

The Matter with Rose

(as read out by Mani Shankar Aiyar at the launch of *The Book of Answers* in Delhi in July 5))

The doctor of venereal diseases was a morose fellow by the name of Dimtimkar, which he must have regretted almost more than the vitiligo that bleached his lips and half his face. He had the fatalistic look of a person who knew that no matter what he did, his clients were doomed. When his patients revealed that they were insolvent, usually just after he had written out their prescriptions, he would sigh and treat them anyway. The bright orange dot on his forehead proclaimed that as a card-carrying Hindu he believed that through penance in this life he would earn his just rewards in the next. Rose tells me that for this reason many thought of him as kind hearted. He was sought out by a steady stream of Nepali prostitutes who were continually ill but could pay him nothing. A dozen or so of them sat sniffing on the bench along the wall, some smoking, some carrying listless infants.

His clinic was a municipal unit that could just as easily have been a garage or a provisions store. It stood without fuss along one of the sceptical alleys of Kamathipura, Mumbai's red-light district, aswarm with the city's twilight people drifting in and out of brief relationships. Men looking for a few parenthetical minutes in the arms of some woman who had lost everything as a child; auto-rickshaw drivers with kerchiefs under their collars, chewing paan and scanning passing faces for a customer who needs more than a ride home; daytime children of evening mothers who only stirred to life around sunset; and ramshackle clinics such as Dimtimkar's where nothing can remain secret for long. Climb three steps and you entered a waiting room about fifteen feet square permeated by a bouquet equal parts urine, Dettol and stale jasmine. A lurid green curtain divided the remaining space into two functional areas, a doctor's cubicle no larger than two phone booths, and an examination room. The latter was a barely confidential enclosure guarded by a plastic shower curtain. A wall-mounted fan destroyed privacy every few seconds with a blast of air that lifted the partition up like Marilyn Monroe's white pleated skirt. Within, Dimtimkar would be visible peering heroically at someone's privates while his assistant shone a torch. All case histories were fully audible to the waiting indisposed. Dimtimkar liked to remind his clients that they could expect no better for free.