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SEX WORKERS OF SONAGACHI BROKEN SHACKLE OF SOCIAL PREJUDICE TO ORGANIZE THEIR OWN PUJA



Durga puja in Kolkata is a time for the good things of life, new clothes, holidays, great food and *pandal* hopping. In Sonagachi it will be celebrated in the same way, but this year it will be something exceptional. This year the puja is a monumental event for the sex workers' community in Sonagachi, Kolkata.

It has been a custom to mark the auspicious beginning of Durga Puja with a mound of clay collected from the doorstep of a sex worker but they were never allowed to participate in puja. Keeping this in mind Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, this year took the initiative to organize Durga Puja of their own. However the very idea was opposed by the local police station and a section of so called local people. To overcome this resistance, DMSC had to approach the High Court. The court allowed DMSC to hold its own puja and through the affirmative order of Hon'ble High Court Durbar organized puja within Durbar's health Clinic which is in the heart of Sonagachi Red light district.

The puja *pandal* was small but for the sex workers it is a symbol of establishing rights of sex workers like any other citizen of the country. They could achieve this success through determination and team work. It is a glaring example to comprehend to what extent the social exclusionary processes are in operation in our country. Sex workers from other red

light areas like Kalighat, Titagarh, Domjur also flocked to the pandal to get a glimpse of the goddess. "This is a big moral boost for all of them as they were never entertained at puja pandals. They are coming to participate in the puja even from the districts" said Dr. Smarajit Jana. "For us organizing this puja is a means of empowering sex workers and ensure that they enjoy equal rights as other citizens" he added. Demolition of ITPA by the Goddess Durga was the main theme of the puja. It was for the first time in history where sex workers could enforce their rights to organize Durga Puja.

The puja pandal was inaugurated on the day of Maha Panchami (9th October, 2013) at about 4pm. The pandal was inaugurated by an aged sex worker, Ms. Manju Patra who is in her late nintes. Mr. Rudra Prashad Sengupta, renowned theater personality, Sashi Panza, Local MLA, Dinesh Trivedi, MP, Mr. Soumitra Dostidar, Director, Ms. Kobita Gupta, a representative of Human Rights

Commission, Kajol Bhattacherjee, Officer of Information Information department, Alam (Sr. Adv., Ms. Debjani (Adv., High Susmita Saha(Cour) and Mr. Saha, former guests of said "We are happy that we permission



and cultural Chandriya High Court), Sengupta Court), ms. Adv., High Jiban Prakash MLA were the honor for the ceremony. extremely got the and we have

planned to arrange various cultural events across all five days," said Bharati Dey, the secretary of DMSC told while inaugurating the pandal on *Panchami* i.e, on 9th October 2013. Komal Gandhar, a cultural wing of Durbar arranged cultural programme on Sasthi and Saptami. The children of sex workers participated in dance, drama and music. On Astami, the second day of puja the sex workers offered *anjali* to Maa Durga, a privilege almost none of the sex workers received earlier. On Navami, the third day of the puja *bhoj* was distributed to all residents of Sonagachi numbering five thousands and above. The sex workers also played *sindoor khela* on Dashami through which they broaden the pathway of their victory.

The 5 day celebration ends with the immersion of Maa Durga in Aahiri Tola Ghat. The sex workers took a big and colorful procession and danced all the way to the ghat to the beats of *dhak* (drum). The sex workers with tears in their eyes bade goodbye to their beloved mother goddess Durga.

WORKING WOMEN COUNCIL CONVENTION

On demand of on job security and to raise protest against the sexual harassment in workplace around 700 unorganized labours participated in a National Convention held on 28th September, 2013 in Calcutta University Institute Hall. The issues of discussion mainly focused on the violence and harassment that are encountered by the female workers engaged in various unorganized labour sectors in state of West Bengal. The convention was attended by female workers representing various trades which includes female sex workers, zari workers, domestic workers, construction workers, weavers, NREGA workers, Mid day meal workers ('Radhuni Union'), brick-lime workers, prawn head off workers, crusher workers etc.

A joint venture was initiated by Working Women Council and Binodini Sramik Union, a collective of female sex workers to find out the types of violence and harassment encountered by the female workers in workplaces and in the transits. The study also undertook issues related to mode of payment, insecurity in job, frequent termination from the job, inaccessibility of taking leaves during pregnancy, health facilities, compensation regarding accident, occupational health etc. The findings which were came up in this survey was published in a book named "*Bivanno pesar sathe nijukto mahilla sramikder jouno henostha o kaj- ekti samikha protibedon*". The book was inaugurated in this convention by two aged worker one from sex work and other from daily wage earner representing agriculture.

The convention which was attended by representatives from different unorganized labour sector shared daily experiences regarding work and difficulties what they face in work place. The demands which were raised by these 700 workers were as follows

1. 6 months maternity leave with minimum wage of Rs 1000 per month for all women workers engaged in unorganized labour sector.
2. Provide necessary arrangements for breast feeding in workplace
3. Crèche facility
4. Toilet facility
5. Primary Health Care Facilities
6. Ensure Job security
7. Make payment on time
8. Under NREGA scheme 100 days work must be provided who are eligible to work, if not unemployment allowance must be given to them
9. Provide work for 365 days under NREGA
10. Provide old age pension to all workers engaged in marginalized sector
11. Provide free medical checkup facilities
12. Provide essential commodities at subsidized rate.

13. Each district should have a committee to register and address sexual harassment in workplace.

The convention came to its end with the resolution:

- a) to strengthen the labor organization in order to ensure the rights and fulfillments of demands of unorganized labor in a state of West Bengal and
- b) Unite against the violence, harassment, exploitation and discrimination against the female workers.



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