

Trafficked maids to order: The darker side of richer India

Tue, 4 Dec 2012 00:01 GMT

By Nita Bhalla

NEW DELHI, Dec 4 (TrustLaw) - Inside the crumbling housing estates of Shivaji Enclave, amid the boys playing cricket and housewives chatting from their balconies, winding staircases lead to places where lies a darker side to India's economic boom.

Three months ago, police rescued Theresa Kerketa from one of these tiny two-roomed flats. For four years, she was kept here by a placement agency for domestic maids, in between stints as a virtual slave to Delhi's middle-class homes.

"They sent me many places - I don't even know the names of the areas," said Kerketa, 45, from a village in Chhattisgarh state in central India. "Fifteen days here, one month there. The placement agent kept making excuses and kept me working. She took all my salary."

Often beaten and locked in the homes she was sent to, Kerketa was forced to work long hours and denied contact with her family. She was not informed when her father and husband died. The police eventually found her when a concerned relative went to a local charity, which traced the agency and rescued her together with the police.

Abuse of migrant maids from Africa and Asia in the Middle East and parts of Southeast Asia is commonly reported.

But the story of Kerketa is the story of many maids and nannies in India, where a surging demand for domestic help is fuelling a business that, in large part, thrives on human trafficking by unregulated placement agencies.

As long as there are no laws to regulate the placement agencies or even define the rights of India's unofficially estimated 90 million domestic workers, both traffickers and employers may act with impunity, say child and women's rights activists and government officials.

Activists say the offences are on the rise and link it directly to the country's economic boom over the last two decades.

"Demand for maids is increasing because of the rising incomes of families who now have money to pay for people to cook, clean and look after their children," says Bhuwan Ribhu from Bachpan Bachao Andolan (Save the Childhood Movement), the charity that helped rescue Kerketa.

Economic reforms that began in the early 1990s have transformed the lifestyles of many Indian families. Now almost 30 percent of India's 1.2 billion people are middle class and this is expected to surge to 45 percent by 2020.

Yet as people get wealthier, more women go out to work and more and more families live on their own without relatives to help them, the voracious demand for maids has outstripped supply.

BEHIND CLOSED DOORS

There are no reliable figures for how many people are trafficked for domestic servitude. The Indian government says 126,321 trafficked children were rescued from domestic work in 2011/12, a rise of almost 27 percent from the previous year. Activists say if you include women over 18 years, the figure could run into the hundreds of thousands.

The abuse is difficult to detect as it is hidden within average houses and apartments, and under-reported, because victims are often too fearful to go to the police. There were 3,517 incidents relating to human trafficking in India in 2011, says the National Crime Records Bureau, compared to 3,422 the previous year.

Conviction rates for typical offences related to trafficking - bonded labour, sexual exploitation, child labour and illegal confinement - are also low at around 20 percent. Cases can take up to two years to come to trial, by which time victims have returned home and cannot afford to return to come to court. Police investigations can be shoddy due to a lack of training and awareness about the seriousness of the crime.

Under pressure from civil society groups as well as media reports of cases of women and children trafficked not just to be maids, but also for prostitution and industrial labour, authorities have paid more attention in recent years.

In 2011, the government began setting up specialised anti-human trafficking units in police stations throughout the country.

There are now 225 units and another 110 due next year whose job it is to collect intelligence, maintain a database of offenders, investigate reports of missing persons and partner with charities in raids to rescue victims.

Parveen Kumari, director in charge of anti-trafficking at the ministry of home affairs, says so far, around 1,500 victims have been rescued from brick kilns, carpet weaving and embroidery factories, brothels, placement agencies and houses.

"We realise trafficking is a bigger issue now with greater demand for labour in the cities and these teams will help," said Kumari. "The placement agencies are certainly under the radar."

NATIONAL HEADLINES

The media is full of reports of minors and women lured from their villages by promises of a good life as maids in the cities. They are often sent by agencies to work in homes in Delhi, and its satellite towns such as Noida and Gurgaon, where they face a myriad of abuses.

