

## Book Review: Daughters of the Brothel: Stories from Delhi's Red-light District

Yadav, Deepak. Daughters of the Brothel: Stories from Delhi's Red-light District', First Edition (6 October 2019);  
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The following report is a review of 'Daughters of the Brothel: Stories from Delhi's Red-light District' by Deepak Yadav, who is an author and entrepreneur based in Delhi. He founded Bigfoot Publications in 2018: one of the leading publishing houses in India during his college days which provide an open platform to debut authors. 'Daughters of the Brothel' is a collection of heart wrenching stories about sex workers in G.B. Road of Delhi, particularly the sex workers of brothel number 56.

### Review:

Title and cover- The title of the book is appropriate as it rightly reflects the contents of the book. The cover too is eye-catchy and eloquently expresses the agony which the characters in the book go through. Both the title and the cover do justice to the themes dealt with in the book.

As being the citizens of a democratic country, we often get into conversations regarding our rights and duties towards our community, society and country. But we often overlook the fact that parallel to our rights-concerned community there are some segments of the society who are so downtrodden that even the law cannot reach to save them. The sex workers of G.B. Road belong to one such section of society. No matter for them, which or whose government comes into power because all they have to keep doing is sell off their flesh only for their livelihood. The book is divided into eight chapters with a prologue and an epilogue. It is stories of seven sex workers named Kareena, Jhumpa, Roopal, Madhuri, Munni, Reshma and Ganga along with few glimpses into the lives of Transgenders. Fatima, the owner of brothel number 56, keeps appearing in between to show that even the brothel owners are not fortunate people. They have their own share of struggles and miseries which are equally shared by their little children, who despite going to school for education; have to become victims of bully because of their mother's profession. All the sex workers in G.B. Road are in the profession against their free will. Some are there because of poverty, some sold off by their relatives, husbands and lovers and there are few who had to take up the profession as a part of their tradition.

The story begins with narrator meeting Sharmila Prakash, a transgender, during his train journey and asking her about the lives and struggles of transgender communities. Sharmila introduces him to various norms of the community, their struggles and excessively painful custom of castration which happens without any medical intervention. Then, narrator tells her about his experience with the sex workers of G.B. Road who are treated there as nothing more than a piece of flesh, limbs and few organs. Narrator describes their stories in vivid detail throwing light on their everyday lives,

friendships, quarrels, desires, life before coming to the brothel and strong belief that it is impossible to get out of the vicious place once a person has entered there.

Almost all the inmates of the brothel live there with false names to keep their real identity hidden. The first story narrator tells is of Kareena, a middle-aged woman, who belonged to a small town in Himachal Pradesh where she was married off to an abusive husband as a child. Her real name was Pinky. She tolerated physical and mental abuse from her husband but left him after he murdered their daughter in a fit of rage. She started working in a construction site where the manager of the site raped her. She complained to the police but no action was taken. A fellow female co-worker suggested her to become a sex worker and poverty compelled her to do it for bringing up her two sons. In the beginning, she used to feel uncomfortable with unknown men touching her body but gradually she accepted it as her fate. She also mentions to narrator about tolerating abuse from her customers but says that even the worst customer has treated her better than how her husband used to treat her. Once she told the narrator about the brutality of police, "*Violence with a sex worker is a normal thing on G.B. Road, Deepak. Every sex worker has gone through brutality in her life more times than they care to remember. Once, a policeman brutally burned a girl's face with cigarettes while she screamed and fought to resist.*" Policemen always come to brothels for free service and if any worker goes to them to file complain against abuse meted out to them then policemen rape them instead of taking action.

Then narrator tells Sharmila about Jhumpa, the youngest sex worker in brothel number 56 who was sold off to G.B. Road, long before she attained puberty, by a man who claimed to love her and brought her to India with a promise that he would marry her. Before selling her to G.B. Road he also got her raped by several men in Gorakhpur. Jhumpa was very young when she was sold to G.B. Road so her brothel owner of that time gave her pink injections (oxytocin injections which are given to cattle so that they produce more milk) to induce menstruation, increase her breast size and widen her hips. A large number of minor girls are trafficked and sold off to G.B. Road almost every day because they are high in demand and attract expensive customers.

