

Saturday in New York with Gitanjali by Tracy Cochran

Gitanjali Babbar wanted to walk to the Freedom Tower. This cold day in New York City marked the end of her first trip to the United States. She had visited in Washington, D.C.; Reno, Nevada; the Bay Area; and now for a few days, New York. For six weeks, Gitanjali had been a U.S. Department of State Professional Fellow, broadening her already deep knowledge of sex trafficking by observing how it manifests in this country. The night before she had visited a Manhattan strip club, hoping to talk with or at least observe the interactions of the women who worked there.

The workers in the strip club seemed lonely and competitive compared to women in the Indian brothels, she told me as we walked south. One young woman in particular haunted her because she wasn't as attractive as the other workers and she seemed intent on using her earnings on plastic surgery, desperate to be a more attractive object.

My plan was Central Park, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, lunch and tea—a day apart from all places associated with great suffering. Yet Gitanjali didn't want to separate from the suffering of others. She walked towards it smiling.

Gitanjali said she loved the way people walk in New York, striding along fast and free, "everyone walking everywhere." Bundled in a dark wool coat, eyes bright with excitement, interested in everything, the twenty-seven-year-old looked younger than she does in pictures and video clips, more like a visiting college student than a visionary and activist. In Delhi she doesn't have the chance to walk like this, she said. On G.B. Road in Delhi, where the brothels are, nobody goes walking. Most never leave their buildings, and

some of the youngest can't leave their cells. Before Gitanjali, no young woman would set one foot there by choice.

By day, G.B. (for Garstin Bastion) Road is a hardware district, full of auto repair garages and shops selling engine parts. At night, the shutters come down and the sex trade takes over. The second and third floors of the buildings on G.B. Road house seventy-seven brothels (or kothas), four thousand women and fifteen-hundred children, making it the largest and most notorious red light district in Delhi. On the second floor of one of these brothels, Gitanjali founded Kat-Katha, a refuge and resource for these women and children, who have become like family to her.

"I don't feel safe in Delhi," she told me. "But I feel safe on G.B. Road."

Gitanjali's mother wanted her to be a teacher. "She thought that was a proper job for a girl," a noble profession that was also safe and contained, "at work by seven and home again after two." But Gitanjali didn't want to live in a safe container. Longing to go out and explore worlds she didn't know, she became a journalist only to discover that editors treat the world like a market, assigning pieces based on what they think will sell. "I didn't want to live in a market," she explained, so she entered a world sustained by different laws.

Gitanjali joined the Gandhi Fellowship and lived for two years in the rural village of Rajasthan, India. The Gandhi Fellowship is a two-year intensive program that immerses batches of talented young Indians in real social problems, sending them into rural villages and government schools, aiming to cultivate inner and outer transformation—transforming the quality of education while cultivating leadership skills informed by Gandhian values.

"When my parents dropped me off, they stayed nearby in a guest house, hoping I would drive home with them." Gitanjali visited them once for a shower but then she went back to the village and stuck it out. Over time, the girl who didn't want to be a teacher learned to improve rural education by engaging kids and teachers and parents, fostering cooperation, activating change by seeing that in every situation there are multiple perspectives and stakeholders. Her time in the Gandhi Fellowship planted the seeds she needed to found Kat-Katha.

Yet Kat-Katha wasn't really founded, Gitanjali explained. It evolved. After the fellowship, Gitanjali worked for a health organization that sent her into the brothels to interview the sex workers about contraceptives and other health topics. Yet that way of questioning, as if there were a wall between herself and these women, made her uncomfortable. Something about these women touched her. She began visiting the brothels after work, talking with the women and learn-ing how they came to be on G.B. Road.

And then came a turning point. One afternoon, when she came to interview women, she found a circle of the women prepared to ask her questions about her own life. Where did she live? Did she have a boyfriend? She didn't know what to say. Gitanjali quit her job and began spending whole days at the brothel getting to know the women more deeply, gaining their trust. One day an older woman asked her to teach her something. And Gitanjali, who never set out to be a teacher, began bringing books. Other women noticed and joined in, and soon their children came.

At home at night, she shared her experiences on social media, and over time volunteers began to show up. Three years later, Kat-Katha has 120 volunteers and is working with the women of all seventy-seven brothels on G.B Road. Gitanjali speaks of all this matter-of-factly, marveling at the serendipity of events. Someone donated book-binding machines, a business donated used paper, and they began to teach the women how to bind and craft notebooks. The children began to see themselves as artists and revealed an uncanny ability to attract the help they needed. A student wanted to learn to dance and a volunteer appeared to teach her.

