



Edited by

ROHINI SAHNI
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HEMANT APTE

PROSTITUTION AND BEYOND

AN ANALYSIS OF SEX WORK IN INDIA



Prostitution and Beyond

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*An Analysis of Sex Work
in India*

Edited by

Rohini Sahni
V. Kalyan Shankar
Hemant Apte

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Sugiya

Your lips are
Like a parrot's
One said

Sugiya giggled and burst out laughing
When you laugh,
You look so nice, Sugiya!
Seeing her sparkling teeth
Was like lightning in clouds
The second one said.

The third one said:
You sing very well
Just like the koel
And what to say for your dancing.
When you dance
The whole earth gets up and dances.

The fourth one read poetry in praise of her eyes.
Your great big eyes
Are so beautiful, Sugiya.
Just like a doe's
Sit here next to me
And gaze at me.

The fifth one who was very close to her
And quiet
Secretly whispered in her ear—
Will you be my girl, Sugiya?
I'll make you a golden chain.

She heard and became very sad, Sugiya
Turned silent, still
Forgot laughing singing and dancing.

(continued)

From morning to evening
The whole day, murderous work, Sugiya
Often thought

Here why can every fifth man
Only speak in the language of my body,
How I wish
Someone would say
You're such a hard worker, Sugiya
And so innocent and honest.
If only someone would say that!

A poem by Nirmala Putul—Translated from Hindi by Arlene Zide,
Pramod Kumar Tiwari and the poet

Reprinted from 'Sex Determination', The Little Magazine, Vol. VII: 1&2,
2007 page 103

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The contributors, nearly all of them, have been smart enough to ignore our constant pleas for early submissions. When they did submit, one could feel the hardwork that had gone into their research. All of them have been wonderful to work with. Some of them are friends. But there have been so many of them who have responded to our requests to contribute to the volume, in very short notice at times, and some whom we are yet to meet in person. The contributions are not just in terms of the papers that they wrote, or the suggestions they made, but in giving shape to the book in exactly the same manner as we had envisaged it to be.

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INTRODUCTION

Take a look at the sketch on the left. Would you think of it as conforming to a book on prostitution? On showing this sketch to some friends, their immediate reaction was 'Really? But she is not a prostitute. Why, she is even reading a book!'

The woman in the sketch does not *look* like a prostitute. Is the disagreement to do with the seemingly 'out of sort' power structures, where the woman is clad in her entirety, as if at the expense of the man? Or is it more of a statement on her social, economic or educational backgrounds, which are more conspicuous than her sexual indulgence? Is that why she 'cannot' be a prostitute?

The artist's depiction of private spaces, and the display of intimacy shared by the man and the woman, do they necessarily mean an authorized relationship? What makes us cringe from extending this privacy and display of intimacy to a prostitute?

Even if we consider a sketch in nude, the identity of the woman is something that cannot be ascertained. There is nothing in it to suggest that she is a prostitute, but there is nothing to suggest otherwise. Yet, in most cases, one would argue fervently of how she is a 'normal' woman, far from being a prostitute. This denial of space even within the spheres of sexuality is perhaps the most poignant of ironies, as if sexuality by itself is a mainstream attribute. For someone who derives her livelihood through the exhibition of her sexuality, this is denying the very reason of her existence. But her denigration has only begun.

In the sanctification of marriage, and the binary of the chaste and the fallen; in the sanctification of working spaces and trivialization of her work as an indispensable evil; in the demarcation of living spaces and the lewd references to the red light area; across all of these contrasts, we consistently find her existence as a woman becoming secondary to her profession. This is where her denigration is complete.

For many, the impressions of a sex worker are almost chimerical, derived largely from her visual imagery in the media; chastised as much by self as by the society, her portrayal is a sheer mockery of reality. For someone who works in the most ruthless of circumstances, and faces the most dreadful of professional hazards (particularly in the context of HIV), nothing could be farther from truth. For anyone who has had a glimpse of prostitution beyond

this veneer of visual imagery, the subject ends up evoking more questions than answers.

The existence of a sex worker could be trivialized or muffled in the prevalence of images over reality. Her character could be entertainment material for the society at large. But her connections with the society are for real, going much beyond the physicality of her relationships with the clients. What of the economics of remittances that she creates and sustains as long as she can earn? What of the artist in her who preserved a wealth of music and dance in the past? Do these virtues have to be secondary to her stigma as a breeding ground for immorality? Is her association with society to be viewed merely as a high-risk group in the transmission of AIDS? What are the underlying value systems at work that highlight only the negative aspects, while not acknowledging the possibility of anything positive about her?

Across all of this discussion on imagery, it is the undercurrent of attitudes towards sex workers that makes its presence felt. The imagery of sex work could mould attitudes, and attitudes—in turn—could manifest in the imagery, reinforcing each other. The culminating point however, is of marginalization, and a strongly conditioned negativity of responses to her needs. Attitudes that demean her work and character go on further to marginalize her at every level of existence. Otherwise, how does one explain the sheer neglect in sanitizing a street in the red light area? Or the callousness of public hospitals in treating her? Or the treatment meted out to her children in schools by teachers and fellow students alike?

At this juncture, we come to an important point of introspection. Whose responsibility is it to voice the concerns of a sex worker? Is it the prerogative of the NGOs dealing with sex workers at the grass roots level? Or is it a question of the women's movements recognizing her needs as fellow women and voicing them? Social agencies like the NGOs or women's groups, themselves, may not be independent of the social conditioning of negativity that we have discussed earlier. Further, they may also limit themselves to working in select issues pertaining to health, or child care, or legal counsel.

At one level, the sex workers themselves need to internalize this responsibility, by mobilizing themselves. But mobilization of sex workers has its own set of difficulties. Firstly, sex workers are not a homogeneous community. Consequently, they may exhibit an enormous diversity of conditioning. The opinion of a brothel-based sex worker about herself may be different from that of a *Devadasi*, who in turn would be different from a street-walker. Secondly, even if we consider a presumably homogeneous category of brothel-based sex workers, there could be diversity on the parameters of ethnic or regional backgrounds, marital status and age, among others. At a more fundamental

level, there is the problem of a lot of sex workers being migrants, without any local support structures.

In this context, the role of social scientists acquires all the more relevance. Firstly, they have the task of considering the breadth of issues pertaining to sex workers in their entirety without losing sight of specific ground-level problems. Going further, they not only have to steer clear of attitudes, but also create a measure of sensitivity towards the problems of sex workers.

Existing literature on sex work in India though voluminous, could be broadly classified as a fragmented documentation. On one hand, we have ethnographic studies of localized, practical realities in contemporary sex work in different regions of the country. It is the natural outcome of grass roots activities and interventions pursued by social scientists and welfare organizations working directly with the sex workers. On the other hand, there exists academic literature that explores sex work from a historical perspective, dealing with its myriad socio-cultural forms across regions; analyzing the ancient, medieval, colonial and post-colonial transformations in the institution of sex work. Further, there also exist theoretical frameworks that contextually analyze sex work in the mainstream discourse on femininity.

This volume attempts to bridge these diverse approaches and bring about a coherence of issues that are pertinently entwined to sex work, but have been dealt with at different platforms of research. Through this, the volume endeavours to surface the inherent inter-relations that together form the complexity of sex work in India.

The topics covered in this book are not all-encompassing; but there is a definite attempt at including perspectives as diverse and representative as possible. They range from theoretical discourses on sex work and femininity, to the diversity of sex work practices in contemporary India. The book includes the social, cultural and economic aspects of sex work, according equal weight to all these issues influencing sex work in India today. By collectively presenting these researches, the volume attempts to bring out the inter-connectivity of issues, all of which have a distinct bearing on each other.

The volume opens with a section devoted to discussing various theoretical positions on sex work, and the way they have developed independent voices in the Indian context. An understanding of these positions at the outset is necessary to appreciate the way feminist analysis on prostitution in India has evolved. They give rise to pertinent questions like why didn't the women's movements in India consider sex work or sex workers as an integral aspect of the women's movements. Why are sex workers' movements limited and isolated to sex workers only? Is prostitution perhaps too alien to mainstream and particularly middle-class sexual experiences, which is the basis for the mainstream movement? If the sex workers' movement is to have a voice,

where is it to be placed in the context of feminist discourse? Even within sex workers' movements, and the organizations involved with them, there are contrasting views and ideologies. Is this internal rift of opinions further limiting the internal interaction across the sex workers organizations, not to mention its interaction with mainstream movements? This section attempts to explore these issues, which are crucial in determining the future course of women's movements, as well as sex workers' movements.

Geetanjali Gangoli comprehensively overviews the journey of mainstream feminist movements in India and their evolving positions of immorality, hurt and choice in viewing sex workers. This paper is supplemented by the proceedings of a live debate comprising of a panel of women activists. Together, they reveal an interesting intersection of opinions and responses on a gamut of issues related to women's movements and their attitudes towards sex worker's concerns. Swati Ghosh presents a theoretical reading of the sex workers' manifesto from a critical feminist perspective, analyzing the purport of sex as work, the implications and limitations of the text. To conclude, Anagha Tambe foregrounds the importance of the caste-based voice; a historically evolving, indigenous position in the mobilization of sex workers, and places it in the context of the discourse on sex work in India today.

The use of the term 'sex work' is a linguistic homogenization, that does not do justice to the individuality of different practices of prostitution that have come to survive in India today. Each of these forms has had its own journey different from the other, evolved differently across time, and their transformations deserve to be unravelled separately. On the one hand, we have historical forms of prostitution, with their cultural vestiges, and on the other, new spaces and avenues of sex work establish themselves in response to the processes of urbanization. The second section puts forth a spectrum of these diverse forms co-existing with each other. The section is not about trying to align theoretical positions with the actual practices. Instead, it opens the field for introspection of whether any theoretical position can truly come to reflect the amazing diversity of sex work in India today.

The second section is initiated with a historical form, the *Devadasis* and the institution of ritualized prostitution, where Rekha Pande explores the journey of *Jogins* in Andhra Pradesh through case studies. This is followed with another distinct historical practice, where R.C. Swarankar discusses the sexual behaviour in the community based sex work of the *Nat* women in Rajasthan. Not limiting the space of sex work to women alone, this section includes an overview of Male Sex Work (MSW), as analyzed by Bindumadhav Khire. Further as a representation of the contrast in urban sex work, the section includes two papers: Ambuja Kowlgi and Vijay Kumar Hugar presenting an ethnographic account of sex work in Dharwad, followed

by the more sophisticated form of call girls, based on a research report of Ishita Majumdar and Sudipta Panja for the Boruka Public Welfare Trust. Juxtaposed with each other, both the urban forms are non-brothel based and surreptitious in nature. But they still cannot be equated by any measure when we consider the women practicing them—their social backgrounds, nature of their clientele and the vast extremes of monetary realization associated with them.

The third section of the volume could be categorized as a congregation of societal interactions and responses to the existing and emerging realities of sex work. It could be critically argued that the emergence of both the theoretical positions as well as the multitude of practices is part of this societal interaction. But this section has a larger responsibility of separating the finer strands of this interaction. Some of the interactions could be monetary, where there is the bi-directional exchange of money from the society to the sex worker, and then back to the mainstream in the form of remittances. The interactions could be further classified in terms of their attitudinal manifestations and the stigmatization of the profession. Going further, the interactions could be regulatory, attempting to control the institution of sex work through the legal framework or the governance of health.

The section commences with our paper exploring the complex interactions of markets, histories and prostitution, and the underlying transformations in the economics of the profession. Meena Seshu, based on her grass-roots experiences, gives a voice to the realities of sex work; as part of which she discusses the impact of stigmatization on sex workers, its violence and its manifestation through marginalizing societal attitudes. The section is further explored through the regulatory framework of law and public health.

Manoj Wad and Sharayu Jadhav put forth the existing legal framework concerning prostitution. The ambiguities of the legal text, its lacunae, its interpretation at the grass-roots level, and the diversity of judgements is illustrated through short articles, case studies and interviews; Zara Kaushik, Harshad Barde, Puja Yadav and Asim Sarode contribute this supplementary text.

In the sub-section on health and rights, Vikrant Sahasrabuddhe and Sanjay Mehendale review the biological and socio-demographic factors that predispose female sex workers (FSW) to the risk of HIV/AIDS. This paper is complemented by Meena Shivdas who relates the story of SANGRAM and VAMP and their experiences of mobilizing sex workers to combat AIDS and protect themselves. The predominance of AIDS tends to overshadow general health problems, giving an impression that AIDS alone is a health hazard to a sex worker. The interview with Dr Nitin Bora is to counter this narrowing of the health perspective, where he sheds light on the regular health concerns of a sex worker.

The third section with its discussions on the interaction between the mainstream and the fringes of sex workers, might give the impression of the sex workers being at the receiving end in their exchange with society. The institution of prostitution pays back in kind through its vast cultural exchanges with the society. This is reflected in language and literature, and their depiction of prostitutes. This is evident in their contribution to the creation of characters in cinema and theatre, reflecting on the changing perspectives of values, morality and the concept of femininity.

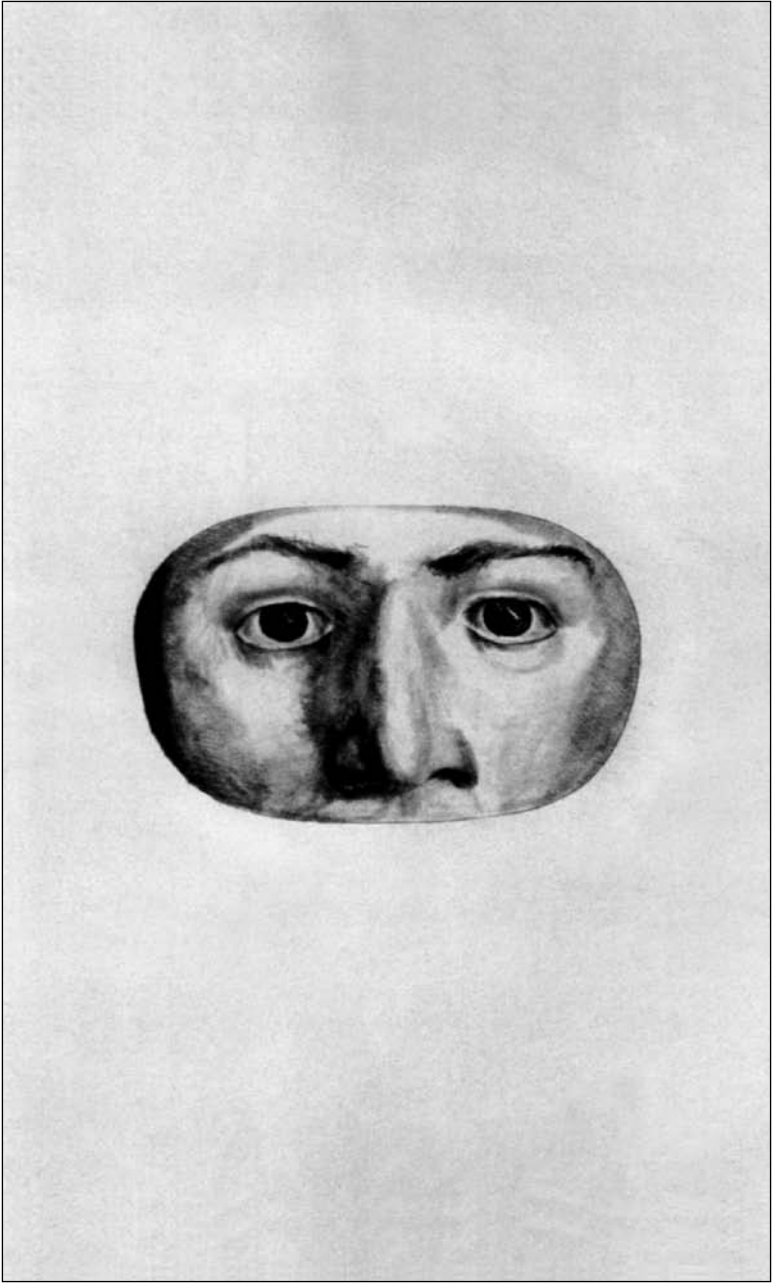
The concluding section is devoted to discussing the cultural impacts of prostitution in language, cinema, theatre and the media. Gayatri Chatterjee, in her paper on the narration-representation of the *Veshya* (prostitute), *Ganika* and the *Tawaif* (courtesan) in Indian languages, literature and cinema, looks at the status of prostitutes, and explores the construction of these cultural manifestations. Going further, she questions the construction of the histories of these characters, bringing in a fresh perspective to the histories of working women. Hemant Apte and Rohini Sahni discuss how the nuances of a language reflect the attitude of a society towards prostitutes and women at large. Lata Singh's contribution on theatre and femininity explores the issue of the middle class quest for respectability, reflecting in the attitudes towards female performers in the colonial period, and their stigmatization as 'prostitutes'. Svati Shah in her paper examines the ways in which the iconicity of prostitution in the city of Mumbai is inflected by narratives of danger and moral decline through public health and journalistic representations of one of the city's longest-standing red light areas, Kamathipura.