In April, a 13-year-old maid heard crying for help from the balcony of a second floor flat in a residential complex in Delhi's Dwarka area became a national cause celebre.

The girl, from Jharkhand state, had been locked in for six days while her employers went holidaying in Thailand. She was starving and had bruises all over her body.

The child, who had been sold by a placement agency, is now in a government boarding school as her parents are too poor to look after her. The employers deny maltreatment, and the case is under investigation, said Shakti Vahini, the Delhi-based child rights charity which helped rescue her.

In October, the media reported the plight of a 16-year-old girl from Assam, who was also rescued by police and Shakti Vahini from a house in Delhi's affluent Punjabi Bagh area. She had been kept inside the home for four years by her employer, a doctor. She said he would rape her and then give her emergency contraceptive pills. The doctor has disappeared.

ONE ON EVERY BLOCK

Groups like Save the Children and ActionAid estimate there are 2,300 placement agencies in Delhi alone, and less than one-sixth are legitimate.

"There are so many agencies and we hear so many stories, but we are not like that. We don't keep the maids' salaries and all are over 18," said Purno Chander Das, owner of Das Nurse Bureau, which provides nurses and maids in Delhi's Tughlakabad village.

The Das Nurse Bureau is registered with authorities - unlike many agencies operating from rented rooms or flats in slums or poorer neighbourhoods like Shivaji Enclave in west Delhi. It is often to these places that maids are brought until a job is found.

There are no signboards, but neighbours point out the apartments that house the agencies and talk of the comings and goings of girls who stay for one or two days before being taken away.

"There is at least one agency in every block," says Rohit, a man in his twenties, who lives in one of scores of dilapidated government-built apartment blocks in Shivaji Enclave.

With a commission fee of up to 30,000 rupees (\$550) and a maids' monthly salary of up to 5,000 rupees (\$90), an agency can make more than \$1,500 annually for each girl, say anti-trafficking groups.

A ledger recovered after one police raid, shown by the charity Bachpan Bachao Andolan to Thomson Reuters Foundation, had the names, passport pictures and addresses of 111 girls from villages in far-away states like West Bengal, Jharkhand, Assam and Chhattisgarh, most of them minors.

The Delhi state government has written a draft bill to help regulate and monitor placement agencies and has invited civil society groups to provide feedback.

But anti-trafficking groups say what is really needed a country-wide law for these agencies, which are not just mushrooming in cities like Delhi but also Mumbai and other towns and cities.

The legislation would specify minimum wages, proper living and working conditions and a mechanism for financial redress for unpaid salaries. It would also specify that placement agencies keep updated record of all domestic workers which would subject to routine inspection by the labour department.

In the meantime, victims like Theresa Kerketa just want to warn others.

"The agencies and their brokers tell you lies. They trap you in the city where you have no money and know no one," said Kerketa, now staying with a relative in a slum on the outskirts of south Delhi as she awaits compensation.

"I will go back and tell others. It is better to stay in your village, be beaten by your husband and live as a poor person, than come to the city and suffer at the hands of the rich."

Disfigured victim's plea to die exposes India's acid violence

Fri, 27 Jul 2012 10:06 GMT

By Nita Bhalla

NEW DELHI, July 27 (TrustLaw) - They came in the dead of night, broke into her home as she slept and poured a cocktail of acids over her face -- burning her skin, melting her eyelids, nose, mouth and ears, and leaving her partially deaf and almost blind.

Her crime? She had spurned their sexual advances.

Nine years on, Sonali Mukherjee, 27, is appealing to the Indian government for medical support for skin reconstructive surgery as well as tougher penalties on her three assailants, who were released on bail after only three years in prison.

Either that, she says, or authorities should give her the right to kill herself. Euthanasia is illegal in India.

"For the last nine years, I am suffering ... living without hope, without future. If I don't have justice or my health, my only way out is to die," she says, sitting on a bed in a sparsely furnished room above a Sikh temple in south Delhi.

