The Intended and Unintended Consequences of AIDS Prevention Among Badi in Tulispur

Thomas E. Cox
Nagoya City University

Introduction

The Badi are an untouchable Hindu caste, with a population of between seven and eight thousand, who live in scattered settlements throughout the Salyan, Rolpa, Rukum, Dailekh, Seti, Jajarkot, Dang-Deukhuri, Banke and Bardiya districts of far west Nepal. Badi men fish (keeping most of the catch for their own family's consumption) and make drums and pipes, which they sell to other Nepalese in nearby communities. Their income however, is minimal. Badi women — the primary breadwinners in their society—work as prostitutes, beginning at puberty (at an average age of 13 or 14) and continuing until they become too old to attract any more customers, get married or, in very rare cases, make enough money to "retire" early (See also Cox 1993; Gurung 1982).[1]

Since 1991, Badi in Tulsipur (a town in the Dang-Deukhuri district of far west Nepal) have been the focus of AIDS prevention programs implemented by the Nepalese government, various international development agencies and non-governmental organizations (NGOs).[2] These programs have had intended and unintended consequences for Tulsipur's Badi society. One intended consequence has been a significant decrease in the incidence of sexually transmitted disease (STD) infection among Badi prostitutes. One unintended consequence has been the creation of a new leadership that is trying to establish a new ethnic identity based on the principles of assertiveness, progressiveness and self-determination. These two consequences, as I will discuss, are interrelated in important ways.

This paper begins with a short history of Badi prostitution. The second section examines relations between Badi and high-caste Nepalese before the implementation of AIDS prevention programs in the early 1990's. The third section explains why Tulsipur's Badi community has been the focus of AIDS prevention efforts. The fourth argues that peer counselors —established by development agencies in 1993— constitute a new group of leaders who are changing Tulsipur's Badi culture in important ways. In the final section I discuss the condom use policy implemented by Tulsipur's Badi prostitutes and its relationship to the new movement to reshape Badi identity.

A Short History of Badi Prostitution

The Badi originally came to west Nepal from India back in the fourteenth century, first settling in Salyan, and later in Rolpa, Rukum and Jajarkot. From the time of their settlement in Nepal, until the 1950s, the Badi made their living as entertainers, travelling— in groups consisting of three or more families—from one community to the next, staging song and dance performances and telling stories from the great Hindu epics of the Mahabharat and Ramayana. Their travels often took them out of their home districts and as far east as Palpa, Baglung, Pokhara, Gorkha and Bandipur (see Gurung 1982).

Until the 1950s the Badi were primarily supported by rulers of three principalities; Jajarkot, Salyan and Musikot, and to a lesser extent by some wealthy high caste landlords. Regmi (1978) describes the rulers and landlords who lived in west Nepal in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. These patrons provided the Badi with basic needs: housing, land, clothing and food. In return the Badi provided them with entertainment and sex. At this time, however, Badi women limited their prostitution to patrons and some of their male relatives. After the overthrow of the Rana regime (in 1950) and subsequent establishment of King Mahendra's panchayat government, rulers and landlords in west Nepal were stripped of much of their previous authority, and lost the right to tax subjects and exact

[1]This paper is based on ethnographic research conducted in Tulsipur's Badi community between May 1990 and June 1995. A longer account of this research is given in Cox, 1993.
[2]Badi in the Tulsipur area live in five separate hamlets that lie on the outskirts (or just beyond) of town. These include Rajapur, Bungusri, Nyabasti, Patekola and Srigau. The total Badi population of these hamlets fluctuates between 350 and 400. Some Badi families move down to Tulsipur from the northern middle hills area. Others leave Tulsipur for border cities like Nepalgunj.

unpaid labor and rent (on agricultural land) from them. As a result they lost much of their economic clout and were unable to continue their patronage of the Badi.

Badi women, in an effort to make up their lost income, began prostituting themselves with an increasing number of men. This growing reliance on prostitution was facilitated in the mid- 1960s by new accessibility (as a consequence of the malaria eradication program) to Tulsipur, Ghorahi, Rajapur, Nepalgunj and other growing, populous Tarai towns with a large expanding market for prostitutes. At the same time that the market for prostitutes was expanding, demand for singing and dancing was shrinking (as a result of the radios, movies and tape players which became increasingly available throughout the 1960s and 1970s), making Badi even more dependent on prostitution as a source of income (see Cox 1993).