Roopal belonged to Bedia community whose main profession was prostitution. The men of the community lived off the earnings of the women of their family. Roopal had to embrace the occupation when she was not even ten years old. Bedia community organizes an auction of virgin girls and Roopal had also been through the same. Ganga, a devadasi from Karnataka, also had to adopt prostitution as a traditional profession of Devadasi community and for her virginity also a bidding was organized. The man who purchased her slashed her vagina with a knife. Munki from Nat community had a similar fate while Madhuri, an orphan, was sold there because she was not able to conceive after a year of her marriage. Reshma, their inmate, was born in G.B. Road only and her mother who was also a prostitute had died of HIV. Reshma wanted to have a child but had suffered miscarriage twice.

Around 60 per cent of the women in G.B. Road suffer from some or the other kind of sexually transmitted diseases and some are under the delusion that they can cure themselves of it if they pass it on to a customer. They never go to any gynaecologist because it is expensive, and consume hormonal pills to delay menstruation so that they can earn more by entertaining customers. These women have to put their hygiene, safety and health on stake, go through unprotected sex on the demand of customers, unwanted pregnancies, miscarriages and strenuous motherhood. It is not easy to raise a child in such a place. A woman in brothel number 200 told the narrator that they make their children sleep under the bed and carry on their business above it. The women who became unfit for the business due to old age or health issues either work as domestic helps for brothel owners or are forced to beg. Some even have to undergo extremely harsh treatments like acid attacks so that their disfigured face can attract more sympathy and in turn more money in begging.

*"Once a drunkard customer came upstairs and tried to slash Madhuri's Nipples with a knife." "Once a black Nigerian man took Madhuri inside the pleasure room, tied her limbs to the wooden bed, tore her clothes, pulled her hair, bit her body and forcefully sodomized till he drew blood from her anus."* And at one time Reshma went to a hotel with a customer who had told at the brothel that there would be two of them but there were many who raped and abused her physically for the entire night. The sex workers had to endure all this merely to survive. What is most troubling is the way they get used to this sad life and accept it with such quietness of soul that it stops bothering them at all. They talk lovingly about the few customers who never abuse or hit them throwing light on the fact that being treated with basic human decency is the highest form of respect and privilege they have ever been entitled to.

The book is enlightening and makes one to ponder over a lot of beliefs which are prevalent in society. It is very easy to make baseless assumptions about people, give those titles, judge them for their choices and situations and sometimes even humiliate or abuse them. But it is equally difficult to consider that there might be a strong reason why their lives

are so. The struggle is always hard and real. Another admirable part about the book is that it does not focus solely on the agony and tortures of the inmates of the brothel, but also throws light on other aspects like their friendship with each other, optimism, the way they long to be with their family and the desire to be loved. These descriptions make all the characters come out alive and real. The stories are also well narrated and the usage of Hindi for direct speeches and songs adds authenticity. The entire piece is descriptive and informative and situations are put forward as they are without being too much analytical. The book also contains the detailed statistics and description of NGOs working for the cause and government policies for the betterment of society's underbelly. The author has also included mythological references depicting how sex has been used as barter since the ancient times and how prostitution came into place. The research done on every topic which has been shared as informative pieces here and there seems responsible and adds to further knowledge on the subject.

The language of the book is simple and the flow of narration has a lucid pace which makes it a quick read. The author has also made vivid use of imagery while describing the places and characters in detail. The sex works of G.B. Road stand as representatives of all the sex workers of the country, if not of the entire world. The book throws light on many unknown truths lying within the false covers of society which every adult deserves to know. However, the series of interviews through which the stories have been narrated and the truths brought to light could have been better. Moreover, the people who are already well aware about the system in which prostitution is run in the country may not find any extra contribution made in the genre. The book is not suitable to be read by anybody below the age of sixteen years because people under sixteen may find the incidents of violence and physical and sexual abuse quite distressing. The book is highly recommended to all the adult readers and non-readers who are yet to explore the wicked webs the world weaves to trap the naïve and needy as the book can prove to be a huge eye-opener for them.

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