"I don't want to live half a life, with half a face."

Sonali's desperate plea highlights the heinous crime of throwing acid on women in India, the lack of support for victims, and lax laws which have allowed attackers to get away with what activists say is the equivalent of murder.

Acid violence - where acid is intentionally thrown to maim, disfigure or blind - occurs in many countries across the world, and is most common in Cambodia, as well as Bangladesh, Pakistan, Afghanistan and India where deep-rooted patriarchy persists.

Around 1,500 acid attacks are reported globally each year, with 80 percent of them on women, says London-based charity, Acid Survivors Trust International, adding this is a gross underestimate as most victims are scared to speak out.

There is no official statistics for India, but a study conducted by Cornell University in January 2011 said there were 153 attacks reported in the media from 1999 to 2010.

Many of these attacks, said the study, are acts of revenge because a woman spurns sexual advances or rejects a marriage proposal.

"These men feel so insulted that a woman could turn them down and have an attitude of 'If I can't have you, no one can'," says Sushma Kapoor, deputy director for UN Women in South Asia.

ISOLATED AND DISFIGURED

With a bright future ahead of her, Sonali was a 17-year-old sociology student in the city of Dhanbad in India's central state of Jharkhand when the attack happened back in April 2003.

The three men were her neighbours and harassed her as she left for college every morning. When she threatened to call the police, they took revenge, leaving her with 70 percent burns to her face, neck and arms.

An Indian court handed down nine-year jail terms to each of her attackers. But within three years, the men were out on bail. Her appeal against their release has yielded little results, says Sonali, and she continues to worry about her safety.

Unlike countries like Pakistan and Bangladesh, where acid violence has in recent years been listed as a specific offence, India still categorises it as grievous hurt, doling out penalties which are lenient and jail-terms which are bailable.

"The actual attack is just the start of a life of suffering. Most are disfigured and blind. They face years of physical and mental pain and need rehabilitation," says Sushma Varma, founder of the Campaign and Struggle Against Acid Attacks on Women (CSAAAW), a Bangalore-based voluntary group.

"In most cases there is no help, no support, no money."

With a rising number of reports of such attacks, the cabinet this month approved a proposal to make acid attacks a separate offence, making it punishable by 10 years imprisonment and a fine of up to 10 lakh rupees (\$180,000). This will now have to be approved by parliament.

But victims and activists say the government must also look at regulating the sale of locally produced household cleaners, which contain highly concentrated acids, that are easily and cheaply available in local markets across the country.

Acids are increasingly being used as weapons, like guns, they say, but there are no licensing laws for those who sell and purchase these deadly chemicals which also include neat hydrochloric and sulphuric acids.

"You can buy highly concentrated chemicals like those used on me in most markets for less than 50 rupees a bottle," says Sonali. "This is enough to ruin a woman's life. They may not have killed me, but I might as well be dead."

Honour killings, diktats throw spotlight on India's "Taliban" councils

Mon, 3 Dec 2012

By Nita Bhalla

MEERUT, India (TrustLaw) – They are illegal, undemocratic and widely vilified for their regressive decrees against women – so much so that human rights activists call them the "Taliban of India".

Yet for centuries, these village councils – comprised of rich, upper-caste, elderly men wearing long white tunics – have governed India's northern countryside, exerting social control through patriarchal diktats that not only clash with a country moving towards more liberal attitudes, but also challenge the law of the land.

Acting as de-facto courts for millions of Indians, the councils, or "Khap Panchayats", settle disputes on everything from land and cattle to matrimony and murder, helping maintain social order in a country where access to justice can be difficult for the poor and uneducated.

But India's "khaps" are coming under growing scrutiny as their punitive edicts grow more regressive – ranging from banning women from wearing western clothing and using mobile phones to supporting child marriage and sanctioning the lynching of young couples in so-called "honour killings".

