continue to be tolerated" [9] and suspend his opponents in sympathies to male chauvinism and criminal agency.

### III. INDIGENOUS INDIAN FEMINISM AND FEMINISTS

Brothel-keepers and dealers of sex industry together with international mafia of course do not belong to indigenous Indian feminists. Has the situation changed during last decade since Karlebach's investigation, when in 2008 according to Coalition Against Trafficking in Women, over two million women and girls in India remain employed in "oldest profession" [10]? No, the situation now is more dramatic because the number of people in forced prostitution has increased up to 3 million [11]. Among contemporary Indian indigenous feminist movements, I could mention AAWW, with outstanding abolitionist Ruchira Gupta, full of charisma and emphatic energy, as a "new wave" of feminist movement. Due to their courageous efforts and fighting AAWW command and the "army" of women saved from forced prostitution have made a powerful international affect and enrolled in their activities world feminist leaders. Gloria Steinem, "an icon of feminism", aspired by Ruchira's work, visits Apne Aap center in Delhi and realizes several mutual projects and discussions [12], [13]. Gloria, I would say, was not only aspired by but also learnt something from Ruchira.

Dealing further with cultural, religious and economic circumstances of CSE in India, we discover traditional religious and cultural background of caste-based prostitution. In India, there exists prostitution of two kinds: in brothels, in which most of the "workers" were trafficked, and a traditional one in the form of Devadasis (handmaiden of God) and caste-based prostitution. Undoubtedly, the first type is forced; the second does not seem to be such but it is only the appearance. After a deeper research, traditional prostitution shows not less violence than trafficked one due to religious sanctions and the fact of interlinking between illiteracy and prostitution as a profession beginning in a young age. It is difficult even to figure out properly statistics of prostitution in India: its wide-spread traditional forms because of illegality cannot be actually registered. Peculiarity of Indian prostitution is rooted in traditional religious and social relationships that make a picture of women's inequality more tragic due to caste factors. The main postulate of Hindu soteriology, which every Hindus knows — his/her caste duty (dharma) should be done properly. Bhagavad-Gita prescribes: much better to do his/her own dharma even not sufficiently, than to do excellent the other's dharma; "the other's dharma is dangerous" (XVIII. 47). Such religious law makes no exclusion for any caste, upper or lower. Thus, for those women who have to exploit prostitution as their duty given by birth (in Sanskrit "jati", or "cast"), it is not only their profession, but also a religious duty.

Inter-generational prostitution and sacred prostitution (Devadasis cult) surviving in India through the ages detect a situation when girls and women after exploring for some time, have been thrown for starving by their own selves. Divyendu Jha and Tanya Sharma testimony: "dedicating unmarried young girls to gods (to Goddess) in Hindu temples, which often made them objects of sexual pleasure to temple priests and pilgrims, was an established custom in India in 300 AD" [14]. During the history, the authors continue, high social status of Devadasis descended. Prostitution as a work did not spread among women from upper castes of Brahmins

and rulers (Kshatriyas), but became the occupation of lower castes. Paradoxically, overwhelming majority of Indian prostitutes now belong to so called untouchables and tribes, but traditional Hindus sanctions make them totally assessable (too much “touchable”) for men’s satiety from upper castes. In addition to traditional prostitution, political circumstances of CSE in India forced the misery of women because of British rulers initiated brothel system.