"We call Kat-Katha magic, but it's not magic," Gitanjali told me as the Freedom Tower came into view. "What is happening is the answer to the prayers of these women and children.

"I never would have dreamed we would have volunteers from Google come visit," adds Gitanjali, who visited the Google offices in New York the day before. She described a group of young American women coming to Kat-Katha with huge bodyguards in tow. The women insisted the bodyguards stay downstairs when they went up to second floor. When they came downstairs, the bodyguards asked if they could go upstairs themselves.

Recently, the Gandhi Ashram in Delhi offered Gitanjali an unused ashram building to serve as a hostel for the children of the brothel, an act of grace that will pull the girls away from the almost certain risk of being sold into prostitution, the boys away from a world saturated in drugs and alcohol and the sex trade. There the children will be taught, reading and crucial academic skills but also basic human skills, washing, brushing teeth, being kind. The school is modeled on the school for children housed within the famous

Gandhi Ashram at Sabarmati, in Ahmedabad. This ashram was the starting point of Gandhi's Salt March, the home of the Indian Independence Movement.

To Gitanjali, Kat-Katha is an alternative space full of passionate volunteers who lead by example. Within this space she sees amazing exchanges happen, which she describes in simple terms: people meet and share stories and love. Yet what Gitanjali and Kat-Katha do is courageous and visionary, a practice in selfless service. Kat-Katha is skillfully bringing about radical change, quietly replacing the usual commerce of the brothel with community, caring, hope.

Gitanjali and her fellow volunteers take inspiration, as do many other "servant leaders," from Vinoba Bhave (1895–1982), a scholar, activist, and trusted spiritual friend and advisor of Gandhi. Called Acharya (teacher in Sanskrit), Vinoba cared deeply about creating a just and equitable society, about helping good triumph over evil, generosity over greed. A frail man, he walked all over India, asking the rich to donate land, which he gave to the landless poor.

Vinoba taught a new movement of social transformation, not dependent on a charismatic leader, focusing on the power of connection, many small groups making many efforts, many connecting to many, creating a network for the good. "When we all see our role in society as servants, we will light up the night sky together like countless stars on a dark night.... The moon's harsh light blinds us to the true and humble work of the stars. But on a moonless night, the true servants shine forth, as though they are connected invisibly in the vast and infinite cosmos."

At last, we saw the Freedom Tower looming up straight ahead. I told Gitanjali it was the tallest structure in New York, 1776 feet tall in honor of our Declaration of Independence. She asked me what it was like being in New York that day. I told her a few of the good things I remembered—the kindness and caring that spontaneously appeared, strangers talking to strangers, helping each other home.

"We were all so scared when it happened," she said simply. "We thought that if it happened here it could happen to us." And it did happen in India, in Mumbai in 2008. And so much else happened, and continues to happen.

We lingered for a long time at the National September 11 Memorial, watching the water spill down into the two huge fountain pools that fill the footprints of the twin towers. The pools themselves are dark and still and seemingly bottomless, so that it feels as if the water is spilling down into mystery. "Now they are all together," says Gitanjali, opening her fingers in a gesture of release. I think of something I heard at the Gandhi Ashram about the potential of selfless service: "We go from emptiness to oneness."

Later, I discovered that the workers and volunteers at the Memorial had launched "Tribute 2983," dedicating themselves and inviting others to perform 2983 acts of generosity and kindness in honor of the victims of the attacks, by replacing violence with compassion, honoring lives lost by paying kindness forward. No wonder Gitanjali wanted to visit.

At last Gitanjali admitted to being a little hungry and cold and tired. I led her to lunch in an Indian restaurant I knew. She ordered vegetarian food for us to share, then she closed her eyes and prayed in silence before we ate. Over curry and naan, we talked more about the painful realities of life in the brothels. Gitanjali pointed to boxed air vents in the ceiling, barely big enough for a slender person to crawl through, indicating that this is about the size of the cells that abducted girls are kept in.

