

# Savvy Sex Merchants

A series of raids on prostitution rackets in Mumbai and Delhi reveals how technology and new modes of operation have turned the two cities into a shopper's stop for commercial sex



SANJAY K. SHARMA

**DELHI** Last week, raids conducted in Delhi on posh hotels and massage parlours exposed another face of commercial sex. In the net are middle-class city girls and Russian women here on tourist visas

By Shefalee Vasudev

The burgeoning bazaar of sex workers in metros has given the police a new chase. A series of recent raids on prostitution rackets run from posh hotels in Delhi and dance bars in Mumbai exposes the growing world of sleaze. A quick sex session at a hotel is old hat. As is the paan-chewing pimp. The new, expensive commercial sex market that hires heterosexuals, homosexuals and bisexuals has made these cities shopper's stops for every kind of sexual fantasy. High prices, low risks. Mumbai is dominated by fancy dance bars and Delhi is the capital for the new, anytime girls.

Raids conducted by Mumbai Police

on March 15 led to the arrest of 2,000 people from dance bars across the city. Another spurt of raids last week in Navi Mumbai led 87 people into the net. The past fortnight has been explosive in Delhi too, when several prostitution rackets were busted. Some exposed Russian girls working in big hotels, who visit India and are frequent fliers between Delhi and Mumbai. Others found local girls working from a five-star hotel. Some fished for clients from massage parlours, others from rented flats of respectable localities.

In both cities, an extravagant market flourishes with boundaries merging fast. Massage parlours blur into the tactile profession of paid sex. Young girls in hipster jeans and chiffon tops who look

like earnest college freshers turn into seductive divas. Fair and lovely Azerbaijan girls are at the beck and call of those turned on by white skin. From furtive smooches in the car, morning-to-evening romps, night-time entertainment at a hotel, weekend companionship, arm candy for farmhouse parties, dance partners for the disco, pretty girls as airport escorts or seven days of non-stop fun, there is everything on the menu. These are pricey options, ranging from Rs 2,000 to Rs 80,000 for a deal. The sleek mobile phone is the new pimp, not some loud-spoken madam in red lipstick and a mismatched bra.

The days of the dingy kothas are over. As police raids in Delhi discov-

ered, what sells is the new package: five-star ambience, girls who dress like Bollywood heroines in trendy dresses, high heels, tote bags, speak English, are clean, articulate, understand table manners and are discreet. "To survive, it is important to get a makeover and work in hotels," says Deepa, a 26-year-old sex worker at Delhi's G.B. Road. "A day's booking gets us Rs 3,000 whereas we barely make Rs 400 in the kotha"

It is as Dependra Pathak, Delhi's deputy commissioner of crime, calls it, "the liberation of the call girl". "Pimps are having a bad time, these girls fix their deals themselves," he adds. Last week, when Inspector Gyan Singh Meena raided Hotel Regent in Karol Bagh, known for sex orgies, he found that the entire third floor of the hotel had been given to nine Azerbaijan girls. The girls were arrested through a decoy customer who struck a deal for Rs 5,000. They were sex-selling tourists who plied their trade between India and the Middle East. "There was not an iota of remorse in them, they were open about it," says Mahesh Bharadwaj, ACP, Karol Bagh, who queried the girls. "Fair girls have a big market in India and liberal visa rules for single girls entering the country support such tours." These girls find favour with rich businessmen who come up with bizarre sexual demands

every time.

The Mumbai raids exposed another dimension. "Half the people in the dance bars are youngsters who have no licence to drink, leave alone other indulgences," says A.N. Roy, police commissioner, Mumbai, adding that the money this business attracts is so high that it makes it a breeding ground for organised crime. Roy says he is amazed to find girls from good families doing the rounds at these bars.

It is a working marriage between demand and supply. As a regular customer from Delhi crassly said, "I want a girl from Mirinda (Miranda) House college. *Aur koi nahin chalegi* (no one else will do)."

"College girls cash in on this vulnerability," says Rishi Kant Shrivastava of Shakti Vahini, who during its work on crime against women, found some Delhi University girls waiting in the North Campus area to be "picked up". Too many aspirations among the youth sanctioned by social permissiveness have made paid sex a doable job. "The

## SLEAZE SHEET

- The mobile is the new pimp as girls make their own deals with clients.
- Fifty per cent of the crowd found in the raided Mumbai dance bars were minors who did not have permits to drink.
- Call girls now focus on lingerie, language, manners, posture and poise to get better clients and earn big money.
- The amount of money spent in the flesh trade is so high that it becomes a breeding ground for other types of organised crime.

success of Indians in beauty pageants abroad has made India a charming destination for sex shoppers," says Bharadwaj.

Jumping on the bandwagon are failed models, aspiring beauty queens, bored housewives and middle-class students. "I earn more if I invest in myself," says Rita, a 19-year-old college dropout from Assam who "works" as a companion. Her first pimp, an overbearing madam in a massage parlour, taught her to wear subtle make-up and lingerie for her "busi-

ness" and focus on manners, language, posture and poise. Now Rita has dumped her madam and rented out a flat with another girl. They find clients on their own.

Pathak categorises Delhi call girls into part-time girls, night-time girls and anytime girls, adding that 90 per cent of elite call girls work of their own will. The cell phone is not the only technological gizmo in this transparent orgy. The Internet is used to access e-mails from foreign clients, find out arrival dates, preferences and take "orders" from sex sites that some women have created for themselves on the Net.

Even as Delhi and Mumbai grow as hubs for newer varieties of commercial sex, Pathak feels it is not just a policing issue. "We shouldn't be complacent but we should not create a moral panic either," he says. Roy, however, says it is not about moral policing, but about enforcement of law. Manjit Singh Sethi, head of the Dance Bar Association of Mumbai, labels the police judgement as double standards. "Police officers take cuts from this trade, they should keep quiet," he told a news channel.

As the moral DNA of society changes, the buck of responsibility keeps getting passed. That doesn't change the fact that prostitution is still illegal. Unless the crackdown on sleaze continues, everyone involved in sex work may become easy conduits for other criminal conspiracies in the country. ■

## MUMBAI

Dance bars have come under intense police scrutiny for being fronts for a variety of sleazy activities



BHASKAR PAUL