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by Trevor Agnew

### **Red-light insight**

Television current affairs reports from overseas follow a depressingly similar pattern. They usually respond to a crisis or issue. A correspondent - often not local - reports on the situation, sometimes interviewing English-speaking locals. Time constraints prevent in-depth analysis, there will be no follow-up, and you can almost guarantee you won't hear the views of ordinary people. Certainly, you will never have time to get inside people's lives and hear their fears and aspirations.

What, never? Well, hardly ever. I've had the privilege of previewing the remarkable *Calcutta Hilton*, which will be screening tonight. The timing is outrageous (Two, 11.20pm), but staying up or recording it to view later will be well rewarded.

A documentary about prostitution in Calcutta would suggest a once-over-briefly treatment, but Christchurch's John Sinclair (producer-director of *Calcutta Hilton*) and Evie Ashton (presenter) have created something much more impressive. Their access to the heart of Sonagachi, the red-light district of Calcutta, came through the remarkable kiwi pair, Annie and Kerry Hilton, who have lived in Calcutta for six years.

Determined to break the cycle of poverty that has condemned so many young women to prostitution, the Hiltons hit on the idea of setting up a workshop making items from local materials for export. (Watch the documentary and find out what the items are.) They pay good wages by local standards, they have succeeded in building up a market and the result is that some of the women have been saved from a hideous life.

The Hiltons are an amazing couple and it would have been easy to have centred the entire documentary on them. Instead, John Sinclair did something even more interesting. He and Evie Ashton (helped by the Hiltons) established a rapport with the workers that enabled them to assemble a fascinating series of interviews.

One woman had been married at nine, but was later disposed of by her husband's family when she was unable to produce children. Another fell prey to alcoholism.

Most remarkable was Mina, a village girl from Bangladesh, who was tricked into going to Calcutta to work as a maid, then forced into the sex trade. Now in her 40s she revealed her ambition was to return home to visit her mother. That, of course, involved getting a passport and the horrors of India's officialdom were shown as an inspector checking her background insisted on examining the film-makers' passports and visas as well.

The tension was awful and one of the most powerful moments in *Calcutta Hilton* comes when Mina makes her way back to Bangladesh. (Watch the documentary to see what happens, you won't regret it.)

Reporters usually remain neutral about their subject, but Ashton was visibly affected by her experience. "I hate this place more and more," she said of Sonagachi, as the camera showed the unfortunate women lined up shoulder to shoulder like a cattle market, while rows of men strolled past. Twenty thousand customers are estimated to visit each night. The scenes of daily life in these streets and alleys were just horrifying. The contrast with the cheerful life in the workshop was a delight.

*Calcutta Hilton* should be on the shortlist when awards for documentaries are given out. The person who chose the screening time should be on a hit list.