The market for prostitutes continued to grow throughout the 1970s and 1980s as the Tarai's population increased, and more Nepali men found out about the Badis' thriving commercial sex industry. By the late 1980's many Nepali men from Narayanghat, Pokhara, Kathmandu, Biratnagar, and other towns in central and eastern Nepal, were taking the long trip out west for the sole purpose of having sex with Badi women. Badi women's income from prostitution continued to rise steadily. By 1990 each Badi prostitute in Tulsipur had an average of 25 clients a month, from whom they obtained a monthly income of around 5,000 rupees.

In 1991 growing awareness about AIDS caused a decline in the demand for commercial sex throughout Nepal. By June of 1995 each Badi prostitute in Tulsipur had an average of only 10 clients a month, from whom they were earning only 1500 rupees. As a result of this declining income Badi prostitutes in Tulsipur are no longer able to buy land and build houses as they did in the booming eighties. Indeed, by 1995 most of them could not even afford to purchase minor luxury items (like costume jewelry, make-up, perfume, liquor and nice clothes) and said they were barely making enough to live on. Despite these problems most Badi prostitutes said they had no intention of giving up prostitution, as they still could not find another occupation that paid as much.[3] The impact of reduced income on one young Badi woman is exemplified by the case of Laxmi, described below.

Laxmi[4] is a young Badi woman who lives in Tulsipur with her mother and two younger brothers. Between 1986 (when Laxmi began prostituting herself at the age of twelve) and 1991 Laxmi had an average of thirty clients a month, from whom she made 8,500 rupees. During this period some especially generous clients would give her up to 1,000 rupees for one night of sex. From this income Laxmi was able to purchase almost one acre of *khet* (irrigated farmland) and build two houses. In 1991 Laxmi's income began to decline. By mid-1995 she was only making an average of 1850 rupees a month from 10 clients.[5] Because of this reduction in earnings she could no longer indulge in certain "luxuries" (like going to movies or buying jewelry and nice clothes) as she used to.

Relations Between Badi and High Caste Nepalese

Badi are the lowest ranking untouchable caste in west Nepal. It is primarily because of the stigma attached to prostitution that Badi have so little status. The rules of orthodox Hinduism dictate that members of Nepal's highest castes (Brahmans, Chetris and Thakuris) cannot allow Badi into their houses or accept a meal of cooked rice or a glass of water from them. Marriage with Badi is also strictly prohibited. A Brahman, Chetri or Thakuri (either a man or a woman) who marries a Badi risks being disowned by their family and ostracized by high-caste society.

Despite the restrictions of orthodox Hinduism many high-caste Nepali men have sex with Badi prostitutes. In most cases relations between a Badi woman and high-caste clients begin and end with the sex act. I have, however, seen many cases of high-caste men who married or otherwise had long-term live-in relationships with Badi prostitutes (see Cox 1993). In most of these cases the man ended up leaving his Badi wife (or lover) because of opposition from his parents and other members of high-caste society. Occasionally, however, a high-caste man will stay with his

[3]A few Badi prostitutes in Tulsipur have begun to work - on a part-time, temporary basis - as agricultural laborers in local farmers' fields, transplanting or winnowing rice for 30 to 50 rupees (the equivalent of 70 cents to one dollar) a day. However, these women said that if their income from prostitution goes up they will stop working as field hands.

[4]The names of all the people mentioned in this paper have been changed to protect their identities.

[5]Not all Badi prostitutes in Tulsipur have had reduced incomes in the 1990's. Indeed, a few of them have actually made more money. Most of these women have been supported by one or more wealthy, generous clients. A case in point is Rama. Between 1992 and 1994 Rama had just one client, a Frenchman (Gerard) who was working in the Tulsipur area. During their two-year relationship he gave Rama over 20,000 dollars. With this money Rama bought 6 acres of irrigated farmland, a substantial amount of gold and a new two-story, 6 bedroom house. In 1994 Gerard returned to France (after having fathered a son by Rama) and apparently has no intention of returning to Nepal. Rama has been able to "retire" on the money Gerard gave her. She sends her two daughters (fathered by separate Nepali clients) to an exclusive private elementary school in Tulsipur. Rama said she wants her daughters to have a good education so they will not have to work as prostitutes.