"If you look at all the regions where there are the worst gender indicators for girls and women – female foeticide, dowry deaths, rapes – they are the same regions where khaps exist," says Ranjana Kumari, director of the Centre for Social Research, a Delhi-based gender rights think-tank.

"Khaps are all-feudal entities and are reflective of the mindset of the medieval times. They are the biggest barrier to the development of girls and women in terms of education, modernisation, autonomy and independence. We are breeding the Taliban in this country," she added.

Khap councils dominate the mud-and-brick villages and fertile farmlands of India's Haryana, western Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan regions. Each khap is divided on the basis of "gotra" or clan and their stated aim is to protect honour and purity of ancestry.

But the media is filled with stories of khap councils linked to the murder of couples who marry within the same gotra – an act considered incestuous by khaps and therefore forbidden.

In some cases, khap members have been directly involved in killings, while in others, the shame khaps attach to families whose children indulge in same-gotra marriages has driven parents to murder their own offspring or face ostracism – they can be forced out of their homes and villages and off their land.

More recently, the councils have even demanded that the legal age of marriage be lowered to 16 from 18 years for girls and 21 for boys as a way to fight increasing cases of rape in a country that is the worst place for women among the world's most industrialised nations, according to [a recent survey](#).

While they have been condemned by India's Supreme Court, criticised by the media, slammed by feminists and even deemed unlawful by the country's most powerful politician, [Sonia Gandhi](#), khaps continue to act with impunity, unchallenged by police and government, largely due to the sway they have over voters in this conservative belt of India.

"These khap panchayats are unconstitutional bodies. They are not legally recognised. They are self-made, self-regulatory, undemocratic all-male bodies," says Reicha Tanwar, director of the Women's Studies Research Centre at Kurekshetra University in Haryana.

"Yet there is no political will to do anything about them," she added. These khaps rule by a combination of fear and financial power over poorer villagers and, in such a way, manage to control large vote banks. No political party wants to seriously tackle them as they could cause a dent."

WHERE LOVE IS A CRIME

Just a few hours drive west of New Delhi, in the bustling city of Meerut, newly-weds Sachin Tyagi, 25, and Pooja, 20, are in hiding.

Moving 20 times around three cities over the last six months, they are on the run from Pooja's family, which opposed their same-gotra marriage and has issued death threats against them.

The couple fell in love two years ago, conducting their relationship in secret. They married in January in a Hindu temple and eloped. Since then, Sachin's mother has been kidnapped and beaten, his brother shot at.

"When they found out, they went after my own family and threw my parents out of the village. They burnt our farmland to the ground and seized our home," says Sachin, sitting next to Pooja on the edge of a bed in a rented room in the quiet back lanes of Meerut.

"The people in the village think this is wrong ... but we are all human beings and have the right to love who we want. That's what the Supreme Court of India says," he added.

At least 5,000 "honour killings" are carried out globally every year, the United Nations says – murders by families or communities to avenge perceived dishonour, often because a local society disapproves of a marriage.

In India, there are no official figures on the number of honour killings linked to khaps. But activists believe hundreds of men and women have been shot, lynched, stabbed or poisoned by their families or communities in recent years.

In 2007, the mutilated bodies of Manoj Banwala and his young wife Babli were fished out of a canal in Hisar in Haryana, not far from New Delhi. Three years later, a court sentenced five people to death in a landmark ruling against honour killings.

"It (the case) is important as it not only linked khaps to this heinous crime, but also awarded strict punishments to the perpetrators," says Jagmati Sangwan, vice president of the All India Democratic Women's Association, a group that works for women's development.

In almost all cases, the intransigence of khaps springs from a fear that modernity will overwhelm local traditions, thus eroding their hold over communities. The internet and mobile phones are seen as tools that cause moral degradation by allowing boys and girls furtive contact.

"NOT THE TALIBAN"

India's khap councils have existed for more than 1200 years, members say, and were originally formed by Jats – a powerful land-owning community and strong vote bank – to resolve disagreements where there were no authorities or courts.