At a broader level, this volume attempts to mitigate the negativity, which has come to be associated indelibly with any mention of sex work. This is reflected through the construction of the sections, the choice of papers, the inclusion of ethnographic studies, group discussions, interviews and commentaries. Taking it further, is the use of sketches, which are a distinct break from the stereotypical images associated with sex work, like explicit visuals of brothels, impoverished women waiting at the windows, congested spaces, to mention a few. These images are undoubtedly real, but the string of reality does not end here. In the attempt to bring out ground realities in all their nakedness, the stereotypical images only end up diverting the attention from the larger, equally real issues of sex work. The choice of sketches for this book, by Sudhir Patwardhan, have been chosen not for beautifying the reality, but instead, to counter the stereotypical. They are a conscious attempt directed at simply viewing reality for reality's sake, and bringing out the woman in every sex worker.

Rohini Sahni and V. Kalyan Shankar

I
**Through the Looking
Glass**
**Sex work, feminism and
theoretical debates**

Edited by
Rohini Sahn and
V. Kalyan Shankar



1

Immorality, hurt or choice

*Indian feminists and prostitution*¹

GEETANJALI GANGOLI

Why, in the first place, is it so difficult to talk about sexuality and why is it so necessary to do it all the same.... In India, the need to discuss sexuality seems to emerge much more as a tail piece to the discussion of fertility and fertility control (Dietrich 1992).

The issue of prostitution brings to the fore many of the contradictions in feminist politics, and the ambivalence in dealing with issues of sexuality, reflected both in Indian (Gangoli 1998) and Western feminist politics (McElroy 1999).² This is not a complete or comprehensive literature survey. My purpose is to point to some trends within feminist analysis on prostitution in India. I understand feminists to include sex workers' unions that play a vital part of the debate, and NGO activists who share a critique of patriarchy and women's oppression; however it is important to point out that 'mainstream' feminisms do not always see women in prostitution as being feminist (Gandhi and Shah 1989).³

Indian feminist movements have raised issues of class and caste primarily in the context of violence against women. Class and caste differentials have been acknowledged in the context of emphasizing the solidarity and 'shared' experience—of gender-based violence—of all women (FAOW 1989). Prostitute-rights groups in India have implicitly questioned the right of 'mainstream' feminism to speak on their behalf. Organizations like *Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee* (literally the Committee of Women for Equality; henceforth DMSC) and *Veshya AIDS Mukabla Parishad, Sangli* (literally the Committee of Prostitutes to Combat AIDS; also called VAMPS)

in India aim to emphasize on, and thus recast the identity of women in prostitution from their own perceptions and experiences. Following Henrietta Moore, identity is ‘both constructed and lived’ (Moore 1994: 48). Resistance and complicity are present in varying measures in these constructions.

There are, essentially, at least three ways in which Indian feminists have addressed the issue of prostitution—silence, as hurt and violence, and as potential choice and liberation. I suggest that all these perspectives are limited, in that they do not necessarily take in the wide range of experiences that women in prostitution encounter. And in different ways, they may well feed into mainstream patriarchal views on prostitution.

The first—and in part, the second approach—analyzes the prostitute and the ‘prostitute body’ without reference to their experience. Hence as Sharon Bell suggests, within these analyses: ‘There is no space for the prostitute herself, particularly if her speech may contradict the feminist construction of her body (Bell 1994: 73–74).’ Within prostitutes’ speech, however, there can be a dichotomy. On the one hand are those sex workers and activists who draw on the experiences of hurt, anguish, violence and coercion that form a part of their lives. These would include, in the Indian context, representatives of organizations like the Calcutta-based Sanlaap and Bombay-based Prerana. On the other hand, prostitute rights groups, such as the VAMPS and DMSC suggest that prostitution should be seen as work. For these groups, it is important to retrieve the moments of strength and pleasure that are important in the lives of prostitutes. In this section I first look at feminist silence around the issue of prostitution in the 1980s. The second part analyzes the rhetoric of hurt and oppression that has influenced feminist organizations and NGOs in their perspective on prostitution. Finally, I look at prostitute-rights’ organizations that seek to create an alternative to these analyses.

Silence and Embarrassment?

Within the Indian Women’s Movements, (IWM) the focus on legal rights and violence against women has contributed to a view of sexuality that is narrow, and somewhat rigid. In the 1980s, the IWM initiated campaigns to amend laws on violence against women on issues like: sexual assault, sexual harassment, domestic violence and battering, dowry-related violence, female infanticide, sex-determination and pornography. Sexuality became an adjunct to discussions on rape, adultery or violence, but is rarely referred to as the flowering of a woman’s identity. Debates around rape in the 1980s, based on the experiences of non-middle-class women were integrated and seen as

bringing out and enlarging opposition between the sexes nakedly, unlike other forms of gender-based oppression, such as lower wages for working-class women. Rape, and the fear of rape was constructed as an instrument for terrorizing and paralyzing all women (Gothoskar 1980). This understanding of universal female solidarity negated differences between women.

Further, feminists have tended to relegate some issues to the unexamined, leading to a meaningful silence on some aspects. These include examining and creating feminist understandings of morality, monogamy and socially coercive heterosexuality. Lesbian-rights collectives in India have argued that the silence of Indian feminists on the area of lesbianism is a sign of the homophobia of the movement (Menon 1995: 100), a label taken seriously by more sensitive feminists. One can sense the nascent, hesitant questioning of ‘unconsciously’ held ideas in the following statement by Bombay based Forum Against Oppression of Women:

It is true that sexuality has a very important place in our lives and so far, we have been taught to only think of heterosexual, preferably monogamous relationships.... Lesbian relationships are perceived by some as an alternative to the destructive violence and power play in heterosexual relationships (FAOW 1989: 14).

The quote above can be seen in the context of prostitution as much as lesbianism. Through a reluctance to debate non-marital sexual relations, the IWM has been complicit in idealizing relationships between heterosexual, monogamous couples, within a marriage or a long-term relationship. Marriage—an area which many middle-class feminists have entered into—was thus seen as potentially open to feminist change. Prostitution was, perhaps, so alien to the experiences of middle-class feminists that it was not addressed in such terms at all.

Activists in the women’s movement have sometimes accepted marital monogamy as not only acceptable, but as desirable. As the following quote from an activist in India brings out, the opposition to legalization of prostitution is based simultaneously on a rejection of non-monogamy as a possibility—both for men and for women—and a celebration of marriage as the only route for sexual satisfaction:

From a feminist point of view, the proposal to legalize prostitution is untenable—why should it be assumed that men have certain urges which need an outlet urgently.... The socialization route is the route to take, so that young men are socialized to monogamy and young women are socialized to view sex as a beautiful, natural activity (so that they do not refuse sex to husbands after 2 or 3 children) not the legalization route (Sanlaap 1998: 53–54).

The view expressed is problematic on two counts—one, that it legitimizes patriarchal notions of the family and monogamy by using quasi-feminist arguments. Second, it appropriates feminism, speaking on behalf of all feminists. It also restricts sexuality to marital sexuality, allowing no space for women and men outside it to articulate their understanding of sexuality.

Thus, in the 1980s, when the IWM emerged as an important political force, the issue of prostitution remained in the background. Unlike other laws relating to women passed in the 1980s, the Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls (Prevention) Act, 1986 was not created in response to the demands raised by a sustained campaign for legal reforms. Where feminists have raised the issue of prostitution is in the form of a partial critique of anti-prostitution laws and attitudes as far as they impacted non-prostituted women. Agnes bases her analysis of anti-prostitution laws being used to penalize ‘all women’ by looking at the case of the harassment of an activist in a local railway station by the police. The activist was threatened with imprisonment for soliciting while buying cigarettes in a stall on the station at 2:30 a.m. Interestingly, while registering a complaint with the police, she did not reveal that she was buying cigarettes, seen as inappropriate behaviour for women in India, while the police accosted her. The woman’s silence and failure to ‘admit’ this allowed the police to publicize and gain mileage out of it. (Agnes 1995: 127–35)

The case cited above brings out some of the ambivalence regarding issues of sexuality as far as Indian feminists are concerned. The case involved notions of chastity—is a woman out at night buying cigarettes a whore? If not, what does it reveal about patriarchal perceptions of female sexuality, and socially defined parameters of public behaviour for women. If she is, indeed, a whore, does that entitle the police—or any male member of the public to harass her? It also raised questions of attitudes to public space. In the mainstream male discourse, only men and whores can access the public space especially at times and places designated as ‘unsafe’. But the right of a whore to access public space is contingent on her being ‘treated as a whore’, i.e. violently and disrespectfully. Feminists have not explicitly questioned this duality.

Some women’s-movement activists have at times taken stands that suggest an internalization of patriarchal notions of morality. In two separate cases of rape, in which members of an organized left party were implicated, leaders of the party questioned the character of the women who were raped. One case (1990) involved the rape of an activist from Kashtakari Sanghatana, an organization working with tribals in Dahanu, a suburb of Bombay by activists from the Kisan Sabha, a rival political organization. The Kisan Sabha

is affiliated to the Communist Party of India (Marxist) (CPI[M]). Bombay-based feminists were anguished to find that women members of the CPI(M), with whom they had participated in several joint-campaigns did not condemn the rape. On the contrary, they denied that the rape had taken place. One leader questioned the 'character' of the activist, implying further that the police records and the FIR had been manipulated. The women's wing of the CPI(M) refused to conduct an independent inquiry, preferring to join in a show of strength with the members of their parties (FAOW 1989).⁴

In Birati, West Bengal, in the same year, three Bangladeshi refugee women were raped. The state government, ruled by the CPI(M), approached the issue as a law and order problem. A senior leader of the party, Shamali Gupta, active in women's issues, in a statement, maligned the women. The statement, carried out by the party journal, *People's Democracy* reads as follows:

A group of anti-socials attacked and raped Sabitri Das, Reba Sen and Shanti Sen, the three women who stayed in the unauthorized hutments along the railway tracks.... Although so many women of that area ... were involved in foul professions and such honeymoons of these women with the anti-socials were an open secret, that day's events appeared to be a sequel to the rivalry between these anti-socials (Sarkar 1991: 218).

That a political party adhering to a communist ideology, one that had taken principled and often progressive stands in the Lok Sabha debates on the rape law amendment, and, more generally, on violence against women (Gangoli 2000) should defend its members accused of raping 'sexually promiscuous women' demonstrates the discomfort that women's movement activists in left parties have felt on some aspects of women's emancipation. As a commentator points out, crimes against women cannot be defended, whether the responsibility of the left, or the right or else, we will be left debating 'reactionary' rapes and 'progressive' rapes (Pati 1991).

The campaigns of the IWM around the issue of pornography reveals a parallel unresolved understanding of sexuality. Women's groups in the 1980s had mainly agitated against films and advertisements that show women in the nude, or in sexually suggestive poses. The campaign involved the defacing of 'obscene' posters, a strategy started by the Chaatra Yuva Sangharsh Vahini, Patna in 1979. Their efforts were met with ridicule and hostility. Much worse, they were co-opted by rightist forces. In Patna, activists complained of men laughing and passing abusive comments as women climbed on ladders to tarnish posters. In Bombay, women from FAOW retreated in horror when they found that they had been pre-empted by members of the Bajrang Dal, who had blackened out film posters.⁵ Thus, a certain feminist understanding

of sexual acceptability corresponded with conservative and right wing notions. Agnes points out that the campaign 'reinforced the notion that anything sexual is obscene, and that respect for women is equivalent to treating them as asexual' (Agnes 1995: 137–38).

One possible result of the streak of sexual prudery and reserve, and the failure of feminists to take up prostitution frontally, is that human rights violations suffered by women have often been ignored by Indian feminists. For instance, a raid by the police in Mumbai in 1996 to 'rescue' women in prostitution violated existing legal provisions. Under the law, raids by the police are legal only if a child is being held in a brothel, but adult women were detained during the raids too. Many were forcibly repatriated to their cities or countries of origin. However, there was no feminist systematic protest against these violations. A prostitute expressed the opinion that had such a gross violation of rights taken place on any other group of women or workers, women's organizations and unions would have protested much more vigorously.⁶

One could further speculate that the focus of the women's movement is essentially on 'innocent victims'. In the next section, we see how some feminists in India and the West have tried to re-cast prostitutes into the mould of victims.

Hurt and Oppression

Radical feminism draws a connection between pornography and prostitution. According to this perspective, pornography is created through force and coercion in two ways: by coercing women to engage in pornographic representations and by creating a pornographic spectacle is one where the classic male fantasy, of men seen as abusing women and women seen as enjoying the abuse. Further it is argued that there is a close connection between pornography and prostitution:

Paying the woman to appear to resist and then surrender does not make the sex consensual; it makes pornography an arm of prostitution. The sex is not chosen for the sex. Money is the medium of force and provides the cover of consent. (MacKinnon 1993: 28)

In this analysis, all pornography—in its actual and representational sense—is oppressive, coercive and anti-women—as is prostitution. All nuances within pornography and prostitution are flattened, degrees of agency that women may experience are negated. Within this understanding, women

in prostitution who state that they have entered prostitution out of their own will, or that they do not want to leave it are seen to be suffering from false consciousness. Or prostitutes, who consider themselves liberated, are being duped by patriarchal values, hence they are unable to recognize their oppression. (MacKinnon 1993)⁷

Other feminists have argued that not only is there violence within prostitution, but that prostitution itself constitutes violence against women and has deep health consequences for women in the context of health effects of sex work (Raymond 1998).