Badi wife. The following instance illustrates the kind of problems that high caste men must deal with if they marry Badi women.

Rajendra Sharma is a 33 year old Brahman man who was born and raised in an ethnic Nepali community in the eastern Indian state of Assam. After receiving his Intermediate degree (the equivalent of an Associate's degree in the United States) Rajendra moved to Tulsipur and began teaching in a public elementary school. Two years later he began having sexual relations with a 16 year old Badi prostitute named Sujata. After seeing each other for three months Rajendra and Sujata decided to get married. They had to elope because of opposition from their parents (Sujata's parents were against the wedding because they knew it would stop Sujata's prostitution and the income it generated; Rajendra's parents opposed the wedding because Sujata was an untouchable). When Sujata's parents found out about the wedding they reported Rajendra to the police, claiming he had abducted their daughter. Rajendra was taken into custody and held for a few hours before the police realized his marriage was legitimate and released him. When Rajendra's parents found out about the marriage they promptly disowned him. Shortly after this Rajendra was fired from his job, precisely because he had married a Badi. Most members of Tulsipur's high caste society also cut off relations with him. For the next three years Rajendra eked out a living by privately tutoring students. When I met him (in 1995) he had recently been hired as a full-time teacher by a private high school in Tulsipur, but was still dirt poor. Rajendra said that he hopes to eventually save enough money to buy a little land and build a house for himself and Sujata.

The prevailing orthodox high caste Nepali attitude towards Badi women manifested itself in an incident which occurred during my fieldwork. I had just finished interviewing a group of Badi women in the (exclusively Badi) hamlet of Rajapur (near Tulsipur) when I was approached by a Brahman landlord who lived nearby. The landlord began to yell at me angrily; "If you came to have sex with Badi women that would be acceptable. That is the only reason why other men come here. But you come here day after day and do nothing but talk and take notes. You actually seem to have a friendship with these women. What is wrong with you? Don't you have any respect for yourself?"

The orthodox high caste Nepali attitude is (generally) that untouchables are nothing but service castes. The Kami (blacksmith caste) exist to make metal ware. The Damai (tailor caste) live to sew clothes. The Sarki's (shoemaker caste) sole purpose on earth is to make shoes, and the only reason Badi are around is to provide sex. To treat Badi women as anything but sex objects — and to treat them as equals — is, to many orthodox Brahmans, Chetris and Thakuris in Nepal, a gross violation of caste boundaries. And yet, as I have already pointed out, many high caste Nepali men who come to Badi prostitutes as clients, end up having long-term serious relationships (or even marriages) with them. The reality of relationships between high caste men and Badi women often differs from the norms defined by orthodox Hinduism (Cox 1993: 7).

Until 1990 the Badi were very isolated from mainstream Nepalese society and (generally) had little meaningful social contact with either high caste Nepalese men or women. Schools often give untouchable children a chance to mix socially with members of other castes. Badi however, and especially Badi girls, were given little encouragement from high caste Nepalese to pursue their education. Badi girls who attended school were often severely harassed by high-caste students. There was also a case, in the Dang Valley, of a high-caste headmaster who refused to admit Badi girls to his school, saying they would corrupt the other students (Cox 1993; 7).

Such persecution was commonplace throughout far west Nepal. Badi women were sometimes assaulted or robbed and rarely, if ever, received any help from the police. (Indeed, in some cases it was the police who were guilty of the abuse.) In other cases they were forced (by local officials) to move out of certain areas for no reason. In addition, Badi women with children fathered by high caste clients were usually unable to win paternity suits. The judges invariably sided with the men saying that since the woman was a prostitute she had no way of proving who the father was (see also Cox 1993; 6).