After independence from Britain in 1947, India promoted democratically elected councils in every village. But in most of the country's north, the illegal writs of the khaps remain.

In April last year, [India's Supreme Court ruled that their diktats were illegal](#) and called for strict punishments for those responsible for honour killings.

"There is no honour in killing. It is the most dishonourable. The death sentence should be imposed. We must stamp out this barbaric practice," says former Supreme Court judge Markandey Katju, who deemed khaps to be unlawful when he was in office.

Yet the khaps, who refute this feudal, patriarchal image, continue to convene and say they are playing an important social and political role in the community.

At a tollgate on a busy highway on the outskirts of Meerut, scores of farmers gather to demand a waiver on toll fees for local people to transport their goods to and from Delhi in a month-long protest organised by khap councils.

"Khaps are not what is being portrayed by the media. We are not the Taliban. It is our fundamental right to believe in the tradition that we do not marry within the same gotra," said Rakesh Tikait, 41, a member of the Baliyan khap panchayat, as fellow farmers nodded in agreement.

"If someone does that, then yes, I admit there are some murders. But that's not because of khaps. Their own families do it. If someone's daughter runs away with a boy of the same gotra, the family's reputation is tainted, so you can understand how much honour is linked to this."

In response to increasing reports of honour killings and growing pressure from civil society activists, the law commission has proposed making such murders a non-bailable offence.

The commission has proposed a seven-year jail term for khap council members who are found guilty of persecuting couples. It has also suggested banning khap councils and other such groups who assemble to condemn marriages not prohibited by law.

But women's rights groups say this does not go far enough and all khaps must be completely dismantled.

Tikait, whose supporters crowd around him, hanging on his every word, rubbishes the idea: "We khaps have organised armies that have fought all the invaders ... the Muslims, the British ... off this land. Let them try and ban us," he says.

"The Supreme Court and politicians should stay within their limits. The support we get from our people can topple governments."

India advances, but many women still trapped in dark ages

Wed, 13 Jun 2012

By Nita Bhalla

NEW DELHI, June 13 (TrustLaw) - The birth of a girl, so goes a popular Hindu saying, is akin to the arrival of Lakshmi - the four-armed goddess of wealth, often depicted holding lotus flowers and an overflowing pot of gold.

That should assure pride of place for women in Indian society, especially now the country is growing both in global influence and affluence.

In reality, India's women are discriminated against, abused and even killed on a scale unparalleled in the top 19 economies of the world, according to a new poll by the Thomson Reuters Foundation.

The survey, polling 370 gender specialists, found Canada to be the best place to be a woman amongst G20 nations, excluding the European Union economic grouping. Saudi Arabia was the second worst, after India.

"It's a miracle a woman survives in India. Even before she is born, she is at risk of being aborted due to our obsession for sons," said Shemeer Padinzjharedil, who runs Maps4aid.com, a website which maps and documents crimes against women.

"As a child, she faces abuse, rape and early marriage and even when she marries, she is killed for dowry. If she survives all of this, as a widow she is discriminated against and given no rights over inheritance or property."

Many of the crimes against women are in India's heavily populated northern plains, where, in parts, there is a deep-rooted mindset that women are inferior and must be restricted to being homemakers and childbearers.

In addition, age-old customs such as payment of hefty dowries at the time of marriage and beliefs linking a female's sexual behaviour to family honour have made girls seem a burden.

The poll results - based on parameters such as quality of health services, threat of physical and sexual violence, level of political voice, and access to property and land rights - jars with the modern-day image of India.

India had a female prime minister, or head of government, as long ago as 1966. Well-dressed women in Western attire driving scooters or cars to work is now an everyday sight in cities. Women doctors, lawyers, police officers and bureaucrats are common.

MILLIONS ABORTED

But scratch under the surface and the threats in India are manifold - from female foeticide, child marriage, dowry and honour killings to discrimination in health and education and crimes such as rape, domestic violence and human trafficking.