In India, much of the focus on prostitution has been through the entry point of harm, coercion and victimhood, especially where activists have concentrated on child prostitution. A statement brought out by Sanlaap, a Calcutta based NGO, following a study of child prostitution in Calcutta in 1989 stated that the condition of child prostitutes was so appalling that prostitution could not be called work under any circumstances. The statement reads:

- (a) When it starts with violence and sexual abuse how can we call it 'work'?
- (b) When power relations are unequal and exploitative how can we call it work?
- (c) When men and some women earn from selling a child's body, a human being, how can we call it work?
- (d) An action that violates human rights, how can we call it work?
- (e) If female genital mutilation has been rejected by women's groups, why wouldn't we reject rape of a girl-child, which is the basis and beginning of prostitution? How can we call this work?
- (f) Purchase and sale of girls, through threats, trickery, deceit and false promises are the ways through which girls and young women are trafficked and forced into prostitution. Do we call it work? (Sanlaap 1999)

Similarly, the National Commission for Women believes that children in prostitution have their childhood destroyed as childhood 'generally signifies easy living, easy nutrition, love, warmth, support and an overall affectionate environment' (NCW 1997).

Significant as this analysis is in documenting the rights violation of children, it blurs the distinction between violence and degradation. While violence is experiential and can be documented, degradation is a social construct. Even if one agrees with Sanlaap that prostitution is synonymous

with degradation of the most extreme form, it can still be seen as work. A lot of 'legitimate' work is violent and can be degrading. Besides, by isolating prostitution as an important if not primary site of violence, it ignores physical and sexual violence against women and girl children within the family. Early marriages are a common feature in South Asia and the mean age of marriage in India is 12.6 years (UN 1998). Not all child marriages are sexually consummated. However, the customary practice is that child marriages are consummated after the girl child attains puberty, which can take place at thirteen. Early marriages can perhaps be compared in their mental and physical effects to child prostitution, since both involve premature sexual activity causing trauma for the child.

The Sanlaap position focuses on children within prostitution and extends the analysis to adult women. Prostitution of children is certainly violation of rights as it exposes them to sexual activity when they lack the physical and mental maturity to cope with it. Like other forms of sexual activity involving children—as in incest and child marriage—the issue of consent is irrelevant. By extending this understanding to all prostitutes, Sanlaap conflates women and children and infantilizes women.

Sanlaap, however, is not unique in treating prostitutes as helpless. It has been argued that the distinction drawn between free and forced prostitution fits into the agenda of the sex industry, since it will give the industry stability and security and will make it difficult for women to 'prove' that they have been coerced into prostitution. Further, that the move by prostitute rights organizations to legalize prostitution and to see it as work, is constructed as a western influence, and is unwise, given the composition of the sex industry in India, as it would only benefit pimps (Pal 1999). It is also suggested that the consent of the woman 'procured' for prostitution should not legally be recognized as a defence for pimps or traffickers, not be accepted as a rationale for 'state-sanctioned institutionalization of prostitution as work' (CATW 1998).

These stands, too, infantilize women in prostitution; women are denied agency, and are seen as undifferentiated and permanent victims. Also, this position creates an artificial and forced distinction between the East and the West. The West is projected as immoral, a geographical entity where women enter prostitution voluntarily. In contrast, the East—represented by India—is a space where women give up their 'honour' reluctantly if at all. Within this discourse, women whose experiences do not fit into the saga of kidnapping, suffering and coercion are marginalized; and there is little analysis of how cultural contexts such as class and caste may play a role in trafficking. The analysis flattens reality and the diverse ways in which women live their lives.

Women enter sex work from a variety of castes and classes, for a range of reasons. For instance, widows from upper caste families in the states of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, are often abandoned by their natal and marital families; however not all abandoned women take up prostitution.⁸ One can suggest, that there are some who do make a clear choice in favour of prostitution over the options of destitution, begging and badly-paid informal work.

Some feminists oppose legalization on another ground. At the time of writing, there is an informal but fairly rigid system of zoning; that is, prostitution is confined mostly to 'red light' areas. Activists fear that once prostitution is legalized, they will move out to settle in different parts of the city, so that NGOs working with them will no longer have convenient access to them to work on STD-HIV prevention.⁹ Here, the debate is constructed almost in terms of 'owning' the women in prostitution, who are the recipients of NGO activism. Sex workers are treated as a homogenized whole, who need to be kept in a restricted area so that they are open to the well-meaning efforts of activists. Prostitutes' rights groups have rightly objected to such efforts to restrict their mobility.¹⁰

The feminist perspective of victimizing women in prostitution is echoed in and influences public policy. Existing laws on prostitution in India aim to 'prevent' prostitution. While debating the Illegal Traffic in Women and Girls (Prevention) Bill in 1986 in the Lok Sabha, a combination of feminist and traditionalist arguments were used. The advocacy of women's groups was a major plank. Member of Parliament, Smt Margaret Alva, who introduced the bill said:

The exploitation of women and girls for the purposes of prostitution is an obnoxious feature of crime against them ... though prostitution has persisted since time immemorial, it has all through been considered an evil that wrecks the foundations of the family and the community, as basic units of human society.... The most disturbing aspect today is the organized racketeering in the sexual abuse of innocent children and young persons in the trade.... A number of individuals, advocacy groups and women's and voluntary organizations ... have been urging upon the government to enlarge the scope of the Act. (Debates 1986)

Alva speaks with remarkable ease of prostitution as violence against women in the same breath as she considers it to be an evil against the family, romanticized as the basic unit of society. There seems a partial assimilation of feminist understanding of prostitution as violence against women. But Alva goes on to suggest that prostitution wrecks the family, ignoring some trenchant feminist critiques of the family. I would argue that this is not a

deliberate oversight. Feminist analysis that prostitution is violence—and that women in prostitution are victims—can feed in as easily into a mainstream understanding that does not accept the family as another important site of oppression.

The analysis pits women in prostitution against the family, without recognizing that they have continuing links with their families, in terms of supporting their families financially. Prostitution can be seen, not in opposition to the family, but as an inversion of patriarchal values where the natal family supports the daughter, initially as an unmarried daughter; later through dowry. The social acceptance of this arrangement ignores the role of single women in the family in supporting the family through their labour.

Even though Indian feminists have taken up the issue of violence against women in the family, they have not fundamentally challenged the marital or natal family itself as a unit. In other words, feminist intervention has aimed at empowering married women, not at abolishing or preventing marriage, even though there is recognition that marriage is a potential and real site for violence for women. I submit that this understanding can be extended usefully to prostitution; that is, it can be presumed that prostitution has elements of and scope for violence against women but women in prostitution can be empowered without abolishing prostitution. A failure to do so has only led to the co-option of feminist intervention by the state and official policy in strange and misogynist ways.

Prostitution as Choice and Identity

Some feminists in the West have argued that radical feminist analysis of prostitution as a story of unmitigated oppression and patriarchal violence is incomplete and inherently flawed. Representatives of prostitute rights groups in the West accuse anti-prostitution feminists of being condescending and patronizing, as one woman in prostitution is cited as saying, ‘...they find it necessary to interpret prostitutes’ experiences of their lives and then feed it back to the prostitutes to tell them what’s really happening’. (McElroy 1999)

Prostitute rights’ groups in India have similarly challenged feminist silence or indifference on this issue. Women in prostitution—when they organize—have used the tactics of mobilization and protest differently from feminists. To illustrate: in 1996, hundreds of sex workers in Falkland Road in Bombay organized to demand their right to vote in the 1996 elections. For most middle class feminists, the right to vote has not been an issue

for debate or mobilization. It is perhaps seen as given. In general, Indian feminists have a somewhat ambivalent position towards electoral politics, seen as murky and male dominated. In contrast, sex workers believe that 'not having the right to vote, and thus to exert leverage on local leaders, prevents sex workers from contesting police and underworld exploitation, which includes rape and extortion from political bosses' (Guha–Bhuvaneshwar 1998).¹¹ It is this understanding that led a sex worker from the Bhartiya Patita Udhara Samiti to stand for the Lok Sabha elections in 1991.¹²

Here it may be important to look at two organizations that have played an important role in organizing sex workers, i.e. DMSC and VAMPS. Groups like these, differ from NGOs that focus on rehabilitation and 'prevention' of prostitution.

DMSC emerged from the study conducted by WHO and Dr Smarajit Jana, a public health specialist in 1991, on the incidence of HIV among commercial sex workers in Calcutta. After the study was conducted, Dr Jana, who had involved women from the red light areas in Calcutta, realized that even to achieve the basic objective of preventing STDs among sex workers, there was a need to focus on women in the profession in a broader manner, and to see them as human beings with 'a range of emotional and material needs, living within a concrete and specific social, political and ideological context...' (DMSC 1997).

The effort to organize sex workers, therefore, grew from the original urge to prevent STDs among them. The DMSC has grown into a forum representing male and female sex workers and has a critique of mainstream approaches to sex work. On the issue of prostitution and work, it holds that:

We believe that like any other occupation, sex work too is an occupation and not a moral condition. If it is one of the 'oldest' professions in the world, that is because it must have continued to meet an important and consistent social demand. But the word 'prostitute' is rarely used to refer to an occupational group of women who earn their livelihood through providing sexual services; rather it is deployed as a descriptive term denoting a homogenized category, usually of women, which poses threats to public health, social stability and public order.... If and when we figure in political or developmental agenda, we are enmeshed in discursive practices and practical projects which aim to rescue, rehabilitate, improve, discipline, control or police us (DMSC 1997).

The DMSC believes that women enter prostitution for social and economic reasons—it is ultimately, a survival strategy, just as male migration and entry in other industries or marriage. Coercion could happen in all these areas, and in the third world context of poverty and deprivation, most people,

especially the poor, have few choices available to them—whether they choose marriage, domestic labour, construction work or sex work.

In addition the DMSC draws a parallel between marriage and prostitution, and at issues of choice and coercion within marriage. They suggest that most families are based not on principles of sharing and love, but on 'inequality and oppression' (DMSC 1997). Sex workers therefore see marriage in two ways. First, they recognize that married life has some benefits—such as social respectability, stability and security—that are not available to sex workers. On the other hand, they consider that sex workers have some advantages over married women. In their view, married women are sexual slaves; indebted to their husband for food and shelter.¹³

It may be tentatively put forth that stereotyping married women as oppressed and dependent may well be a way to see them as the 'other'. Since sex workers lack the social power to 'mainstream' their views, they seem to fall within the category of the 'unusual' or the 'unacceptable'. Stereotyping sex workers as sexually promiscuous and immoral, however, is totally acceptable and part of the 'common sense' of social life.

This view of sex work challenges the victim-mentality implicit within mainstream feminist perceptions. Significantly, however, the DMSC finds it necessary to reiterate that they are not inherently against the family, or men (DMSC 1997). I submit that, rather than seeing it as an 'anti-feminist' view, the failure to make an uncompromising critique of the institution of the family owes much to the high degree of emotional investment that sex workers have in the family. Also, to the failure of mainstream feminist ideology that has neglected to draw theoretical links between their critique of the family and of prostitution.

The manifesto offers a critique of the paucity of options available both to men and to women within the social structures. It, however, sees sex workers as fulfilling an important social need, that is, providing sexual services to men. While the DMSC may not hold to the view that male sexuality is uncontrollable, this view can perhaps feed in to the perception that prostitution is a 'necessary evil'. The DMSC position may serve as a rationale for prostitution, but prevents a deeper understanding of prostitution—and marriage—as feeding into patriarchy.

The view that prostitutes play an important social role is expressed by the Bombay-based Asahaya Tirskrut Nari Sangh (literally, the Organization to Rehabilitate Helpless Women). Its representative, I.H. Gilhada holds that prostitution is a necessary evil that preserves the family and prevents rape of women. Similarly, Khairati Ram Bhola, a Delhi-based social worker opines:

If prostitutes are unhealthy, they will infect our children, the young boys who go to them for gratification. All men feel hungry for sex. Prostitutes prevent women from good families from getting raped. If prostitutes were not there, women would not be able to walk on the road. Unmarried young men would attack any woman on the road. In fact in my opinion, prostitutes are next only to mothers and should be treated with respect.¹⁴

There appears to be a continuum between the point of view held by DMSC, Bhola and a certain colonial perception of prostitution in the nineteenth century that suggested that if there were no prostitutes in cantonments where a 'large numbers of young, unmarried soldiers lived, there would be an increase in 'offences such as criminal assault, rape and unnatural crime' (Ballhatchet, 1980: 23).

The following excerpt from an interview with a police inspector in Kamathipura in 1995, who echoes this sentiment:

According to me, prostitutes are social workers—if it was not for them, women from good families (sic) would not be able to walk on the streets of Bombay. Men would attack women if there were no prostitutes, as they need a vent for their lust (sic). Women from good families look down upon prostitutes, but many prostitutes play a role in preserving their marriages. Men would attack their wives and even daughters if prostitutes were not allowed to ply their trade.¹⁵

The views expressed above, buy into patriarchal notions of male uncontrolled and uncontrollable sexuality. However, when expressed by prostitute rights groups, it may be useful to see them in another light. I suggest that prostitute rights' groups like the DMSC and the BPUS 'use' the rhetoric of men's uncontrollable sexual urges to create a space for women in prostitution. Thus, a flat feminist analysis of this may not be useful. There is both resistance—to a patriarchal notion that prostitutes are socially redundant and immoral—and compliance to another patriarchal notion that men's sexual needs are paramount. From the point of view of women in prostitution, this belief can contribute to a feeling that they play an important social role. This can be of some importance to a category of women who have been marginalized socially and politically.

Radical and liberal feminists—who have so far rightfully objected to these stereotypes about men and male sexuality, might benefit from attempting to expand sexual spaces for men and for women, rather than to restrict them for men. Here I refer to efforts by feminists in India to restrict access to pornography and to perceptions that male clients, rather than women prostitutes, need to be controlled. As sex workers have pointed out, controlling

or restricting clients affects women in prostitution adversely.¹⁶ It also leads to efforts at transferring stigma from women in prostitution to male clients, rather than removing the stigma all together.

Organizations like the DMSC, play a unique role in empowering women in prostitution. Sex workers in the organization point out that the DMSC has helped them see their trade as something they need not be ashamed of.