Badi were often very passive in the face of persecution, primarily because of their fatalistic attitude towards life. Most Badi women believed it was their fate to work as prostitutes. They accepted the caste system, accepted the theory that certain kinds of work can only be done by certain groups of people and that everyone should be ranked along an axiom of purity and pollution.

The social isolation of Badi before 1990 was also due, in part, to the obscurity of their community. As a result of the Badi's small population and the relative remoteness of their settlements, they did not come to the attention of most high-caste government officials and development professionals, especially those in Kathmandu. This ignorance of the Badis' existence was even more profound among western expatriates in Nepal.

In the early 1990's awareness of the Badi — among both high caste Nepalese and expatriate development professionals — grew dramatically. This led to a tremendous increase in meaningful social contact between these people and Badi women. The catalyst for this important change in social relations was the AIDS pandemic.

AIDS Prevention Programs in Tulsipur's Badi Community

In 1989 HIV began to spread rapidly among prostitutes and their clients in India and Thailand (see Serrill 1990). This caused great concern among public health officials and local leaders in west Nepal. They realized how susceptible Badi prostitutes were to AIDS and how easily the virus could spread from them to the wider Nepalese society. By 1990 Nepali social workers, teachers, public health officials, at least one anthropologist (i.e. myself) and other people began educating Badi women about AIDS.

In February and March of 1991 officials from Nepal's National AIDS Control Project (with assistance from the World Health Organization) tested 228 Badi prostitutes (in Nepalgunj and the Dang Valley) for the HIV-1 (AIDS) virus. They all tested negative (although 70 percent tested positive for other STDs—Cox 1993) and public health officials realized there was still time to save Badi from AIDS.

Throughout 1991 and 1992 awareness of the Badi continued to grow among both Nepali and western development professionals in Nepal. This was due, primarily, to local leaders and health workers from west Nepal who went to Kathmandu to talk with government officials about the potential impact of AIDS on the Badi community. The media also played an important role by publishing articles and airing radio news stories about the Badi.

In 1990 not a single non-governmental (NGO) or international development agency was working in Tulsipur's Badi community. By 1995, directly or indirectly, five international agencies and four NGOs were involved.

There are three major reasons why Badi in Tulsipur have been the subject of so much attention from development organizations. Firstly, they were at very high risk of contracting AIDS. By 1991 most Badi had heard about AIDS, but still did not know enough about the disease to adequately protect themselves. In addition they needed a better condom supply and improved treatment for STDs. Secondly, compared to commercial sex workers (CSWs) from other castes and ethnic groups Tulsipur's Badi prostitutes were relatively easy to find and talk with. They lived in an easily accessible urban area and, after some initial reticence, enthusiastically supported AIDS prevention efforts in their community. Thirdly, the sheer ethnic exoticism of the Badi has attracted many western researchers and public health officials from a variety of international agencies. The Badi are one of a very few societies in the world in which prostitution among women is a social norm (see Baines 1912; Blunt 1969 [1931]; Crook 1974 [1896]; Sherring 1974 [1879] and Singh 1988 for descriptions of some "prostitute castes" in India). This basic fact - and the many unique customs surrounding prostitution in Badi society— has captured the interest of many western public health officials, drawn them out to Tulsipur, and inspired them to implement AIDS prevention programs for the Badi community there. What follows is a description of these programs.

An STD Clinic

In January of 1993 Nepal's National AIDS Control Program, Backward Society Education (BASE) — a large, Tulsipur-based Tharu NGO — and Save the Children U.S.A, ran an STD clinic for all Dang Valley residents. This involved different activities including (1) Free examinations and treatment for anyone suffering from an STD; (2) Public education sessions in which different groups of people were taught about STDs and how they could be prevented and/or treated; (3) The distribution of condoms along with a demonstration of how to use them; (4) Free testing for AIDS and other STDs; and (5) The improvement of local STD diagnosis and treatment services. (This was accomplished by training local doctors, nurses and health post workers about how to diagnose and treat syphilis, gonorrhea, chlamydia and other STDs.)

Most Badi women in the Dang Valley (including those in Tulsipur) enthusiastically participated in this clinic. They were tested and treated for STDs, came to the education sessions and gladly accepted the condoms. This clinic significantly increased Badis' awareness about AIDS and other diseases, cured many people of STDs and expanded local health care workers' ability to diagnose and treat them.