These ten-, eleven-, twelve-year-old girls are cocooned in such constricted cells for three to four years, never leaving, seeing only “special” customers (“special” in the sense that they pay extra and won’t go to the police). The girls are confined like this until they are judged by brothel owners to be too broken and too afraid to run away. I ask her how this can happen. These girls are abducted from poor families, she says. “The poor have no resources to find their children.”

When the girls become women they rarely leave the brothel. When a woman has a baby, the baby is often taken away from her. She is allowed to see the child once a week, an inducement to stay. There is no medical care. Gitanjali described seeing a young woman with sores related to AIDS; the woman was untreated because the brothel owner thought that treatment would be bad for business. The usual diet is very poor, mostly only bread and street food. Given drink and drugs and the squalid lifestyle the average life expectancy is about forty-five-years old. The women who manage to grow that old are sent out to procure customers on G.B. Road.

As the painful details mount, I wonder who frequents these brothels. Poor men? Rich men? Sometimes rich men come to G.B. Road, Gitanjali answered. There are special places where incredible services are offered. There are brothels featuring young Nepalese girls who are very beautiful and blue-eyed.

Gitanjali told me that one of her biggest challenges is to not judge, not even the brothel owners. “They come to me and say, ‘Look at this expensive suit I’m wearing. But what good is it to be able to have money if my children can’t get an education?’” Gitanjali plans to include their children, shamed and shunned because of what their fathers do, in the new hostel school. All must be included.

Offering me the bowl of rice, Gitanjali reminded me that Jayesh Patel, a beloved mentor and leader in the Gandhi organization, believes that it’s a sin to waste food. Suddenly, the big basket of naan and big platter of rice seemed a display of abundance for display’s sake, and this waste seemed obscurely connected to the exploitation and neglect of these girls and women. As Gitanjali offered me yet more bread and more rice, it struck me that the seeming magic of Kat-Katha, like all magic, involves seeing what is usually unseen.

“Kat-Katha” means puppet show. Gitanjali told me that the name came from an insight she had from spending time with the women in the brothel, learning about their lives and how they wound up on G.B. Road, one kidnapped as a child, one lured by a false promise of marriage, most born into grinding poverty. She saw that we each are the product of a long chain of cause and effect, all controlled by the strings of our circumstances and conditioning. She saw that the difference between her and the women in the brothel was that her strings “were in better hands.”

We walked north, to Central Park and the Metropolitan Museum. At the Conser-vancy Pond in the park, we stopped and watched the radio-controlled model sailboats gliding slowly on still water, their white sails as touching as the wings of great birds. Gitanjali exclaimed at the storybook beauty of the scene, asking me to take her picture at the Alice in Wonderland statue. “I’m going to read Alice in Wonderland to my kids and then show the picture to them.” She missed her family, her parents with whom she lives in Delhi, her boyfriend, and her family on G.B. Road.

“While I am here roaming through New York, there are 120 people working hard,” she said. She doesn’t want to be the head of an organization or a movement, she told me. She

was reassured when Jayesh Patel told her that in time the movement itself would take over and she would sink into the background. It struck me as strange that we usually think of heroes as solitary, standing strong and alone, protected by the armor of their convictions. It struck me that I was spending the day with someone whose idea of heroism consisted in taking off her armor, in making herself vulnerable to life, giving up the privilege of separation.

At the Metropolitan Museum of Art, we stood before a magnificent sculpture of the Hindu Trinity: Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva; the gods of creation, maintenance, and destruction. We ended with Ganesh, the god of beginnings, patron of wisdom and learning, overcomer of obstacles. Gitanjali told me that she has always loved Ganesh.

“I haven’t yet met one American who wants war,” said Gitanjali as we walked out into the twinkling New York night. I assured her they exist. “Those are the people I would like to talk with,” she said.

We walked down Fifth Avenue to Grand Central Station, where Gitanjali was meeting the friend who would host her that night. The stores were being elaborately decorated for Christmas. Many had their windows shrouded in black to save the surprise until after Thanksgiving, the official start of the Christmas holiday season.

As we passed the Christmas tree at Rockefeller Center, still under wraps before the official lighting, she told me someone had given her a bough from the tree. She packed it in her suitcase. “I plan to tell my kids about Christmas and about New York, then I’m going to show it to them.”

In Grand Central Station, she bought me a notebook decorated with a web of sparkles, “to write down what we talked about.” As she left, I thought of Vinoba Bhave’s vision of stars on a moonless night, of the infinite web of connection.