Prostitution pursued as caste duty and essentially profession of women from lower Indian castes, indigenous communities and de-notified tribes like Bedias, Kanjars, Madiga, Naths, etc. Who are de-notified tribes? – The native people who were stigmatized in the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 by British colonial forces as criminal groups of Indians: colonizers marked them like a flock. Eurocentric expansive and violent colonial thinking and actions treated them as barbaric, licentious, and backward, and consequently legitimized British rule. That all induced colonial background of forced prostitution in India. Up to now, those tribes are marginalized; up to now, many of them are invisible for Indian government, so are invisible their problems among which forced prostitution is the most woeful. Ruchira Gupta testimonies that their girls are sold for the price less than that of a hamburger [15]. DivyenduJha and Tanya Sharma think that prostitution in pre-modern Indian epoch was a prestigious profession, but in the second-half of the 19th century when the perception of Indian prostitute changed with the colonization, the morality of prostitution lead to an increased criminalization of the practice. British saw prostitution as an evil necessary to satiate the “natural sexual desire” of their troops and sought to control the practice by ordering that Indian women are to be available in the cantonments for soldiers [16]. By this way, colonizers set the brothel-system and red light area districts in urban Indian society.

All these circumstances, religious, political and economic show that the overwhelming majority of Indian prostitutes are forced due to direct violence/trafficking, inescapability prescribed by cast/birth and religion, due to miserable poverty and colonial “heritage”. Therefore, indigenous Indian feminism now works at eradication of social, political and to some extent traditional roots of women’s discrimination and oppression, breaking down with male chauvinist expansion and neocolonial hegemonic discourse.

#### IV. EDUCATION AS REHABILITATION

The third problem mentioned above or third level of investigation is to trace the ways and models of rehabilitation for women as victims of forced prostitution. We assert that basic problem of woman pushed in prostitution, to speak philosophically, is alienation: alienation of woman’s gender essence by putting it for sale (CSE), alienation between man and woman, between soul and body etc. Therefore solving the problems of women’s exploitation in CSE means overcoming different forms of alienation and harmonizing relationships among all people, males or females in a rehabilitation way. AAWW has introduced and successfully approved several tactics and models of rehabilitation. Therefore in 2017 University of California, Berkeley,

Stanford University and Stanford Library have launched “Ruchira Gupta and Apne Aap Archive” for research, education, and advocacy initiative [17]. The Archive provides an accessible resource for students and researchers all over the world that means necessity of its actualization for educational affairs. Here I shall mention only one aspect of Apne Aap’s rehabilitation education which resembles trauma-informed therapy that was discussed in my previous paper [4].

Apne Aap’s unique newspaper “Red Light Despatch”, written precisely by and for victims and survivors of prostitution carries first-person accounts of violence and harassment in the lives of commercial sex-workers. Meena Sheikh, whose fate is typical, was 11 years old when she was kidnapped from home and brought to a brothel in India’s state of Bihar: “I was raped by many men every day. I hate the people who brought me and pushed me into this as much as I hate the men who were my clients. Why do you have to suffer like this if you are a woman? Why are those who make us suffer not punished?” [18]. In addition to physical violence brothel’s monsters imposed mental violence on girls — a false shame that they are devaluated through prostitution and cannot go home and their destiny is to stay at brothel forever. To overcome false identity that you are only a portion of flesh, an instrument for male’s pleasure, like a thing yet, not a human being, you have to achieve personal identity, a personality, essential for dissolving alienation. According to AAWW’s practices, there are several stages for a personality’s “resurrection”, after most violent harassment and humiliation.

- Through freeing the voice of the voiceless (former prostitutes) via “Red Light Despatch” and therapeutic story-telling sessions in the centers the trauma is marked as trauma, as something abnormal, which should be dismissed and exteriorized.
- Such reading, writing (often with other’s help), arts or another Apne Aap’s pedagogic model give the girls awareness of mutual misery, they collaborate together supporting each other and become stronger in the struggle for their personality and freedom.
- Rehabilitative methods going side by side with and through multiplicative AAWW’s education, — primarily, secondary, supplementary, job training and others — open the girls new worlds of safe existence, new horizons of self-realization, providing every victim with self-improvement and establishing her human personality.

#### V. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, actual and indigenous Indian feminists in face of Apne Aap fighting with men, not against men, for basic human rights of women reduce women’s discrimination and exploitation in CSE. AAWW’s methods and models of education overcome girls’ and women’s alienation and rehabilitate their personality.

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