An exception were Badi prostitutes living in Pakriya (a hamlet near the Dang Valley town of Ghorahi). These women had far less contact with development professionals than Badi in Tulsipur. They had no idea what the STD clinic was all about and were initially scared of the Nepalese running it. Many Badi women in Pakriya were convinced that STD clinic staff were out to persecute Badi women from suspicions that they harbored HIV. This fear was so intense that many Badi prostitutes in Pakriya literally ran away from STD clinic staff who first approached them.[6] A day after this however, some Badi women from Tulsipur and a few Ghorahi residents went out to Pakriya and allayed the women's concerns about the clinic. After this most Badi prostitutes in Pakriya participated in all clinic activities. Many of them received treatment for STDs and attended the AIDS education sessions. Later, most Badi women in Pakriya said they really benefitted from the clinic.

Non-Formal Education (NFE) Classes: In 1993 BASE, with the support of UNICEF and the Danish Agency for International Development (DANIDA) implemented Non-

[6]They described the intensity of their fears with the following proverb: "*manisharulai banko bagh khane banda manko bagh bhari khane huncha*" (Fear of the tiger consumes more people than the tiger itself).

formal education (NFE) classes for Badi children in the Dang Valley towns of Tulsipur and Ghorahi. The purpose of this program is to give Badi children basic literacy skills and expand their knowledge of important subjects such as development issues in Nepal, human rights and AIDS. These classes have been taught (primarily) by Badi — from the local area or elsewhere — who have a ninth grade education or higher and who have been trained as NFE teachers. As of June 1995 over thirty Badi girls were studying in NFE classes in the Dang Valley.

Condom Distribution: BASE, with the support of the American Foundation for AIDS Research (AMFAR) and DANIDA, has been distributing condoms to Badi prostitutes. BASE workers made regular visits to Badi settlements to check on condom quality and supply, and to train women how to use condoms correctly. (The impact of condom use on the Badi community is discussed below.) Badi were also free to come into the BASE office and discuss these issues (and others) with health program staff members.

Sewing Classes: BASE, with the support of DANIDA, has also established sewing classes for underprivileged young women in the Dang Valley. The goal of these classes is to give women the training necessary to produce and sell clothing. Five Badi girls in Tulsipur have been taking these classes. They all claimed that this program was the first encouragement they had ever received to enter any profession other than prostitution. After completing the course they hoped to open their own garment shop. Although they did not have the money for this the girls said they hope to be able to borrow the necessary capital from BASE or some other organization.

Peer Counselors: A new Badi leadership in Tulsipur

In January of 1993 doctors implementing the STD clinic established two paid peer counselor positions for Badi prostitutes in Tulsipur. Two months later BASE - with funding and technical support from DANIDA and, later, AMFAR - created four more such positions. These peer counselors have played an extremely important role in the Tulsipur Badi community's AIDS prevention efforts. The peer counselors' duties include the following.

(1) Educating women about AIDS and other STDs

2) Distributing condoms

(3) Mediating conflicts between Badi prostitutes and clients

(4) Meeting regularly with public health professionals — from supporting agencies, NGOs and government ministries — to discuss ongoing AIDS prevention efforts

(5) Encouraging Badi women to participate in non-formal education classes, job training courses and other development programs

(6) Attending workshops, seminars and training courses to enhance leadership and communication skills.

Tulsipur's six Badi peer counselors were selected because they were current or former commercial sex workers with proven leadership and communication skills who had a genuine desire to help their community by doing AIDS prevention work. What follows is an account of the experiences of one Badi peer counselor.