Indeed, a girl's fight for survival begins in the womb due to an overwhelming desire for sons and fear of dowry, which has resulted in 12 million girls being aborted over the last three decades, according to a 2011 study by The Lancet.

This has led to a decline in the number of women in proportion to men in many areas, resulting in a rise in rapes, human trafficking and, in certain cases, practices such as "wife-sharing" amongst brothers.

In fact, the curse of dowry continues even after marriage.

One bride was murdered every hour over dowry demands in 2010, says the National Crime Records Bureau. Some are "stove burnings" where in-laws pour kerosene, the commonly-used cooking fuel of poorer homes, over women and set them alight, making it appear accidental.

"The courts are flooded with cases of gender-related crimes," said retired Supreme Court judge Markandey Katju. He said honour and dowry murders should be punished with death.

"These are not normal crimes. These are social crimes because they disrupt the entire social fabric of the community. When you commit crimes against women, it has a lasting impact."

Experts say child marriage remains among the biggest hurdles to women's development in India and has a domino effect. Almost 45 percent of Indian girls are married before they turn 18, says the International Center for Research on Women.

A child bride will drop out of school and is more likely to have complications during child birth. One in five Indian women, many child mothers, die during pregnancy or child birth, the United Nations says.

Their babies, if they survive, are more likely to be underweight and suffer stunting due to poor nourishment. Many will be lucky to survive beyond the age of five.

In the narrow, crowded alleyways of Sapara slum on the outskirts of Delhi, 15-year-old newly married Aarti has never been to school and says she was married off because her father has tuberculosis and couldn't work or afford to look after her.

"I said no, but my mother said my father was sick, so I had no choice," Aarti said, wearing the traditional bright red bangles of new Hindu brides.

"I spent my time doing domestic chores. I like to play with dolls ... but my grandmother has taken them away now. She says I don't need them any more."

TWO INDIAS

Indian authorities have also struggled to combat rising crimes against women, including domestic violence, molestation, trafficking and rape.

Reports of women being snatched from the streets and gang-raped in moving cars are frequent in Delhi and its neighbourhood. Newspaper reports are full of stories of trafficking and sexual exploitation.

In many cases, violence against women has a level of social acceptability. A government survey found 51 percent of Indian men and 54 percent of women justified wife beating.

India has robust gender laws, but they are hardly enforced, partly because a feudal mindset is as prevalent among bureaucrats, magistrates and the police as it is elsewhere. Politicians are also unwilling to crack down on customary biases against women for fear of losing conservative votes.

"The inheritance law was reformed in 2005, bringing women's legal equality in agricultural land. In reality, however, less than 10 percent women own some kind of land," said Govind Kelkar from land rights group, Landesa India.

"This is more stark as 84 percent of rural women are engaged in agricultural production. There is policy silence on the implementation of laws for women's rights."

Some gains are being made, primarily by instituting gender-sensitive laws and social schemes as well as boosting the number of girls in primary schools, the workforce and village politics, experts say.

More than two decades of economic liberalisation has also helped empower women, and as India has opened up, Western ideas of equality have permeated towns and cities.

The country's top political positions are held by women, including the head of the main ruling party, Sonia Gandhi, and the country's outgoing president, Pratibha Patil.

"There are two Indias: one where we can see more equality and prosperity for women, but another where the vast majority of women are living with no choice, voice or rights," said Sushma Kapoor, South Asia deputy director for U.N. Women.

Gender experts say the challenges are immense, given India's vast population of 1.2 billion, its diversity, and geographical spread. But they add they are not insurmountable.

Tiny pockets show positive change by giving women opportunities such as access to higher education, vocational training [ID:nL3E8CG1HO] and finance - tools that should transform the perception of women as burdens to assets.

A new Oprah Winfrey-style television talk show called "Satyamev Jayate" (Truth alone prevails), hosted by popular Bollywood actor Aamir Khan, has in recent weeks focused on issues such as foeticide, and dowry and honour killings.