The police is not as harsh with us now as they used to be since the committee has started working here. The mohalla boys used to beat us if we didn't pay a donation during the festivals. They used to extort money from the customers too. That has stopped too. If we unite under the DSMC, there are no limits to what we can achieve. We haven't done anything shameful or wrong. Why should people look down upon us?¹⁷

Members of the organization assert their identity as sex workers—they use the Bengali term *Jouno Kormi* (literally sex workers) not only in daily parlance, but also for official purposes. While forming the Usha Committee, a co-operative that gives credit and offers training, they registered themselves with the state government as sex workers, not as 'housewives' as advised by the officials. As with other marginalized groups such as homosexuals and blacks taking on negatively charged epitaphs, the act of stating their identity as sex workers is an articulation of their assertion to be recognized as sex workers.¹⁸

'VAMPS' makes a fundamental critique not only of the issues taken up by Indian feminists, but the manner in which they have been understood. It argues that feminist campaigns on violence against women have been focused on married women, or women within the formal structure of the family. This is borne out by an analysis of feminist activism in the 1970s and 1980s. The entry point into the issue of violence has been through the experiences of married women. A campaign in the 1980s on the issue of domestic violence concentrated on the harm done to women within marriage by their husbands and parents-in-law. In response, the state passed a law that criminalized domestic violence, defining it as mental and physical violence against married women. A wide range of women's experiences of violence within the home was not addressed, including violence against single women and children in their natal or marital home. These would include the experiences of child sexual abuse within the family and sexual and physical violence experienced by unmarried or divorced daughters or widowed daughters-in-law (Agnes 1995).

Representatives of VAMPS argue that feminists have not addressed the issue of violence against prostitutes, whether physical or sexual. They suggest

that women in prostitution have evolved strategies to deal with violence, whether in their work situation or as married women. These include the use of verbal abuse and rallying around an abused woman. It has been suggested that these strategies work because men do not expect women to fight back, or to support each other as it is unlike the way women in their families react to violence. In other words, indifference to the world of prostitution has meant a loss for feminists in terms of effective strategy.

Prostitute rights groups critique the ‘rehabilitating’ urge that drives feminists and policy makers alike. They critique the victim-status attributed to women in the profession within dominant discourse, and suggest that moralism allows a great deal of oppression to be perpetuated against women in the profession (DMSC 1997).

Representatives of prostitute rights’ groups have rightly accused feminists of homogenizing prostitutes, and not seeing them in their multiple roles as mothers, wives, daughters and lovers.

Conclusion

Prostitute rights groups are important not only in what they say but in that they articulate positions that are based on their experience. What is at stake here is the articulation of the experiences of prostitutes and the creation of identities that challenge feminist hegemonic constructions of their lives.

Critics have held that in the Indian context, prostitute rights groups—such as DMSC and VAMPS—are dependent on funding from international sources. While this may not be suspect in itself—especially given that this is a trend affecting much of mainstream feminisms—it could lead to redefining prostitutes rights through the prism of the needs or dictates of funding agencies. This acquires another dimension when one considers that international funding organizations focus on prostitution from the point of view of preventing HIV and STDs, in other words, as vectors of infection.

This is indeed partially valid. However, the dictates of international funding may affect activists only to the extent that they are allowed to. As I pointed out earlier, many women’s organizations, human rights organizations and NGOs in India are dependent on foreign funding for their day to day activities. However, they manage to raise important issues and to critique funding agencies and the state while being somewhat dependent on both. There seems no reason to believe that prostitute rights groups are any different. DMSC and VAMPS, for instance, do work on preventing and combating AIDS, but simultaneously raises fundamental questions about the

structure of the sex industry and the Indian State. Even where organizations start with the narrower agenda of AIDS prevention, there is soon recognition that women in prostitution may not respond to their interventions unless the issues important to them are tackled. Women in prostitution are not just helpless receptacles of activism. They define agendas as much as they are subjected to them.

There have been—in recent times—critiques from within the mainstream feminist movements in India that have tried to examine the issue of prostitution not as harm or coercion, but according to the multiple positions held by women in prostitution. (CFLR 1999)

A similar effort to look at the stereotypes that make up research on prostitution was made during a workshop on trafficking in South Asia organized by a Delhi-based feminist group, Jagori and Global Alliance against Traffic in Women (GAATW) in 1998. Participants of the workshop—members of feminist groups from Bangladesh, Nepal and Sri Lanka—addressed patriarchal constructions of femininity and the extent to which even feminists imbibed them. As the workshop report puts it:

One cannot construct a ‘bad woman’ without constructing a ‘good woman’. This basic construction of women in terms of binary oppositions ... excludes possibilities of grey.... Solidarity amongst women also gets split because good women and bad women are pitted against each other.... These constructions are also the basis of concepts of ‘rehabilitation’. We also need to explore our own biases within the framework and question the divide between us and them, between good women and bad women. (Bhattacharya 1998)

While the analysis in the passage quoted above may not be new—what is significant here is that the report makes a case for confronting the divide within ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women and looking at the extent to which feminists and activists themselves have internalized these concepts.

Feminists in India—and elsewhere—have had to confront challenges not only from the state, but also from women who identify themselves as working against aspects of patriarchy, but rejecting the hegemonic claims of women’s organizations. These enrich and give a deeper hue to feminist politics.

Notes

1. Reproduced with permission from Geetanjali Gangoli, ‘Immorality, Hurt or Choice: Indian Feminists and Prostitution’, *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 2007, 8(1), Routledge.

2. In the USA, there was some degree of co-operation between prostitute-rights groups and feminists in the 1970s. In 1973, COYOTE—Cast Out Your Tired Old Ethics—emerged in San Francisco from WHO—Whores, Housewives and Others. In the 1980s, the AIDS virus killed the connection between the prostitute rights groups and women's organizations. Mainstream feminists now castigated prostitution as a form of patriarchal abuse against women. The image of the liberated whore was replaced by that of the oppressed prostitute who would be rescued by feminists.
3. By mainstream feminisms, I refer to women's organizations and feminist organizations in India that have focused on issues of violence against women in the 1980s and 1990s. These include—women's wings of left-wing political parties like the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and self-defined autonomous women's organizations such as the Forum Against Oppression of Women, Bombay.
4. There were and continue to be several strands in the women's movement in India. Women activists from left parties may not call themselves feminists, but have taken stands that are feminist and have worked with self-assuredly feminist groups in the country on several campaigns.
5. Interview with Sandhya Gokhale. Member, Forum Against Oppression of Women, Bombay.
6. Interview with Salima on 24 January 1999.
7. According to MacKinnon, 1993: 149:
Women who are compromised, cajoled, pressured, tricked, blackmailed, or outright forced into sex ... often respond to the unspeakable humiliation ... by claiming their sexuality as their own. Faced with no alternative, the strategy to acquire self-respect and pride is: I chose it.
8. Based on field work in Calcutta, August 1999 and May–June 2000.
9. Interview with Shekhar Chatterjee, who worked with CINI and now works for a sponsorship programme run by Sahay in 400 villages in West Bengal on 1.09.01.
10. International Committee for Prostitutes' Rights, World Charter For Prostitutes' Rights. Amsterdam 1985. The charter states that: 'There should be no law which implies systematic zoning of prostitution. Prostitutes should have the freedom to choose their place of work and residence. It is essential that prostitutes can provide their services under the conditions that are absolutely determined by themselves and no one else.'
11. Although, women in prostitution in India (if they are Indian citizens) have a technical right to vote, in reality, their names are rarely entered in voters' lists, a concrete example of stigma and discrimination.
12. Interview with Khairati Ram Bhola, Bhartiya Patita Udhar Samiti. 29 August 1998. New Delhi.
13. Excerpts from interviews with sex workers:
'The man gets free labour in the house from his wife. He also gets dowry, and children to carry his name.'
'We can refuse to sleep with a man if we don't want to, a wife can't.'

14. Interview with Khairati Ram Bhola, President, Bhartiya Patita Udhar Samiti, 29 August 1998. Bhartiya Patita Udhar Samiti is a Delhi-based NGO that works towards legalizing prostitution.
15. Interview with Police Inspector V.G. Wagh, Nagpada Police Station on 5 November 1995.
16. Interviews with sex workers in Calcutta in September 1998.
17. Interview with Rekha Lamba, sex worker from Calcutta. interviewed on 14 July 2001.
18. For instance, blacks calling themselves 'niggers' and lesbians 'dykes' as a political assertion. There is an interesting analysis of one woman's assertion as a sex worker in Sheila Marie Thomas, *Speaking the Unspeakable: Annie Sprinkle's Prostitute Performances*. M.A thesis. Department of Theatre. University of Colorado.

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2

Women's movements in India

*Do they include female sex workers?
Proceedings of a live debate among
women activists¹*

A PANEL DISCUSSION

Why didn't the women's movement in India consider sex work or sex workers as an integral aspect of the women's movement? Why are sex workers agitations/movements limited and isolated to sex workers only? Why is the mainstream women's movements' perspective on sexuality limited to rape, reproductive health, sexual violence, battering and dowry, which are essentially marriage related assaults?

A sex worker operating from a red light area has acute problems related to human rights, police harassments, safety, sanitation, literacy, health and potable drinking water due to the congested nature of her live-in work place. Why aren't these issues taken up by mainstream movements? They are mainstream problems of all households within a geographical boundary of a city/urban area.

This discussion is centred on the above questions.

Meena Seshu

To begin with, there is an understanding that women working as sex workers are not considered as *women*. This is a reality we have faced while working with sex workers themselves. Being 'good' is a necessity to be considered (as a woman), and since sex workers are stigmatized as 'evil, deviant, debauch, worthless'; they are not considered as part of the general body of women.

This has been the major understanding of sex workers which has been derived from their dealings with the police and other key stakeholders with whom they have to deal with from the mainstream society.

Second, vis-à-vis the women's movements themselves, the response has been oscillating from sex work as sexual exploitation to sex work as occupational choice. Essentially, there is a conflation of trafficking with prostitution, which complicates the issue.

Pushpa Bhawe

The words 'sex work' or 'sex worker' are of recent origin, while women's movements go back many years. The term sex worker has been floated by the World Bank, and I do not accept the World Bank nomenclature. I would stick to the term 'women in prostitution' instead. By using the term sex work, we are rationalizing the situation where women are losing their traditional jobs and occupations, and therefore entering commercial sex work activity.

As far as women's movements are concerned, there is no natural inter-connectivity with 'women in prostitution' because in the Indian society there has always been a bifurcation of women into *pativrata* (chaste) and prostitute.

Before we discuss the issue of women's movements, considering this problem, we must look back at how this issue has been addressed in the past. In Maharashtra, in particular, Phule and Ambedkar considered this problem as a special case of human rights issues. Coming back to women's movements addressing the issues of women in prostitution, first there is a structural problem of communication. In the course of our experience of working with prostitutes, we could only speak to the madams of brothels, who would not allow us to talk to the women in the brothel.

Second, there is a problem of attitudes. Why should women's movements consider women in prostitution as part of women's movements?

Individually, women think of 'women in prostitution' as 'not good' women. This is a perception, which also exists among the police and other sections of the society including political parties. Those who work with women in prostitution frequently come across questions like: 'Why should you go to *that* area?' This, again, is part of an attitude problem. If the mainstream women's movements would talk of them, they would be considered as 'agencies' and not as 'actors' themselves in the movement.

Kiran Moghe

I would agree with Pushpatai (referring to Pushpa Bhawe) in not using the term sex workers. 'Women in prostitution' is the term that our party (CPM)

also approves. Here I would like to state our position where we maintain that 'women in prostitution' are exploited, that they should be provided with alternative employment opportunities and rehabilitated. Our women's wing has been taking up several issues involving 'women in prostitution'.

As far as the women's movements are concerned, when they started organizing women, they took in the majority of women, or the mass of them, whereas women in prostitution could be considered as outside the mainstream, or marginalized. Within this mainstream then, there have been sectional movements addressing the issues of Dalit women or tribal women. We must understand that there has been a maturity of the women's movements over time, and there was no deliberate attempt to keep women in prostitution outside this framework.

There have been many small and big issues which were not addressed by women's movements in the past, though women's movements have started thinking about such issues over the past 10–20 years, with more research and more contact with the concerned women.

In future, though, women's movements will have to take up the issue of women in prostitution considering the consequences of globalization where women are: (a) being trafficked and (b) forced into prostitution.

Here I must mention that a possible reason for not taking up the issues of prostitution could be this inherent dichotomy between women in prostitution and married (or single) women. There is an intrinsic belief among normal mainstream women that women in prostitution are responsible for the dysfunction or destruction of their marital framework. The repercussions of such a notion cannot be ignored.

As I have said before, there was no deliberate effort as such in keeping them out of the movements, just that the movements could not reach out to them.

Anagha Tambe

I would like to raise a couple of questions here. The first one is concerned with what was just said that the movement did not deliberately ignore the sex workers' issues. Here, I would like to mention that when in the West they started to think of sexuality, they did consider the case of prostitution. So, what is so specific about the Indian women's movement that even when they spoke of sexuality, they did not allow the space for the issue of sex work? The Indian women's movement did take up the issue of sexuality in case of rape and even challenged or tried to re-define marriage. I feel there hasn't been much work, but there has been a re-thinking of the issue of marriage and sexuality directly or indirectly. Why is it that the movement did not really

challenge the contradiction between ‘good’ and ‘bad’ women? Was it not a priority for women’s movement?

Second, as Pushpatai mentioned, Phule and Ambedkar took up this issue. Also in the 1980’s, there was the Dalit literature movement, which did take up issues of prostitution. Be it Namdev Dhasal in his poetry in *Golpeetha* or Baburao Bagul in his stories or the so called Raja Dhale controversy. The issue of prostitution was taken up as a caste issue rather than as a women’s issue. I assume that here in this conversation we are referring to it as a women’s issue, but there have been attempts in whatever ways to address it as a caste issue. It is looked at more as caste exploitation. Now this voice is a little weaker, but there are still organizations like *Devdasi Sanghatana* or Action Aid working with *Bedia* women who view it, not as a purely sexual exploitation but as a caste-based exploitation.

So how do we see the link between women’s movements and dalit movements, and other movements as well?

Meena Seshu

It is not just a question of the women’s movements not raising the issues of sex workers. But when the women themselves got a voice, their movement actively kept the voice out. It has always been considered as legitimizing an immoral space. This also complicates the issue.

When one says that women’s movement did not put forth analyses, when the sex workers started getting a voice, and participating in this debate, that voice did not get any legitimacy. They were in fact mocked in derogatory terms, as if to suggest that these women were ignorant fools, not capable of understanding the issues involved. This attitude has been repeated time and again.

Pushpa Bhawe

Anagha’s presentation of caste as an issue is important. In this reference, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) had published a report, which had basically asked one question. ‘How do women come into the *red light* area?’

The first answer was poverty. Next they said was caste. After caste, it was the reason of rape members of the family or those who are close to the family. It may be remembered that when this report came out there was a sharp resistance to this point that family was responsible for women entering prostitution. It may appear as an exaggeration, but it is not so.

During my work in the recent years with Women’s Special Cells, a parallel may be drawn between the prostitution-structure and the family-structure. I have seen daughters-in-law, who have a will of their own and who want to

make certain changes within the family, who have been broken down in the same manner as it happens in a red light area. I am not talking of a particular case. These cases are not discussed because they don't really come to the fore. I would like to mention that whether the girl comes to the prostitution area or she comes to the family, the procedure to break her down is the same. But the family will never discuss it, or the mainstream women will never mention it.

There are several other things that don't get mentioned. Here, I would like to say that the Hindi film, or a Marathi story by a person like Arvind Gokhale, always depicts the prostitute as one who is always pining for family life, for marriage. It has never been deciphered whether this picture drawn by middle class family men is true or not. What is a prostitute's perception of family men who come to the red light area?