Pushpa is a 34 year old Badi woman who was born and raised in Nepalgunj. When Pushpa was 18 she moved to Tulsipur because it was cleaner, quieter and cheaper than Nepalgunj and had a good market for commercial sex as well. When Pushpa was 21 she developed a very close relationship with a Chetri man (named Kumar) who owned several clothing stores in both Tulsipur and the town of Butwal. Kumar lived in Butwal, but often came to Tulsipur on business. He first visited Pushpa as a client and soon began to live with her during his trips to the Dang Valley. Over the next three years Pushpa maintained a monogamous relationship with Kumar and had two children (a son and a daughter) by him. At the end of this period Kumar left Pushpa (because his parents and brothers opposed the relationship) and has had no contact with her since. Shortly after the break-up Pushpa began prostituting herself again.[7]

Pushpa said that she often visits relatives in Nepalgunj and that some of them are sending their daughters to a school there that was established specifically for Badi (see Cox 1993). Pushpa said that seeing Badi girls in school really made her want to educate her own children. (As of June, 1995 Pushpa's seven year old daughter was in school and she planned to enroll her son the following year.)

Pushpa was an active participant in the January 1993 STD clinic. She encouraged women to attend the education sessions and get themselves checked for STDs. The doctors, noticing her efforts, offered her a peer counselor position. Pushpa accepted immediately and shortly thereafter went through a training course at BASE's main office in Tulsipur.[8] Over the next two years Pushpa attended

[7]There is a direct correlation between the Badi's openness and their very low position in Nepal's social hierarchy. All over the world members of the upper and lower classes tend to be more open (and less hypocritical) than middle class people. Members of the upper class are usually so powerful that they can say whatever they want with impunity. Reputation-wise, lower-class people have little (if anything) left to lose, so they too can saywhat they want without fear of penalty. The middle-class, on the other hand, is both vulnerable and, status-wise, has a lot to lose, so they tend to be more reticent and deceptive about their behavior.

several workshops and training programs in different cities (including Nepalgunj, Pokhara and Kathmandu). During these events Pushpa befriended many Nepalese health and development professionals from international agencies, Nepal's health ministry and different NGOs. Many of these people have visited her to discuss ongoing AIDS prevention activities in Tulsipur and offer moral, technical and/or financial support. Pushpa said the pay for the peer counselor position is not enough to support her family, and she has had to continue her prostitution to make enough money. But Pushpa says the status conferred on her by the position more than makes up for the low income. She is now welcome at almost all government and NGO offices in Tulsipur, whereas before she was not even allowed inside many of them. Pushpa has forged strong professional ties with several government officials and leaders in Tulsipur. These connections have made her work and life easier. For example, Pushpa said that before becoming a peer counselor she was often harassed by the police, but that by 1995 they were completely leaving her alone and, indeed, were sometimes offering to help her deal with abusive clients. Pushpa said that support for her work - among Badi and, indeed, the whole Tulsipur community - has been growing steadily and that she can see the benefits of AIDS prevention activities every day.

Peer counselors have become influential leaders in their community and important mediators in the new patron-client relationship that has developed between Nepal's development community and Badi in Tulsipur. Supporting agencies, NGOs and affiliated government ministries provide Badi with certain resources (i.e. money, jobs, technical assistance, education, health care and a certain degree of professional and political status). In return Badi are expected to promote condom use, reduce sexual partners whenever possible, get an education and, in short, develop themselves and their community.

Peer counselors have been using their new-found political clout to enforce a relatively strict condom use policy for clients of Badi prostitutes. If a client tries to force a Badi woman to have condomless sex peer counselors usually intervene and take the following measures. First they will try to reason with the man and explain that if he does not use a condom he will be putting himself, the Badi woman and, in some cases, his wife or girlfriend, at risk of contracting a serious and perhaps deadly STD. If the man still won't comply the prostitute will usually refuse to sleep with him and, furthermore, will tell all the other Badi women what happened, prompting them to boycott the man as well. If a client becomes abusive the peer counselor will often call a group of Badi men to expel him from the community. In other cases peer counselors have threatened to write an account of the client's abusive actions and display it outside in Tulsipur's main bazaar. (In one case, in 1994, a man suspected of trying to abduct a Badi girl was, on the orders of a peer counselor, grabbed and forcibly taken to the police station). These measures have, in general, been very successful.

