

Village of ill repute . . . Choices stark for girls in India's sex centers

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NANDLALPURA, India — In this village down a three-mile dirt track from a busy highway, every woman is or was a prostitute, and every girl will probably become one.

It is how people of the Rajnat tribe survive these days.

Generations of Rajnat were traveling minstrels and dancers, dressed in brilliant turbans and swirling skirts of rainbow colors. They were welcomed in the sandstone fortresses of the maharajahs and queens who ruled the western desert.

Then Indian royalty slipped into history and television put wandering folk troupes out of business.

Naina, who is 8, dreams of being a doctor. More likely she will become like her sister Usha, a chubby-cheeked 13-year-old who approaches visitors with a seductive amble, fluttering eyelashes and pouting lips reddened with betel juice.

One day, Usha stood with her head down coquettishly as an aunt struck a deal with a man who had arrived on a motor scooter. She sent them into a family bedroom.

"The girls brought up in this atmosphere are . . . eager to earn their own money," said Kusum Jain, a social worker who visits Nandlalpura to encourage the use of condoms.

After she managed to persuade village women that unprotected sex was dangerous, their way of promoting condom use was simple: Charge men who refuse them the equivalent of \$2.25 instead of \$1.60, the standard fee.

If India is an AIDS time bomb, as scientists believe, Usha and Naina are among the fuses. India has tried to curb prostitution along its highways and spread the word about condoms, but with little success.

"What can we do? We have to earn a living," said Shyama, the eldest sister, brushing Naina's hair outside their three-room home of mud bricks. "The choice is dying of

AIDS or dying of starvation."

Shyama, 30, was a prostitute for more than 15 years in the village and Bombay.

"I have six sisters and one brother," she said. "For years I supported them. Now that I am too old, they look after me."

Most men in Nandlalpura are unemployed. They pass the time playing cards and drinking locally distilled liquor.

Meanwhile, hundreds of village women congregate just off the major highways, serving the sexual appetites of truck drivers and men from towns close by.

The government tends to ignore the Rajnat villages because of their reputations. Engineers laid power cables to nearby villages four years ago, but bypassed Nandlalpura.

Bhawani Shanker, who heads a social organization that conducted a two-year study of village prostitution, said the Rajnat and four other tribes operate 144 sex centers in Rajasthan state that range from villages to small towns.

He said at least 20,000 women were involved in the sex trade in the state's eastern provinces, the area his study covered. Most have never heard of AIDS or seen a condom.

More than 2,000 carry the AIDS virus.

Highway prostitution is one of the biggest factors in the spread of AIDS across India. The World Health Organization has identified India, Thailand and Taiwan as "smoldering volcanos" of AIDS in Asia.

India has been slow to heed the warning. Many Indians believe AIDS is a disease of the decadent West and does not threaten a country where contact between men and women outside marriage remains taboo.

Boys are preferred elsewhere in

male-dominated India, but in Nandlalpura and other sex villages, they are neglected, scruffy and ill-fed. The girls wear clean frocks, their hair is brushed and braided, and, said Jain the social worker, they "are always given better food."

Nandlalpura has no medical clinic. Few of the children attend the nearest school, in a village a mile away, because they are teased by classmates and mistreated by teachers.

Women in the village can earn middle-class incomes of 5,000 rupees, about \$160 a month. Some have begun saving to buy farms for their families.