Meena Seshu

We did 'Zinda Laash', consisting of clippings of Hindi films, starting from early films like those of Meena Kumari. Everywhere, we come across this concept of *Zinda Laash* (translated as 'a living corpse'), or *Main Zinda Laash Hoon!* (I am a living corpse). This is what depicts prostitution in these films. More than the violence that is attached to women in prostitution in these films; the central idea is that they are living dead. Right up to Manisha Koirala in 'Market', it is the same. It is interesting the way women are depicted. She has to swear, she has to smoke a cigarette; all these are stereotypical images. There has to be a cage, there has to be these windows with bars. All these are very strong impressions that cannot be discounted at all in the forming of these images.

Gayatri Chatterjee

I feel there has to be a question of class also. When one looks at antiquity and the ruins of Hampi, one still finds the Suli Bazaar, structured like red light area, and in the reports from Portuguese travellers, we find the *Ganika*, who is the only person to sit and eat paan with the king.

Jumping a few centuries, to the courtesans in the British period, we have the position where these properties were being cashed upon. For example we have Oldenberg's work, saying that the courtesans were paying the largest tax. The nationalist struggle if we could say coincided with the rich *kothas*.

Internationally, the way prostitution figured in the mainstream May '68, and subsequent French discourse, for example Goddard talking of every kind of exploitation as prostitution; prostitution then becomes an analogy ultimately for liberation and not just a mainstream analogy. That analogy is missing in India.

This ultimately brings us back to the issue of the middle class and why are they not taking up this issue though it happened in the earlier generation (as mentioned by Kidwai). Where is this disjuncture coming from?

Vidyut Bhagwat

For the question as to why women's movements in India did not address this issue, I go back to the USA where the radical feminists had started by talking and bringing in some radical issues. Then came the National Organization of Women (NOW), and Betty Fredle, and then came a liberal framework where individual women tried to comment on the issues.

I feel a similar thing has happened in India. For example, the Durga Bhagwat-Namdeo Dhasal debate in Maharashtra where Durga Bhagwat said that prostitutes are like safety valves, to which Namdeo Dhasal asked why she did not practice it herself or train her daughters. She had no answer for that. Similarly in the *Devadasi* debate, there was a position taken by Chhaya Datar that *Devadasis* have much more freedom (of choice). Somewhere we must remember that feminist politics in India at least in the initial stages when Janwadi Mahila Sanghatana was not active; that was the stage when we saw a liberal framework coming up (in India). The critique of the stand that women are prostituting within family; this argument was not really entertained.

The movement took up the issue of work, devoid of going into sex and sexuality. Work was invoked as the important core-issue for women's movements, and work (of women) inside and outside household got legitimacy.

From this, we could say that Indian women's movements initially went through both liberal and Brahminic frameworks, and caste as a mode of production was not taken seriously. These could be the reasons why these movements never took the issue of sex workers seriously.

Anagha Tambe (addressing to Meena Seshu)

While talking of your work in Sangli, in particular with deserted women, you talk of this strong link between prostitution and deserted women that was not examined or explored much. What could be the reason that such linkages were not explored, in detail, by the women's movements? Several such linkages could be found. Caste could be one, prostitution and deserted women could be another.

Meena Seshu

In Sangli, we come from a belt where there are a lot of *Devadasis*, but there are also a lot of other women in whose case the family security net has been removed for whatever reason. They may have fallen in love, or run away from

home, or were involved in a sexual relationship which was not acceptable to mainstream families they were living with.

I would like to go back to what Chhaya Datar had said about the freedom that *Devadasis* experienced in their life's choices. This is something that has just not been recorded by feminists who have studied the *Devadasi* movement.

Also, it is these women who have challenged the norms of a family to a high degree in many situations. If we look at their children and the very concept of children, a *Devadasi* will never say whose kid it is, since it is always her kid. There may be a thousand men who could have fathered the kid but the kid is always hers. The womb is always hers, and the seed is always hers. There is also the concept of them being heads of households, taking all the decisions in the house. But this is not recorded as such.

Also from my own personal history, when I started working with sex workers, I had come from the erstwhile women's movements in Bombay. I was totally rejected by my own family of women's movement. They did not accept me, they in fact told me to stop working, saying that it is an HIV issue, or that it was foreign-funded. Essentially, it was an issue of resistance. Here I would like to ask about what this resistance is, and what is the discomfort?

Svati Shah

There are two questions that keep coming to my mind.

First, what is at stake for women's movements in keeping out 'women in prostitution' from their central themes?

Second question is with regard to the origin of the term sex work. In the US, it is a term that has come from the grass roots sex workers rights' movement. There is a woman from California who claims ownership of this term, a woman named Carol Lee. The genealogy of such terms can never be known as to who was the first person to think of these two words 'sex' and 'worker', and put them together.

Meena Seshu

Actually, the term coined by World Bank is Commercial Sex Worker. Just like there are commercial doctors, commercial lawyers, there are Commercial Sex Workers. But even within sex workers, you have this situation of calling themselves 'in business'. *Dhanda* (translated as 'business') is the word used by the women themselves all over India, and business is a common word used worldwide.

The one thing that we have been trying to push with the mainstream women's movements is that when they are looking at violence against women,

they should also look at it as violence against sex workers. That is one small agenda; and it is something that has not been rejected or resisted by the women's movements. There is a broad-based acceptance of this agenda.

But going beyond this, there are two things we are talking of—

First, the rights of sex workers like their 'right to healthcare', which everyone accepts. Second, when we talk about sex work as the 'fundamental right to work', I think, that is where the problem arises. This is where we are having a dialogue with the mainstream movements and facing maximum resistance. The problem arises when women start saying they have a right to be in this profession.

'Women in prostitution' has always been the term that we have been using for describing the women. But over the years, the way globalization has worked on this trade, we have seen a lot of women actually doing it just as work. Maybe not so much in India, but definitely in, say, South-East Asia. Their argument is that they think of it as work. Then one has to be inclusive and start calling them as 'Women in Prostitution and Sex Work'. Then of course there are men who do sex work, who said 'What about us?' Then it became 'Persons in Prostitution and Sex Work'.

The discomfort or what is at stake, as Swati asks are mainstream movements picking up particular issues from within this gamut of issues. This is a problem more real than the legalization and decriminalization, which are more of strategies. The real problem is, women saying that they want to be in multiple-partner relationships in a commercial context, and the argument is whether we are going to allow them that freedom.

Kiran Moghe

That does not throw much light on the internal debate. My question is that a large number of 'women in prostitution' are children, below-age girls, or minors. So where does the question of choice arise out here?

How are we going to view these young girls as wanting, as you say, (addressing Meena) to be with multiple-sex partners in a commercial context?

The data shows that a large number of girls, say between the age group of 8–14, are being trafficked. My question is, can this be seen as a matter of choice or freedom?

It is not that we don't see it as work. But if you had other choices, which the current system does not give, you are perhaps forced to do this work. Perhaps, you have no other recourse. If you had all the other multiple choices, then prostitution would also be a question of choice.

The women's movements have always recognized that there is a great deal of violence in prostitution and have always been vocal about it.

Meena Seshu

Even internally, there are these debates. The whole issue of choice versus force, and the understanding that these are mutually exclusive positions does not reflect reality. The truth is that prostitution is a dynamic space where there is choice from the best possible options, and there is force, violence and exploitation, all of it co-existing.

A second thing I would like to state is that let us not infantilize women by clubbing them with children. The children's issue is very clear. That is, child sexual abuse, and I don't think there is any difference of opinion even among the sex workers' movements. Trafficking is an issue, which the sex workers' movement has clearly opposed. Trafficking cannot be equated with sex work. Trafficking is a criminal offence and the law in India is the 'Immoral Trafficking Act'. It is a criminal offence going beyond the moral or the immoral. Unless we unravel these issues, and stop infantilizing women, and start looking at the criminal side of it as criminal, by de-linking trafficking from prostitution, we cannot proceed further. We have made trafficking a soft option, in the political sense. This is the reason we have no answers.

When the sex workers' movements said that as adult sex workers, irrespective of what the personal histories, we don't think children should be present in this profession; it is more of an issue of business for them. The more young children there are in the business, more the adult women that are out of business. This is a very business-oriented approach by them. I am not saying that the sex worker is looking at it from a feminist point of view.

Unless we unravel and separate, and use the women who are in prostitution to deal with these issues, we will just keep conflating the issue of trafficking versus prostitution. The women in prostitution have the best strategies to counter this.

Svati Shah

What does one mean by trafficking as a soft option?

Meena Seshu

What has happened politically, is that in our discussions with mainstream political parties in Sangli, the response has been that 'trafficking and prostitution are just the same'. And we argue that it is trafficking, which is a serious offence and where one needs serious strategies to deal with it.

The women themselves are coming up with a plan where they will have a strategy of regulation. Jana calls it Self Regulatory Boards; in Sonagacchi, it

is called Mohalla Committees, who will counter this issue, and ensure that there are no young girls coming into this trade. But the political parties are not interested.

Svati Shah

So, you mean to say that prostitution then becomes a marginalized issue?

Meena Seshu

Yes, it is definitely a non-priority issue.

Pushpa Bhave

The fact is that serious trafficking has always had political backing. Whether in Bengal or in Bihar, it could not happen otherwise. So it is not their perception, it is their involvement. One could go to any police station but there would be very few police officers who would help.

Meena Seshu

I would like to add something here. We have tried this in Sangli, every time we are talking of trafficking, the police invariably think of it as *dhandu* (literally meaning business, here referring to prostitution).

One has to tell them that one is not referring to a 'woman in prostitution', but a nexus beyond this. Since we have not analyzed it and given it enough words, the police are not interested in listening. More importantly, the police are interested in doing moral policing, and hence, their interest in this issue. But the criminal nexus, which has a political backing is not dealt with at all.

Pushpa Bhave

From a women's movement point of view, there should be an inter-connectivity of a different sort. There are people working as bonded labour, and trafficking too is almost bonded labour. The first amount, which is paid for her, is the amount paid to buy her. The debt-trap starts from there. For those working with bonded labourers, on the theorizing part, as well as the practical part, there should be an inter-connectivity of these movements, and not only women's movements.

Anagha Tambe

Most of the times, the alignment of the sex workers' movements is with sexual minorities, and not the workers or trade unions. Though they think of

themselves as 'workers', their alliances have not been with worker's organizations. Why is this so even though they claim worker-status? Is AIDS an issue here?

Kiran Moghe

I want to know here, what the origin of the sex workers' organizations in India is. At what location they are in the social or political history of our country.

When we say that 'women in prostitution' have been there for so many years, we don't see these movements or unions in the early post-Independence period? So there is a particular context in which they emerged. We need to study this context.

I, again, come back to the question of choice. Whatever the situation in the Soviet Union was, at the time of the October Revolution, there is documentation to say that after the Right to Work was granted as part of the whole Soviet goal, the number of 'women in prostitution' went down. Conversely, after the restoration of capitalism, there was a huge increase in the number of prostitutes. Also, the number of women leaving Eastern Europe, with Bonn, Berlin, and Prague becoming centres of commercial sex workers and flesh trade, was indeed surprising. How does one explain these processes? Somewhere, we have to also talk of the link between the economic spheres and its correlation.²

Rohini Sahni

I would like to raise the next issue of our debate, which is pertaining to the agenda of mainstream women's movements. Why is the mainstream women's movements' perspective on sexuality limited to rape, reproductive health, sexual violence, battering and dowry, which are essentially marriage-related assaults?

Kiran Moghe

I do not agree with this at all.... In fact it was the women's movement which brought in the issue of single women whether they were deserted or whether they were alone, stressing that they do have an existence and they too have problems. The women's movement has spoken about violence against all women whether married or single.

Pushpa Bhave

I must say here that the play that was put up by the 'Stri Mukti Sanghatana' dealt with issues only within the marital framework, I had objected to that at the time.

Meena Seshu

I want to talk about non-marital sexual relations. We talk about violence against married women or even single women. But we don't speak about the single women's sexual issues.

Vidya Baal

It is my opinion that even after so many years of the women's movement, we haven't really dealt with the issue of sexuality.

Kiran Moghe

When a movement gets underway, when women begin to organize, the issues they find most pressing get targeted first. Eventually, as women start feeling more comfortable with each other, issues of sexuality start coming into the picture. I can give an example. We have a union of Anganwadi workers, many of whom are single, gay women. Now many of the workers are well aware of this but they haven't objected to it neither have they made an issue out of it. The women have taken a very understanding position.

Meena Seshu

Well as far as deserted women are concerned, we have some experience of working with them and we find that they have clandestine relationships within the village. But we never took this up as an 'issue'. We ignored the issue and that is the truth.

Kiran Moghe

The question does not get discussed deliberately, as in 'now let us get together and discuss sexuality'. However, when we have more weekly meetings, there are issues that are discussed in a free atmosphere, including problems of sexuality.

Vidyut Bhagwat

In my opinion we must think about issues related to sexuality in a deep manner. We have to explore the very relationship between men and women.

Meena Seshu

I can say that the women in prostitution have a very strong critique of marriage. I can even say that they have a strong anti-male attitude. What I am saying is that they have a strong doubt of the so-called 'goodness' of the married women. There exists a parallel system of thinking which has a strong

opinion on every issue including marriage, which needs to be recognized. For instance, for many women who were gay, they found their space within the space of prostitution. They couldn't express themselves within the main-stream society.

Svati Shah

A question may be raised here—Is prostitution a question of sexuality or that of political economy?

Kiran Moghe

You just said that they have a strong critique of marriage. Well I would say that all women have critique of marriage. For instance, I know of cases where there are extra-marital relationships. They too object to marriage.

Meena Seshu

But the question is whether these issues are articulated in the movement and in what way are they articulated. Then there is an issue of inter-connectivity. Maybe VAMP is the only organization, which is trying to have a dialogue with the movement. Dr Jana from Sonagachi for instance, finds that they find closer inter-connectivity with the workers' movements than with the women's movement. This has happened globally, and not just in the Indian context. The alliances are with the labour movement.

Kiran Moghe

I feel that women in prostitution have actively participated in the movement on these issues. They were homeless when they joined the movement. I have, myself, worked with women who have worked on these issues and in fact, this is a better way of inclusion because then we do not differentiate between people in this manner.

Meena Seshu

Now here, I must say that women from the red light area go to any political party if it is going to help them in some way. For example, in getting ration cards. However, I must note that there is a strong effort to politicize the women on issues. But when the women go to a political organization, they go there as 'homeless' and not as 'sex workers'. They went to Shiv Sena for instance, in Sangli, but they went as 'poor women' and not as sex workers. What I feel is that women should organize as sex workers and have alliances within the movements as 'workers' and where their issues should be accepted.

Kiran Moghe

There is no great divide between the women's movement and the organization of sex workers. I think that a dialogue has already begun.

Hemant Apte

Here we have to mention that because of HIV, a whole lot of money has come into the area and the situation has changed dramatically.

Meena Seshu

I would like to talk about the issue of money coming in. Bill Gates and his organization has decided, and he has an agenda, that they are going to eradicate STDs. I would actually like the intellectual community to analyze the situation and challenge this in a big way.