The enforcement of the condom use policy is part of a new assertiveness and spirit of self- determination among Badi women in Tulsipur. New-found authority, the encouragement and resources bestowed by various agencies and NGOs and the leadership provided by peer counselors, is altering the culture of fatalism (marked by passivity in the face of oppression) among Badi women. For the first time many Badi women in Tulsipur are standing up for themselves and aspiring to a better life - one characterized by increased confidence, education, income generating opportunities and political-social support from the wider Nepalese society and international development agencies. However, these progressive attitudes have come into direct conflict with a Badi NGO in Tulsipur called the Nepal Sudar Sangh.

Conclusion: Competing Models of Ethnic Identity

The Nepal Sudar Sangh is an NGO that was established in June 1993 by Kamal Nepali, a Badi man from Tulsipur. The stated goal of the Nepal Sudar Sangh is to raise the socioeconomic status of Tulsipur's Badi community through the implementation of income generating activities. When it was founded the Nepal Sudar Sangh received a small grant (from BASE) of 650 dollars that was used to purchase some musical instruments. As of June, 1995 however, the organization had received no further funding. In its first two years of existence membership in the Nepal Sudar Sangh hovered between 35 and 40 people from Tulsipur and Ghorahi. The number of male and female members is roughly equal. Most of them are older Badi in their 30's, 40's or 50's. The Nepal Sudar Sangh has organized public song and dance performances by its women members and a program to market drums and pipes made by Badi men.

All of these activities have been vehemently opposed by Badi peer counselors. They argue that singing, dancing and drum-making - as traditional low-caste activities - are counter-productive and discourage Badi from really changing their society for the better. Badi peer counselors have completely boycotted all Nepal Sudar Sangh activities, and encouraged other Badi to do the same. Nepal Sudar Sangh members have responded by claiming (falsely) that peer

[8]In some other places Badi women were not so eager to do peer counseling work. For example, Badi prostitutes in Nepalgunj initially turned down the peer counselor positions because they did not pay as much as prostitution (Cox 1993; 7).

counselors are working for some political parties and have no real interest in helping the Badi community. Very few people believe these claims. In fact, the vast majority of Badi, and especially younger men and women, support the peer counselors. They attribute Nepal Sudar Sangh members' comments to fear of change and jealousy. As one Badi peer counselor said to me; "uniharulai dahalagera hamro kutta tandaichu" ("They are jealous and pulling our feet.").[9]

The Nepal Sudar Sangh and the peer counselors have profoundly different views of Badi identity. The Nepal Sudar Sangh believes in developing Badi society by raising income from some traditional occupations. The peer counselors, on the other hand, are trying to cultivate a culture of assertiveness, progressiveness and self-determination. They believe these values are necessary to transform Badi society for the better.

The peer counselors' philosophy of change is not only more appealing to other Badi, but to Nepal's development community as well. While peer counselors have strong ties to many development organizations the Nepal Sudar Sangh became increasingly isolated and, by mid- 1995, was on the verge of collapse.

Badi prostitutes in Tulsipur established their condom use policy in April of 1993. BASE promised to supply them with all the condoms they needed and peer counselors and health care professionals (doctors and nurses from Nepal's National AIDS Control Program and Save The Children) taught Badi how to use them.[10] (Before these interventions many Badi prostitutes could not afford to buy condoms on a regular basis, and even when they could the condoms were not always available in local pharmacies.)[11]

Peer counselors established a goal of 100% condom use for all Badi clients. However, the actual rate of client condom use between April, 1993 and June, 1995 was around 85%. Some Badi prostitutes did not require condom use from clients who they were particularly fond of, or with whom they wanted to have children. In some other cases Badi prostitutes have acquiesced to demands for condomless sex because they desperately needed the money.[12] Nonetheless, the 85% condom use rate represents a significant improvement from the pre-1991 period, when it was less than 20%.

Increased condom use has benefitted Badi women in many ways. One positive consequence has been increased birth control. This is important because Badi prostitutes only want to have as many children as they can adequately support. Condom use also enables Badi women to choose the man who will father their children. Most Badi women want their children to be fathered by men with certain good qualities (i.e. intelligence, healthiness, handsomeness, emotional stability, etc.).

The rise in condom use also led to a 50% to 70% drop in STD infection rates among Tulsipur's Badi prostitutes between June, 1993 and June, 1995.[13] Even more importantly, not a single woman tested HIV positive (see Nepal National AIDS Control Project Surveillance Records).

