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Nightclub couple who trafficked Bangladeshi women jailed 5.5 years, fined in first such conviction

By LOUISA TANG



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SINGAPORE — A married couple ran two Hindi nightclubs here and trafficked three Bangladeshi women, making them work seven days a week as dancers. On Tuesday (Feb 11), they were each sentenced to serve five-and-a-half years' jail.

Malkar Savlaram Anant, 51, and his wife Priyanka Bhattacharya Rajesh, 31, were also ordered to pay a fine of S\$7,500. Malkar was further ordered to compensate one of the women with S\$4,878 for unpaid salaries.

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The Indian nationals were the first individuals to be convicted of labour trafficking in Singapore under the Prevention of Human Trafficking Act. The law came into force in March 2015.

Their lawyer told the court that they will be appealing against their convictions and sentences.

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The couple kept their victims on a tight leash through a combination of surveillance, confinement, a climate of fear, financial bondage and by confiscating their passports. One of the victims was also made to prostitute herself.

The victims were not paid their monthly salary of 60,000 Bangladeshi taka (about S\$980) until after police conducted a raid at the women's lodging on Kitchener Road in Little India. They were also stripped of whatever cash they had brought with them from Bangladesh.



Manan, also known as Jimmy or Dada, was the sole managing operator of Kikk, a Hindi entertainment club in Boat Quay. He was also responsible for the recruitment of performing artistes at Kickk, another Hindi club on Circular Road nearby.

He was found guilty of five charges, including three under the Prevention of Human Trafficking Act — one for each woman he allegedly harboured by means of abuse of power, for the purpose of exploitation or servitude, between Dec 23, 2015 and June 1, 2016.

Priyanka, also known as “Priya” or “Didi”, was convicted of five similar charges, and one more charge for procuring one of the victims for the purposes of prostitution here.

‘EXERCISED TOTAL CONTROL’

District Judge Shaifuddin Saruwan told the couple that they played “integral roles in the vice ring” and exercised total control over the victims.

“They did not have freedom of movement here. The harsh financial penalty they had to pay to extricate themselves from their contracts meant that they were isolated and vulnerable,” he said.

The women had very little education and were asked to sign employment contracts — that were drafted in English and not explained to them — which obliged them to pay an exorbitant financial penalty if they chose to terminate the contracts.

In particular, the contract stated that the victims would have to pay a two-way airfare and one month’s salary to the company if they were to resign within three-and-a-half months.

District Judge Shaifuddin added that such human trafficking offences are hard to detect because they usually “operate under the protective cloak of a legitimate business” — a nightclub in this case.

In their sentencing submissions to the court, Deputy Public Prosecutors (DPPs) James Chew and Rimplejit Kaur called it a “serious case of human trafficking”, calling out the couple for exploiting vulnerable victims from poor socioeconomic backgrounds.

“They were first-time workers here and unfamiliar with everything... They came here on the promise of work and income. They were then isolated, their personal autonomy severely restricted, and various manipulative methods were used to maintain control and perpetuate a sense of being trapped,” DPP Chew said.

Not only did the couple receive “significant financial gain”, the prosecutor added, but they have showed “no indication of any remorse”.

The couple’s lawyer, Mr K Jayakumar Naidu, alleged in mitigation that one of the victims — who testified that she was cajoled into having sex with the club’s customers — had received all of her salary in advance.

DPP Chew called the claim, which did not surface anytime during the trial, “ridiculous”.

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Over the course of the trial, the court heard that the victims — whose names and ages were removed from court documents due to a court order — worked between 10pm and 5am daily with no days off.

They would leave their place of stay at around 9pm in a minibus that was provided by the clubs to take them to work and home from work — always accompanied by “deejays”.

The prosecutors said that the women’s main door at their place of lodging was always locked and they were not given keys to the door. Their personal mobile phones and passports were confiscated.



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Both Malkar and Priyanka subjected the women to verbal abuse, as they had threatened to blacklist them and reduce their salaries for not collecting enough tips from customers.

Another victim testified that while she was hesitant to offer any kind of sexual services, she relented with a male customer between February and March 2016, who gave her S\$400 after sex and another S\$2,000 in tips at club Kanggan.

She then offered sexual services to two other customers at the club in May 2016.

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