Kiran Moghe

I think that the women's movement must look at the HIV issue and the money coming in and all these issues.

Meena Seshu

I am not just talking about the money that comes for HIV. I am talking about the whole framework, which claims that we will build the 'sex workers' movement'. There is a tremendous amount of money with the anti-trafficking right-wing section. These are big games being played and we have to be extremely aware of them. The sex workers' movement has to be well aware of these undercurrents.

Notes

1. The panellists for this discussion were Pushpa Bhawe, Meena Saraswati Seshu, Anagha Tambe and Kiran Moghe. This discussion was convened and organized by Rohini Sahni at the Department of Economics, University of Pune on the 11 July 2006. The audience for the debate included: Vidyut Bhagwat (Director, Savitribai Phule Centre for Women's Studies, University of Pune), Svati Shah, Sujata Patel (Professor, Department of Sociology, University of Pune), Meena Kurlekar (Director, Vanchit Vikas, Pune), Vidya Baal (writer and women's activist), Gayatri Chatterjee and Hemant Apte.
2. An objection was raised to this by Rohini Sahni. Her argument was that prostitution existed during the Socialist regime in the Soviet Union, though it was invisible. The only difference now is that it is more flagrant.

3

Elusive choice and agency

A feminist re-reading of the sex workers' manifesto

SWATI GHOSH

The Sex Worker's Manifesto (1997) is a unique politico-moral document of the recent times. Unprecedented as it is, it also comes at a time when the organized movement of industrial workers seems to have been pulverized by the dominant order of capital and also from possibly the least expected quarters that had remained largely invisible and inert all these years in matters of one's rights and choices. Today, when the workers' community or the women's movement finds such written call for action nearly outmoded or at the most cavalier, the sex workers of Kolkata have produced a written manifesto to proclaim their demands in the very early years of their movement. Starting from 1995, the movement gradually took shape as organized struggle of sex workers and the manifesto appeared to be the first document explicating the ideological foundation of their movement.

Why is it that the sex workers seeking to be included within the mainstream as workers had to think of a manifesto as a requisite to their movement? How is the Sex Workers' Manifesto similar to and different from its near-namesake the Communist Manifesto that was grounded on class relations, the rhetorical turns of which so frequently appear in this text? Let us explore the discursive attempt of the sex workers with a critical concern and examine the theoretical import and intent of the movement as it has been laid down in the manifesto. While we trace the line of argument of the movement that evolved without much support from either the workers' unions or the feminists or even the human rights activists, we would also examine the claims of agency for the sex workers that the manifesto seeks to achieve.

The Sex Workers' Manifesto today, has immensely influenced the sexuality discourse in India¹ and has emerged as a significant document in representing the voices of marginalized women in sex work. The manifesto is a product of organized struggle of the brothel-based sex workers of Sonagachi in Kolkata, one of the largest red light zones in India. Further, the manifesto is the outcome of a specific section of the prostitutes making a living in the brothels largely as dependent workers within a network. The emergence of the manifesto coincided with that of the health-care programmes carried out in Sonagachi for prevention of HIV/AIDS. This coincidence is of significant social consequence.² Not only did it initiate state intervention in the brothels for health reasons, it also prompted numerous academic discussions and activist endeavours in a short span of time.

In this paper, we appreciate the deftness in charting out the theoretical basis as stated in the manifesto and initiate a feminist reading of the same. This is not to undermine the purpose or content of the political document but rather to sharpen the focus of the gender lens used in the text. The critique is intended to be an internal one that ventures to reveal the differences in positions and remove the illusions of a seamless world of theory regarding the controversial issue of 'sex work.' Since the field of practice is more prone to contain conflicts, the theoretical basis of the emerging movement needs to be examined critically from within, and critiques such as this, tend to serve the purpose of enriching and strengthening the basis by posing counter arguments. However, in no way does the critique underscore the definite, positive, functional achievements of the movement, which would be cavalier and reactionary.

First, we take up the semblance in rhetoric between the Sex Workers' Manifesto and the Communist Manifesto of 1848 and then bring forth the arguments of the sex worker regarding sexuality and work. This is relevant because both pursue the objective of situating 'workers'—of different categories, be it industrial workers of 1848 or the sex workers of 1997—within the socio-economic order and aspires for their emancipation. Second, we try to reveal the significance of the document with respect to the sexuality discourse from class and gender perspectives. We find that while gender is chosen as the major entry point in formulating the interpretations, the category of class has been largely ignored in the Sex Workers' Manifesto. We are rather critical of this stand because the complexities of the real world are bereft of a unitary governing ideal, identified in this context as 'patriarchy' which is not without intersections and overlaps with several other cultural and social imperatives. Our proposal is that instead of focusing on gender-bias alone, the category of 'class differentiation' among the sex workers be taken into

account as well, at least in contexts of heterogeneity of the sex workers, which remains an oft-discussed issue in the manifesto. Finally, we identify the position in which the sex worker situates herself in the act of claiming agency and we evaluate this ideological location from a feminist viewpoint. We would like to mention that the issue of agency is central to the argument that differentiates feminists regarding their views on sex work. Our enquiry is to identify which of these several positions does the line of thought, represented in the manifesto, owe its allegiance to and why.

I. Comparison with the Communist Manifesto

The Sex Workers' Manifesto immediately brings to mind the *Communist Manifesto* of 1848.³ The Communist Manifesto is indisputably one of the world's most influential political tracts explicating the cause of misery and the path to freedom for the wage workers in factory production, to be achieved through class struggle. The introduction to the Communist Manifesto begins with the claim that across Europe the ideology of Communism is feared (the spectre). The communists ought to make their objective and line of action comprehensible to the workers as well as to the rest of the world. The legendary first line of the introduction commences with "A spectre is haunting Europe—the spectre of Communism..."

The Sex Workers' Manifesto, we find, is a brief essay, presented as the theme paper of the First National Conference of the sex workers organized by their forum at Kolkata in November 1997. It briefly presents the forum's understandings regarding different issues on sexuality and chalks out the objectives and future plans of the sex workers' organization. The reason why we start by drawing a parallel between the two manifestos is due to the apparent similarity in its style of formulating the introduction. Interestingly, the first few lines of the Sex Workers' Manifesto begin with a similar note:

'A new spectre seems to be haunting the society. Or may be those phantom creatures who have been kept in the shades for ages are taking on human form and that is why there is so much fear...'

It seems that someone acquainted with the original Marxist tracts and possibly having faith in the political doctrine has wittingly used the rhetoric to serve an immediate cause, no less important, in framing the above lines of the Sex Workers' Manifesto. The enemy of the time, which is as 'sinister' as capitalism, is soon identified and brought to task, in the text. The new spectre that seems to 'haunt' the mainstream society today is the prostitute

who is raising fundamental ideological questions as to her marginalization. The apprehension is that the prostitute in claiming workers' rights, perhaps for the first time, would eventually violate the settled norms of social order. The manifesto constructs the theoretical foundation for the sex workers' movement in trying to make their objectives and programs heard. *Patriarchy*, in addition to some passing reference to *capitalism*, is identified for instituting exploitation of women workers in different ways and its detrimental effects are underlined. But the resonance is far less pronounced between the two manifestos beyond the first few lines of the introduction. As for the differences in focus between the two, the former has class relation as the basis of analyses and the latter gender relations, apart from the distinct mode of interpretations followed in the two texts to which we come back later.

II. Uniqueness of the Sex Worker's Manifesto

Fight against patriarchy

The crux of the sexuality discourse that the Sex Worker's Manifesto puts forward is based on the unequal gender-relation that constitutes a woman, and particularly a sex worker. In this document the history of sexual morality, the institution of family and the issue of hindered choice for a woman comes under scrutiny. Apart from describing what the sex workers' movement is all about, the direction of the movement and the natural allies thereof, the Sex Workers' Manifesto proposes to address several important questions about the 'social structure and relations, inter-linkages between class, gender and sexuality, about politico-moral ethics' of the Indian society (line: 5). As the movement gains momentum, the manifesto proposes to outline the likely changes, look for answers and generate further questions regarding sexual ethics at large.

In the manifesto, two principal aspects of the movement are stated thus: to 'debate, define and re-define the whole host of issues about gender, sexuality' (271) that are being thrown up, and to consistently resist the 'daily oppression that is practised with the support of the dominant ideologies' (279). To explicate the ideological basis of the movement, the manifesto clearly identifies patriarchy as the institutional monolith that shapes the sexuality discourse, privileging heterosexuality as the sanctioned mode of practice. It raises questions about unequal and discriminatory claims of men over women regarding sexual desire, where social practice strictly restricts women in their expression of desire. The discrimination is as much a reality for wives and husbands within the family as between prostitute and client within

the sex trade. The manifesto keenly points out that the 'whore-madonna divide' is a social construct, which caters to male lust differently. It further mentions that within patriarchal society, women's own sexual need is totally ignored and women's sexuality is stereotypically marked either as the 'de-sexed motherhood and domesticity' of the wife (203) or as that of a 'sex-machine unfettered by any domestic inclination or feminine emotion' of the prostitute (204). The manifesto establishes that the moral position differentiating women in two distinct roles of reproduction and pleasure, also determines the need to control women as exercised upon her by men:

...in all cases female sexuality is controlled and shaped by patriarchy to reproduce the existing political economy of sexuality and safeguard the interest of men (207–208). Women's sexual needs are not only considered to be not important enough, in most cases its autonomy is denied or even its existence is erased (210–12).

The Sex Workers' Manifesto further brings up the aspect of internalization of patriarchal values. It states that both men and women, conditioned by deeply entrenched patriarchal values, approve of the maintenance of the sex trade as necessary for the society with a tacit understanding and acceptance of each other's roles. The natural outcome of internalization is also reflected in the preserve of the dual domain of sexual pleasure for men in the form of the public and the private:

In this political economy of sexuality there is no space for expression of women's own autonomous sexuality and desires. Women have to cover up their bodies to protect themselves from male gaze and at the same time bare themselves for male gratification (134–37) ... a man has access to his docile home-maker wife, the mother of his children and the prostitute who sustains his wildest sexual fantasies (210–12).

As an outcome, it is mentioned, that women engaged in commercial sex consider themselves to be fallen and 'morally corrupt', while men find sex outside family more 'thrilling'. The very act of performing a 'sin' encourages men to participate in sexual 'perversions' of all kinds, thus conforming to the assigned male role of performing and enjoying sex (145–47). Yet instead of blaming man as an individual, the manifesto considers that men, who seek warmth and companionship of women outside family for various reasons, cannot all be dismissed as evil and immoral. It is men, as a collective, operating within the patriarchal values that keep dominating women as objects of pleasure. Unpacking the category of 'men' the manifesto points out that:

...there is no uniform category as men. Men like women are differentiated by their class, caste, race and other social relations (149–50) ... Our movement is against patriarchy and men as a collective group who derive their social power over women from the patriarchal institutions (137). The men who come to us as clients are victims of the same ideology (145)...

The manifesto also states that the movement of sex workers is not against family. The general societal perception that sex workers and women outside conjugal relations are a threat to the institution of family is a misogyny, which the manifesto is keen to erase. It is only to claim social sanction of sexual pleasure beyond reproductive purpose, the sex worker's struggle aims to project themselves as necessary service-providers for the male population in comparison to the housewives who remain 'sex-slaves' within conjugality (194).

The sex workers (many of whom are mothers themselves) value motherhood. But the objective of patriarchy to set motherhood as the primary and only aim in life for women is what the movement wants to challenge. The manifesto believes that sex, with the sole objective of procreation, curbs the autonomy of women and envisages non-procreative sex as 'unproductive' and therefore undesirable, unnatural and deviant. The objection regarding the institution of family lies in the unequal distribution of power and resources between men and women and it is what the movement of the sex workers seeks to change.

Recognition of 'sex-as-work'

The notion of sex as work is a contested issue of the recent times⁴ and the Sex Worker's Manifesto attempts to signify the unique nature of 'sex work' as different from other kinds of work. Since inclusion of the prostitute into the working class is yet an unearned status for the sex worker, the aim to achieve this end has been chalked out with conviction and foresight. We find that the demand for worker's right is premised on the *a priori* 'sex as work' and emerges as the characterizing slogan of the movement from the beginning. We would look into how the rationale for work becomes important for the brothel-based prostitutes and the claim for workers' rights emerges as the single most issue around which the sexuality debate revolves.

The manifesto compares the prostitutes with other workers, such as the wage labourer in a factory, the self-employed worker in the city and the farmer in the village in the context of intense physical labour spent in each of the cases. That the work of the prostitute providing sexual service for money is

'definitely not fun and frolic' but hard labour, is pointed out in earnest effort (236–37). But while the work aspect has been explicated often with analogy, the sexual aspect has been the primary focus of the logical exposition in the manifesto. It starts with the description of the societal moral stigma towards sex work, the invisibility of 'deprivation and distress' in sex work and the lack of social concern to understand the demand and need of the sex workers in the industry. The legitimacy of the demand for worker's rights is thus established:

We believe that like any other occupation sex work too is an occupation not a moral condition. If it is one of the 'oldest' professions in the world that is because it must have continued to meet an important and consistent social demand (49–50). If other workers in similarly exploitative occupations can work within the structure of their profession to improve their working conditions why cannot we, sex workers, remain in the sex industry and demand a better deal in our work and life? (83–85)

The importance of sex work here, lies in its income-generating ability for the millions of women trying to support their parental and extended families in times of economic crises. In a situation plagued by unemployment, sex work seems to provide a livelihood to numerous women, just as factory production provides a wage worker. While exploring the reason for joining prostitution, the manifesto cites examples relating to the mainstream work force with the implicit intent of comparing sex work to other kinds of labouring activities:

Our stories are not fundamentally different from the labourer from Bihar who pulls a rickshaw in Calcutta or the worker from Calcutta who works part-time in a factory in Bombay. Women take up prostitution for the same reason as they may take up any other livelihood option available to them (222–25).

The notion of sex work thus projected, makes a transit from being a mere survival strategy for women forced into the trade, to a *livelihood option*. The manifesto reminds us that in reality there is lack of choice even for a woman of family in opting for an occupation or marriage, and the sex worker is no more vulnerable than her. Rather, sex work after a period of being bonded imparts a 'degree of independence' to the sex worker, which other typical jobs such as domestic labour or marriage and family life, may not guarantee a poor woman within family:

A whole lot of us end up in the sex trade after going through many experiences in life—often unwillingly, without understanding all the implications of being

a prostitute fully (227–29) ... after being bonded to the madam who has bought us for some years we gain a degree of independence within the sex industry (225–27) ... (but) do we become casual domestic labour willingly? Do we have a choice about who we want to marry and when? (230–32)

She is rather bothered with the ‘stigmatization and marginalization’ associated with her profession. The manifesto raises the question that when the immoral transactions of food or health is accepted without much furore in the society, why should the issue of commercial transaction of sex disturb the social order. Although the major differentiating factor of sex work with other kinds of work is ascribed as social stigmatization, we find that various kinds of occupational hazards—such as ‘unwanted pregnancy, painful abortions, risk of sexually transmitted diseases’—inherent to the profession are pointed out too (236–37). In this context, the lack of transparency that veils the structure and the material conditions of deprivation of the workers engaged in the trade are identified as characteristics that need to be rectified.