The shows have won wide acclaim and stirred debate in the media, but experts say the efforts to increase awareness in Indian society as a whole need to be sustained.

"Laws alone can only play 20 percent of the role in empowering women in this country," said judge Katju.

"Eighty percent of the role will be played by education, by changing the mindset, the mentality of men who are still to a large extent feudal-minded which means they regard women as inferior."

Indian "prostitute village" marries girls to end flesh trade

Sun, 11 Mar 2012

By Nita Bhalla

PALANPUR, India, March 11 (Reuters) - A village in western India hosted a mass wedding and engagement ceremony of 21 girls on Sunday aimed at breaking a tradition of prostitution which has for centuries exploited women of a poor, marginalised and once nomadic community in the region.

Hundreds of guests from surrounding villages and government officials gathered at the colourful event, which saw eight couples married and 13 others engaged in a huge marquee in Wadia village, 115 km (70 miles) west of Palanpur city in India's Gujarat state.

"Prostitution is a tradition which this community adopted for ages and it has been very normal for them. They did not think they were doing anything wrong. But it is uncivilised, indecent," said Vijay Bhatt, development officer for Banaskantha district, which Wadia village is part of.

"By marrying and engaging these girls we have been able to break this culture. Once a girl is married, she is out of the profession. Once she is even engaged, she is out of this nexus."

Adorned in gold jewellery and dressed in brightly coloured pink sequined skirts and blouses, the girls sat veiled on a raised platform in a long line next to their grooms and fiancés in golden turbans, as a Hindu priest chanted Vedic mantras.

Activists said the girls - who come from the Saraniya community, where women traditionally do not marry and work as prostitutes in nearby towns and cities - will now be able to break free of the profession of their mothers and lead "normal, pious" lives.

"We are trying to get rid of this culture and stigma. We want to pull it from its roots," said Ramesh Saraniya, whose 25-year-old sister and 22-year-old niece were wedded to local village men in the mass ceremony.

"It is happening for the good of our society."

"EASY MONEY"

The men of the Saraniya community, a nomadic group of 50,000, once worked for various warring factions which ruled over this drought-prone region prior to India's independence from Britain in 1947, sharpening their daggers and swords.

The Saranias' women were "entertainers" for the feuding warlords in the then fragmented Gujarat and neighbouring state of Rajasthan, dancing and singing, as well as providing sexual pleasure for their employers.

Post independence, activists and officials say, the Saraniya were given land by the government to provide a better means of income, but due to the "easy money" made from sex work, Wadia's men have continued soliciting their sisters and daughters.

Local people from mud-and-brick Wadia village are reluctant to talk about the issue, fearing discrimination against them in this conservative and largely patriarchal country.

"We are poor and don't have water. We have been doing agriculture and farming castor seeds and now are earning more money. The kind of work that you talk about has stopped now," said Valiben Saraniya, whose 20-year-old niece was married.

At the ceremony, musicians played the dhol and shehnai, the traditional Indian drum and trumpet used in weddings, as the eight marrying couples simultaneously placed garlands over one another and walked around a sacred fire placed in front of them, as per Hindu tradition.

Thirteen couples as young as 12 were also engaged during the ceremony, exchanging rings in the incense-filled tent, as a priest gave instructions from a microphone. Their parents said their weddings would take place when they turn 18.

Social activists who organised and the funded 900,000 rupee (\$18,000) event said securing the girls with future husbands would end Wadia's flesh trade, but they added that more development was needed to ensure other girls did not become sex workers.

"It is damn sure that no one will go into this profession after getting engaged or married as that is how this community has worked. If there is a husband, she won't be sold," said Mittal Patel from the Vicharta Samuday Samarthan Manch, a local charity that works to support India's nomadic tribes

"Alternative employment to the women is necessary such as teaching them embroidery, boosting irrigation for their fields and for them to do animal husbandry. This will end this cycle. No woman wants to do this by choice."