Before 1993 most Badi prostitutes were constantly infected with STDs (see Cox 1993; 8).[14] They often felt bad, physically and emotionally, and this intensified the sense of fatalism, inferiority and powerlessness prevailing in their community at that time. By mid-1995 most Badi prostitutes in Tulsipur were free of STDs and felt better (physically and emotionally) as a result. This feeling of well-being has motivated them to maintain the condom use policy and, in general, to support the peer counselors' efforts to promote assertiveness and progressiveness.

---

[9]The idiom *kutta tannu* "feet pulling" means to socially and/or professionally ruin someone by sullying their reputation.

[10]Badi women reported that many of their clients did not know how to use condoms properly. They often put them on inside out, did not unroll them all the way or did not squeeze the air out of the tip. When this happened Badi women made them put on another condom and showed them how to do it correctly.

[11]Demand for condoms can fluctuate from one week to the next. For example, my Badi informants told me they always needed extra condoms during the Bhote *mela* (Tibetan "fair" or festival) which is held during the first week of February. This festival is celebrated primarily by Tibetans from northern Nepal who winter in the Dang Valley (to escape the bitter cold of their high altitude villages). While in Dang these Tibetans live in tents and sell medicinal herbs, horses and mastiffs. During the Bhote *mela* many Tibetan men feast, sing, dance, drink heavily and have sex with Badi prostitutes.

[12]Despite the threat of infection by STDs many men in Tulsipur continue to have sex with local Badi women. Some of these men quoted the following proverb to describe their weakness in the face of this sexual temptation: "ago agadi ghiu rakyo bhane paklinchu" (If you put butter in front of a fire it melts).

[13]When Badi women are infected with an STD they usually go straight to a clinic, health post or hospital for treatment. Occasionally, however, they will try to treat themselves. Many Badi women have learned the names of some antibiotics from doctors and other health care workers. There have been some cases of Badi women who bought antibiotics (most medications in Nepal can be purchased over the counter) and tried to treat themselves. This, of course, is dangerous as it can lead to ineffective treatment and the development of gonorrhea or syphilis strains that are resistant to available medications.

[14]Badi women have many traditional beliefs regarding STDs. For example, they believe that exposure to the light of the full moon — or the consumption of meat, alcohol or chili peppers — exacerbates cases of syphilis or gonorrhea.

The Badi community is still beset with problems. There is still persecution, poverty and ignorance. However, Tulsipur's Badi women have begun to change their society in very positive ways. They are standing up to abusive high caste men, embracing new educational opportunities, forging strong ties with Nepalese and western professionals, establishing new dynamic leaders and improving health conditions in their community. They have taken the first steps towards a better life.

References cited

Baines, Sir Athelstane. 1912. **Ethnography (Castes and Tribes)**. Strassburg: Verlag Von Karl J. Trubner.

Blunt, E.A.H. 1969 [1931]. **The Caste System of Northern India**. New Delhi: S. Chand and Company.

Cox, Thomas E. 1993. **The Badi: Prostitution as a Social Norm Among an Untouchable Caste of West Nepal.** Kathmandu: Asian Ethnographer Society Press.

Crook, W. 1974 [1896]. **The Tribes and Castes of The Northern Provinces and Oudh**. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications.

Gurung, Ganesh Man, 1982. *Prostitution as a Way of Life: A Note on Badis*. **Kathmandu Review** 2 (7): 5-8.

Regmi, Mahesh C. 1978. **Thatched Roofs and Stucco Palaces: Peasants and Landlords in 19th Century Nepal**. New Delhi: Vikas Publishing House.

Serrill, Michael S. 1990. *The End of Denial*. **Time** 136 (4): 42-44.

Sherring, M.A. 1974 [1879]. **Hindu Tribes and Castes**. Volume Two. New Delhi: Cosmo Publications.

Singh, N.K. 1988 *Cursed by Custom*. **India Today**. January: pp. 68-71.

Crossing the Soanne, with the Kymore Hills in the Distance (From *Himalayan Journals*, J.D. Hooker)