‘We are working people’, (252) says the manifesto, ‘all we can do now is to explore the current inequalities and injustices ... and change them’ (266–68).

As we explore further, we find that in contrast to the societal view of prostitution as a degraded way of life for commercializing the intimate sex act, the manifesto is keen to emphasize the role of the sex worker in providing a service beyond mere sex-act for men.

The sexual needs we meet for these men is not just about mechanical sexual act, nor a momentary gratification of ‘base’ instincts. Beyond the sex act, we provide a much wider range of sexual pleasure which is with intimacy, touch and compatibility—a service which we render without any recognition of its significance (214–18).

In addition to hard labour, the manifesto says, that the specific attributes of warmth and companionship—‘around which we weave our narratives in literature and art’ (92–93) are required for the intimate physical act, and should be acknowledged. Thus sex work is valorised as an activity, which apart from generating sexual satisfaction in the body provides mental solace for the men clients in catering to their ‘loneliness, alienation, desire and yearning for intimacy’ (213–14).

This is where sex work, with the potential of being ‘independent, democratic, non-coercive, mutually pleasurable and safe’ (243–44), is marked to be different from other kinds of labour—the manifesto holds. The ‘responsibility’

that the female sex worker bears towards the male partner is often absent in family relations and this is what makes it unique, it is explained. And this brings her to call for a democratic and mutually pleasurable sexual act to be initiated between her and her client that would take care of each other's sexual needs and desires. It is assumed that such a situation might only emerge from a societal consensus in viewing sex work as a respectable profession. Acceptance of sex work as an occupation would enable her to be acknowledged as a regular worker in society; that is, in her becoming a worker, and not a threat to public health, sexual morality, civic order or social stability—not as a social refuse—as it has been all these years. The manifesto therefore, calls for inclusion of the sex workers within the organized struggle that would enable them to negotiate their own position as workers within the sex industry.

Further, the manifesto makes the accusation that the organized struggle of (male) workers does not recognize or address oppression of women. The class-based ideology of achieving worker's solidarity is framed against capitalist exploitation and struggle against exploitation has always ignored the women's question, it is claimed. A woman is never more than a female wage worker even to those radical men who wage war against the exploitation of workers. They even 'defend the ideology of family and patriarchy' when issues of gender inequality are raised, the manifesto complains. Towing this line of argument further, the 'oppression' inflicted on the sex worker on account of her sexuality, in addition to the economic exploitation, is brought to the fore. Although it is not elaborated or explained, it is noted that sex workers suffer more than other regular workers:

The same system of productive relations and logic of profit maximization which drives men from their homes to towns and cities make women into sex workers (162–164) ... (yet) the kind of oppression that can be meted out to a sex worker can never be perpetrated against any other regular worker (70).

The Sex Workers' Manifesto therefore, frames its primary agenda with the aim of achieving equal access and choice for women with regard to sexuality. With the ultimate objective of building a gender-just and equitable society, the manifesto seeks to win the battle against 'sexual inequality' where 'control of sexuality' is the major impediment for women in sex industry.

III. The Critique of the Manifesto

The Sex Workers' Manifesto, emerging in the early years of the movement has been a significant contribution towards re-orienting the sexuality

discourse in India.⁵ The demand for workers' rights as the major motto of the movement aspires to discard the impression of the prostitute as 'objects of pity' within dominant discourses and speaks of the 'rights and wrongs' of their profession in public forum, in an attempt to inscribe 'self-defined and self-conscious identity as sex workers' in the public sphere. The image of the fallen and degraded woman wanting to be 'cleansed and sanitized', materially and symbolically, or the powerless victim in need of rescue and rehabilitation has been erased in the self-projection of the prostitute as a worker. The sex workers' manifesto has contributed in pointing out the exclusion of the prostitutes from the mainstream work-force in spite of their role in providing sexual service that the society cannot do without. Besides, prior to the sex workers' movement, the employee status of the brothel-based sex workers did not emerge as a distinct labour-form and the prostitutes were not sex workers who could claim and assert their rights as labourers.

Today the prostitute question is being re-framed with respect to work and agency and has come to occupy an important slot within the feminist agenda. Feminist activism in India until now engaged in more crucial issues such as dowry-deaths, rape, sexual harassment, female foeticide, domestic violence, and they have taken up the cause of sex workers with utmost eagerness.⁶ The demand for right to work and erasure of the moral stigma associated with work has questioned the very notion of sexual morality. Isolating social stigma as the major blockade for exclusion of the prostitutes as workers, the manifesto has accused patriarchal norms for reinforcing inferior social position compared to other workers and other women in society. The manifesto thus envisages a change of disposition for the prostitutes who should view themselves as sex workers in their own right and come to represent the enunciation of the members involved in the movement.

In the Sex Workers' Manifesto, we find gender as the critical entry point in locating the sex workers within the heterosexual matrix. Rather than class relation, gendered relation becomes the overarching frame for situating women differently within family and its outside, in sex work. The relation of power, not between individual man and woman, but between the society at large and woman, is the core content of the manifesto where the norms of the society are strictly male-dominated. Subordination of women in society because of the imbibed patriarchal values, which has been severely criticized throughout the text, makes the flair of the analytical approach to be feminist. It is to be noted, that while occasionally referring to Marxist categories of class in context of exploitation of the sex workers within the 'capitalist-patriarchy' framework, class-differentiation among the heterogeneous group of sex workers has not been focused at all. Hence, the doubling effect of

capitalism and patriarchy is not worked out beyond mere mention. Yet the manifesto is immensely relevant as a political document in taking up issues that have never emerged previously within the purview of the sexuality discourse in India.

Class and gender

Since the notion of work cannot be discussed in isolation with respect to sex work, the unique nature of sexual service becomes relevant in this context. Presuming that the prostitutes have been transformed to sex workers⁷ we find explicit descriptions on the 'forging of a positive identity' for the sex workers who no longer intend to remain within the 'clutches of the agents of power' but can act on their own. In spite of claiming a worker-status for the prostitutes, we find that the manifesto primarily deals with the anxiety about the disparate position bestowed upon the sex worker, but does not search for the reasons for exploitation. While economic reasons are cited as the sole cause of poverty drawing women into prostitution, class does not emerge as an element of enquiry to explain the marginalized position of the sex workers. There is no reference to aspects of remuneration of workers, conditions of work or social security for sex workers, in the discussion. It is not the exploitation of labour that seems to bother the sex workers, rather institutional injustice of a male-dominated society is defined as the cause of oppression. The focus is on the cultural aspects such as 'moral conditions' and 'social values' regarding sex work. The political economy of sex work and the social relations, within which the work is performed, serves as the pre-condition for imposing control over the workers and has been largely overlooked.

We find that the manifesto, as the proponent of workers' rights for sex workers, did not care to explore the interaction of class and power relations at work. The Communist Manifesto in 1848 had focused on class relations as the sole category for its analyses of workers' exploitation in surplus generation within capitalist framework. The Sex Workers' Manifesto in 1997 could not make the most of the Marxist lens in remaining restricted, rather narrowly on 'gender' alone. The emancipation of the workers through struggle and solidarity was sought for the sex workers, where the notion of 'class' was almost redundant.

The fact that the brothel-based sex workers were not a homogenous category of workers was overlooked and there was no mention of the owner-employer relationship among the sex workers within the trade. The 'bondedness' of the sex workers was presumed to be a state of affair for the new entrant

to the sex trade and this mere transitory situation was soon to be overcome in independence, it was stated. The vicious cycle of power network that binds a newly-picked girl to an ex-prostitute madam, until she becomes a madam herself in later period of life, is overtly disregarded.

Without pinning down the exact relations that reinforce the commercial and cultural abuse, any description of the plight of the sex workers remains incomplete. The economic exploitation of sex workers in their trade is not considered consequential in discussions. This is where the radical engineers of the Sex Workers' Manifesto miss the aspects of exploitation and oppression of the workers enmeshed within capitalist-patriarchal framework. Using the perception of gender alone, they solely concentrate on social marginalization of sex workers. The manifesto therefore, calls for liberation of sex workers by contesting the very cultural meanings, which strips sex work of its *work* aspect.

Settled norms of heterosexuality

We find that in spite of the elaborate interpretation of how patriarchal institution is at work, the sex worker does not aim to fight patriarchy as the central adversary. No plan of action as to how sex workers can think of resisting the settled norms of the heterosexual society within which they have to work and live, finds a place in the manifesto. Further, in reference to the Communist Manifesto, which historically situates the working class in antagonistic position with the owner/employer and analyses its role in initiating a new social order, more egalitarian than the existing one, the sex workers' manifesto tries to relocate the prostitute as worker within the *same* social order. The workers, subject to economic exploitation in the process of generating surplus for their employers, aim at a proletarian revolution to overthrow capitalism. The Sex Workers' Manifesto does not aspire to change the social order that fabricates their marginal existence in the least. Neither does the manifesto claim to abolish sex work as degrading and subservient for women nor does it suggest alternative modes of living for them. Instead, they suggest correctives such that their role as a sex worker is reinforced, enabling them to function as independent workers with choice and freedom in life.

Further, male sex workers in same-sex relationship with male clients are designated as 'comrade-in-arms' and it is believed that their participation would make the movement 'truly representative and robust' (295). It is even stated that the material and ideological status of the male sex workers is more precarious, but we find that heteronormativity is nowhere to be challenged. Male sexual lust remains to be served unilaterally with or without

the solidarity of male and female sex workers or even irrespective of the movement at all. The movement that seeks to 'negotiate the locations as workers within the sex industry' (276), does not claim or even aspire to cross the limits set by the heterosexual normativity. Both male and female sex workers promise to unite together in their struggle against the inequalities within their specific professional domain and thus remain within the bounds of the structural framework that locates them. The manifesto questions the discriminations between men and women within heterosexuality only to the extent of correcting the disparity, not in challenging it to any extent.

Is sex workers' manifesto a feminist one?

Let us examine to what extent the Sex Workers' Manifesto is successful in using gender as the analytical tool and in upholding a gender-just society that would not marginalize sex workers. This would call for identifying the theoretical position from which the manifesto has been written. To identify patriarchal norms as the root cause of subordination for women is to challenge the norms and not comply with it—the feminists would tell us. To which exact feminist school of thought the manifesto shows its allegiance, is yet to be marked. How far the Western influence works in the Indian context and shapes the purpose and direction of the movement is also to be probed. And finally, to what extent the manifesto furthers the movement that promises agency for the sex worker needs to be explored.

The position of the manifesto is very much in tune with the feminist stand that seeks to achieve equality for men and women in any societal structure. The position does not propose a radical transformation of the structural framework. Rather, it identifies the areas of inequality and injustice within the heterosexual framework that hinders freedom and restricts expressions of sexual desire for men and women. In this mode of understanding, sex workers and women within marriage are subservient to men, who control them, being more privileged in every respect. Sex workers or women within marriage, lacking the option to choose their career cannot but allow themselves to be dominated and face the disparate situations. It is presumed that only if they have access to equal rights, choice and freedom, they would be liberated and equal as men are. For a sex worker, having a choice to decide about herself enables her to dictate the terms of work and have control over her earnings.

In the manifesto, she is perceived, as any other worker not deemed inferior or immoral because of her profession. In such a situation, she has only to fight for equal rights, social status and work security guaranteed to any

member of the organized labour force. But what about her choice and freedom? Would she be able to choose and decide for herself, even if she is acknowledged as a worker like everyone else? Whether wage workers really have a choice is a different question altogether. But would the sex workers attain a state of enhanced choice, without the stigma that the manifesto presumes?

The sex workers of the red light areas in India, who are forced into the trade for whatever social or economic reasons, do not enjoy freedom to a considerable degree for a greater part of their life. The proponents of the manifesto did not want re-structuring of the framework, nor did they challenge the norms of the structure. All that they wanted was to be free from the stigma associated with their work and to be able to perform efficiently, with due recognition as a worker, within the network of the sex trade. In spite of all their criticism towards the patriarchal society, they rather helped to maintain the preserve of the dual domain of sexual pleasure and promised to cater the unique service beyond mere 'sexual gratification' to their men clients.

From this standpoint, it is likely that a sex worker would not opt for eradication of the profession of sex work on the ground that it impinges upon her entity as a woman. The manifesto tells us that a woman is perhaps in a disparate situation everywhere, yet the sex workers can survive best if they performed efficiently in their work and others regarded them as workers. For them, the violation of the body and sexuality of the prostitute-woman that radical feminists⁸ complain of is not significant because every work has its own hazards. Exposition of the body and self is inherent to sex work and is not violation per se. Eradication of prostitution proposed on the ground that sex work is inherently devaluating for women that keeps them subservient to male norms of power within heterosexuality, is not accepted or agreed upon as an alternative. Therefore the idea of rehabilitation for sex workers as suggested by a section of social reformers and feminists, receive harsh criticism in the manifesto. Questions are raised as to 'is rehabilitation a feasible or even desirable option' for the sex worker:

People who are interested in our welfare cannot think beyond rehabilitating us or abolishing prostitution (75–76) ... we systematically find ourselves to be targets of moralizing impulses of dominant social groups (55–56) ... charity organizations are prone to rescue us and put us in 'safe' homes; development organizations are likely to 'rehabilitate' us through meagre income generation activities which in any case never help to erase out the stigma as 'former' prostitutes... (59–61).

Social stigma regarding sex work is thereby brought to the fore as the major blockade in the way of inclusion of prostitutes in the mainstream workforce. This position is clearly against abolition of prostitution as an occupation and the movement is geared towards this direction wholeheartedly.

We find that the position of the manifesto also stands far apart from the socialist feminist viewpoint that is in favour of inclusion of the sex workers as part of organized labour and considers the wrongs meted out to the prostitutes to be the same as that of any wage worker. As we have observed earlier, economic exploitation rather than social marginalization of workers is the crux of the difference between the Marxist position pursued by the socialist feminists, and the proponents of the manifesto. The sex workers' manifesto isolates the sex workers as a specific group emphasizing the restoration of social respectability for the sex workers and demanding worker's rights as the primary objective. If the demand for worker's rights and removal of the social stigma were simply the initial steps towards achieving a bigger goal of eliminating economic exploitation or challenging the norms of male dominated society, it should have had a mention in the manifesto. Rather the demand for workers' rights is projected as the sole agenda of the movement for the sex workers and ultimately becomes an end in itself. That the movement seeks to reach a 'gender-just, socially equitable, emotionally fulfilling, intellectually stimulating and exhilarating future for men women and children' (306–07) simply through removal of social stigma reduces the reach and the possibility of the movement.

What could women's movements achieve without defying or reversing the norms of the structure—the sex radical feminists would tell us.⁹ The sex workers of the Western world, subsequently emerging as different prostitutes rights' groups in recent times (1980 onwards), claimed themselves as workers and challenged the male dominated power relations of the sex trade. In this post-modern endeavour, the prostitute is transformed into an empowered body from an abused body to rectify the power imbalance that prevailed until now. The heterosexual framework that defined women as sex workers remained, but the cultural meanings of the norms are displaced and overwritten with the subordination of women getting reversed from within the structure. Sex work continued to be an earning profession for the women, selling sexual service, but the terms of transaction came to be dictated by the women sellers and not the men clients any longer. The prostitute in the process lost her 'criminal', 'victim' or 'abused' image and emerged as the powerful teacher, therapist or entertainer and the sexual services were transformed into therapeutic services for men, as lessons in the art of pleasure or as fixed packages of entertainment offered with a purpose.

The Sex Workers' Manifesto seems to be influenced by the cultural sway of this line of thought and the language of rights in the manifesto at times nearly mimics the sex radicals. But in spite of the rhetoric of the manifesto being critical of the patriarchal norms, it does not, in materiality, chart out the course of action towards elimination of dominance on the sex workers, but only discerns it. The language of rights in the manifesto chooses to mend the power relation in sex work by merely attempting an erasure of social stigma and removal of work hazards. The structure of the sex trade that employs the sex worker remains unaltered; the empowerment of the sex worker is achieved not beyond equality-claims. The manifesto did not aim at rendering men as mere recipients of sexual services in exchange of money, what the prostitutes' rights' group in the West has attempted. That it is an impossibility in the context of brothel-based prostitutes in India, is obvious because of the settled structure of power and control over the sex workers within the trade. Yet, we find instead of attempting to examine the pre-conditions of the possibilities of liberation at the local level, the language of rights in the manifesto almost replicates the global lexicon of the prostitutes rights' groups.

The manifesto, in actuality, reiterates the *liberal feminist* claim that as long as the sex worker can operate independently at her place of work and earn on her own terms, she could think of herself as an equal partner in sex work. It was only then that she would be free to negotiate with her client to the extent of commanding the commercial transaction and sexual relationship between them. When the economic earning is dependent or controlled by others, as in the case of the Indian sex worker of the brothel, she is vulnerable to oppressions and inequalities that she wants to get rid of in real life. But without disturbing the structural framework, what she could demand at the most was social recognition as a worker. The declared radical content of the manifesto nearly evaporates at a closer scrutiny. It was not a stance of exploring the avenues to enhance the choice of the sex worker in reality. It was not imparting of agency to the sex worker to decide about herself either. The power relation was not reversed in the least. The basic paradigm of the manifesto continued to stick to the liberal frame intact, presuming away the imperative of dependence and domination.

Notes

1. The Sex Workers' Manifesto has been quoted and/or referred to by scholars in more than one occasion in context of debates on law, culture and sexuality (Kapur 2005; Kotiswaran 2001), emancipation and empowerment of women (Nag 2005; Gangoli 2005; Sarai 2005) and with respect to AIDS and responsible

sexuality (Qadeer; Ritu Priya; John: all in SCSACI 2002). The sex workers have also been invited to voice their words at academic institutions such as the Department of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata 1998, The Centre for the Study of Developing Societies and The Centre for Social Medicine and Community Health, JNU, New Delhi 2002, only to name a few.

2. The politics of intervention on account of initiating 'safe' sex measures among the prostitutes and the coincidence of these women taking part in organized struggle has been discussed with focus on the techniques of surveillance (Ghosh 2005).
3. The Manifesto of the Communist Party, written by Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in 1848, laid out the purpose and programme of the Communist League—an international association of workers—and suggested a course of action for the workers to achieve their aim. The industrial workers of the world were a part of universal brotherhood, united as a class. Class struggle was the only means that would possibly end exploitation and inequality persisting between the working class and the bourgeois class.
4. The notion of sex as work has been incisively analyzed in Gorz (1988) and Sunder Rajan (1996).
5. While advocating the rights of sex workers, the need to address the cultural arguments in face of cultural essentialism of the legal debates has been discussed by scholars (Nair 1996b; Kotiswaran 2001). The question of transformation of the legal subject emerging in/through narratives in post-coloniality has been examined with respect to the present struggle of the sex workers of Maharashtra (Sangram) and Bengal (DMSC) (Kapur 2005). Historicizing the contemporary debate on sex work, the colonial regime that criminalized sex workers has been compared to the pre-colonial period which provided state support to them (Banerjee 1998). The role of the sex workers in the construction of the nation and refutation of the sex worker as an external contaminant through promiscuity and disease also appear in contexts of Bengal (Chatterjee 1992; Banerjee 1998), Agra and Allahabad (Gupta 2001).
6. The Feminist responses towards prostitution and issues of sexuality has been summed up (Gangoli 2005) either as position of 'silence and embarrassment' for not considering it an adequately significant cause, or in identifying the prostitutes as victims of 'hurt and oppression' within society or as that of 'choice and identity' emerging for the prostitutes in recent times. If such an understanding is relevant for both India and the West simultaneously, as Gangoli suggests, it is an issue to be examined critically; the present paper does not attempt such engagements here and focuses on the general influence that the sex workers' manifesto has been able to create.
7. The genealogical difference in connotation between the terms prostitute and sex worker is implied, which is relevant in context of forging identities. In spite of the difference, the two terms have been used almost synonymously in the paper.

8. The notion of the prostitute as de-humanized labour with alienated body and self is what the radical feminists propose. Prostitution is defined as 'law of male sexual rights' and prostitutes as objects of 'male desire' (see Zatz 1997).
9. Organizations such as the COYOTE, PONY, Red Thread (of San Francisco, New York and Amsterdam) among others were the prostitute rights' groups that projected the prostitute body as sexually powerful against the victim-image in the exposition of the bodiliness. The performance-oriented sex work, such as live sex shows, porn-art and sex-salons, established a new identity of the prostitute and destabilized the binary of designating woman as either the sacred or the profane (see Bell 1994).

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4

Different issues/different voices

Organization of women in prostitution in India

ANAGHA TAMBE

The politics for the rights of women in prostitution is fraught with an acute divide regarding the articulation of prostitution. Can women only be coerced into prostitution, or can it be a choice and if so under what circumstances? Can prostitution be conceptualized as a legitimate form of work as any other, and what kind of work could it be? Should prostitution be seen only within the framework of sexual violence, or can it be a site for claiming sexual pleasure and freedom? These are the key issues raised by the autonomous organizations of women in prostitution, initiated in the 1970s in many advanced capitalist countries. Even in India, there have been several attempts to debate prostitution and to organize women in prostitution since 1990s.

This paper argues that the debates and collective actions around prostitution in India are not restricted to the polarized 'sex wars', but goes on to formulate the third dimension of prostitution as caste-based sexual exploitation. Though this voice is hardly acknowledged in contemporary debates, it has emerged through historical struggles in India, challenging prostitution as brahmanical sexual exploitation. This paper emphasizes the strengthening of this voice for understanding the diverse issues and voices in the organization of women in prostitution in India.

With these underlying objectives, the first section highlights how erroneous it is to homogenize the voice of women in prostitution. The second section

further explores the underpinnings of these different voices, revealing the multiple and often polarized articulations on the issues of agency/choice, work and sexuality in prostitution. The third section foregrounds the articulation of prostitution as the caste-based oppression and locates this articulation in the historical struggles on the issue.

Section I

Organization of Women in Prostitution in India: A Silent Revolution?

The politics for the rights of women in prostitution seems to have emerged in India in the decade of 1990s, and the most cited force initiating the mobilization among the women was the HIV/AIDS prevention and control discourse. This discourse largely locates the disease in the disadvantaged and underdeveloped post-colonial countries, specifically among the women in prostitution in these countries. For effective AIDS control, these women are sought to be empowered. International bodies, which bestow agency on the women and support their collective actions, view them largely as political actors engaged in transnational movement. The HIV infected mothers are considered to be passive and hence objects of state intervention, while the women in prostitution are seen as autonomous and so remain outside the intervention of nation-state, thus creating the dichotomy of 'global whores' and 'national mothers' (Booth 1998).

Kempadoo and Doezema assert that it is AIDS activism and flow of funds, which has provided new opportunities for women in prostitution across the world, specifically in post-colonial countries (1998), enabling them to mobilize, build dialogue and forge alliances. However, the AIDS-control endeavours are also considered to have transformed the groups of women in prostitution in advanced capitalist countries, by narrowing their engagement to just the funded outreach work on HIV intervention (Overs 1994). It is this logic of global funding from the advanced capitalist countries more than any need or struggle from the ground that has initiated a politics of sexual rights in post-colonial countries like India (Tellis 2003).

It is through this politics, with its focus on AIDS-control endeavours, that cultural categories and gendered identities such as the sex worker, seem to have emerged. Sexuality as pleasure has been the foreground of this discourse, highlighting the limits of the dominant trope of sexuality as violence. Yet, the implications of the limitless consumerist desire of this sexually desiring subject and its fixation in class, caste and age grids have not been given due attention.

In India the AIDS control programme among the women in prostitution, more specifically, the peer-education programme focusing on women as the agents of intervention is appreciated for encouraging mobilization among these women, and their empowerment as the individuals with rights (Nag 2005, Misra et al. 2005). This programme with its underlying premises, that insiders are more effective than outsiders in reaching the community; that women in prostitution can reliably enforce the use of condom for their own protection (SANGRAM 1997), is seen as significant in building the sense of community among the women, thus cementing their organization.

However it has also been pointed out that the peer education programme is put to use in order to implement discipline among women in prostitution, through strategies of persuasion, counselling and advice and through a network of familiarity, trust and hierarchical social order between the observer, peer-educator and the observed women of same prostitute community (Ghosh 2004). This has served not only to render the programme cost-effective and efficient, but the observation of women in prostitution has then come to mean caring for them, due to which the observed women feel obliged to respond to the initiative of caregiver and modify their behaviour. The point of discussion has been—how the programme should be viewed as an effective strategy in the fight against AIDS rather than as a tool of empowerment.

One of the earliest and the most celebrated organizations of women in prostitution in India is the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) established in 1995 in Kolkata out of a STD/HIV intervention programme undertaken through the government–NGO collaboration in 1992. SANGRAM is another significant organization founded in 1992 in Sangli, Maharashtra for HIV prevention that eventually led to the formation of Veshya AIDS Muqabala Parishad (VAMP) in 1996.¹

Along with an HIV intervention programme, largely focusing on the distribution of condoms, these organizations have initiated several other programmes such as forming a co-operative society or a cultural wing, educational programmes for women and their children, health awareness programmes, and notably, a self-regulatory board, attempting to act as a principal arbitrator of the sex industry. It is with the initiation of these organizations that the first national sex workers' conference was held in Kolkata in 1997. An Asian Meet was organized in Kolhapur in 1999 and the sex workers' Carnival–Millennium Milan Mela was initiated in 2001 to urge for rights to oppose wrongs done to the women, thus heralding the autonomous activism of the women in prostitution for their rights as human beings. The organizations such as the DMSC are exalted for pioneering a silent revolution in the global

arena with considerable epidemiological achievement in reducing the rates of STDs and HIV/AIDS among them (Nag 2005).

However this exaltation has had its share of criticism, by asserting that this empowerment of women in prostitution cannot be disentangled from the DMSC declaration that 'sex work is real work and we demand workers' rights'. According to Ghosh², the women through this declaration seek to use the AIDS intervention programme of the state not only to claim the disease-free body and thus to erase the stigma as vectors of disease, as immoral and sinful criminals; but extend this for making a democratic claim to the workers' status, dissociating themselves from the mark of mere sexual beings (2004). This claim is made not to demand better working conditions but to assert their agency and autonomy, to proclaim human rights and equality with the workers and claim a new subject position outside the criminalizing law. However this claim remains unsuccessful because of the typicality of sex work, of the ignominy of a livelihood based on sexuality and corporality. Hence the women in prostitution could become an object of welfare but not a worker with rights and dignity equal to other workers (Ibid).

What is interesting to note is that this claim of workers' status does not forge linkages with or take shape of the trade union politics or workers' activism, or shy away from framing the identity in the sexual sphere. On the contrary, significant linkages are initiated with sexual minorities for sexual rights. The Sex Workers' Manifesto that was declared at the first national conference of sex workers in 1997, locates prostitution in the structure of sexual relations in the society; and the Millennium Milan Mela held in 2001 has declared that 'we want bread, but we also want roses', asserting that the sexual freedom is the foundation of all freedoms (DMSC 2001). Thus the activism of women in prostitution initiated through the AIDS control efforts navigates between the perceptions of prostitution as sex and as work, leading to ambiguity in their articulation.

Another force facilitating the emergence of organizations of and for women in prostitution is that of the anti-trafficking discourse that seeks to prevent trafficking and engage in rescue and rehabilitation operations that aim to assist women who are compelled, coerced or duped into prostitution. However, this notion of trafficking of women linked only with violence is complicated, if we locate it in the matrix of global economy.

Trafficking is linked with an emergence of alternative circuits of globalization, which are developed with increasing feminization of migration wherein households, communities and governments of post-colonial countries are becoming dependent on women migrating for survival (Sassen 2002).

While reproductive labour, domestic and sexual—has come to be central to the process of globalization; spaces available for lawful independent migration are shrinking and this demand is met by traffickers often belonging to global criminal organizations (Agathangelou 2002). The stringent, punitive border controls by advanced capitalist countries, claiming to protect the sovereignty and security of these nation-states, have thus initiated strong anti-trafficking measures specifically for people migrating from the post colonial countries. In India, the anti-trafficking initiatives have led to the rise of organizations working with women in prostitution and especially their children to prevent their entry into prostitution.

Sanlaap, a Kolkata-based organization started in 1993 (initially a feminist group), is one of the major organizations that views prostitution as sexual and/or economic exploitation. It claims to fight prostitution—and not women in prostitution—and aims to work for their human rights. Through its economic assistance, legal aid, shelter, awareness and advocacy programmes, it seeks to curb the entry of poor vulnerable girls, especially those of women in prostitution, who are compelled into this occupation.

Another significant organization is Prerana in Mumbai, that aims to make intervention for the protection of rights of women in prostitution as victims, marking prostitution as commercial sexual exploitation (CSE) and trafficking. By networking with the government bodies and other NGOs, it seeks to eliminate the 'second generation' trafficking of children into prostitution and to support the daily struggles of women in prostitution through day/night care centres, educational and health intervention, awareness and advocacy programmes. Notably, Prerana has been instrumental in the formation of an organization of women in prostitution called Nishant, which holds the opinion that the women in prostitution are misguided in believing that their grievances can be redressed only if they get recognized as workers. Hence, it proclaims the collective identity of these women not as workers, but as victims of commercial sexual exploitation (Patkar and Patkar 2004).

Thus the contemporary organization of women in prostitution in India has emerged on heterogeneous sites and has travelled conflicting trajectories. The organizations like DMSC and VAMP are initiated through the AIDS intervention efforts that highlight the sexual rights of women in prostitution. Sanlaap and Prerana, on the other hand, have emerged with the anti-trafficking measures that mark the women in prostitution as victims and survivors of poverty and sexual exploitation. The next section analyzes the central areas of disagreement among and between these organizations, as also with the feminists.

Section II

Debating Prostitution: Issues of Agency, Sexuality and Work

The contrasting responses of the organizations working with women in prostitution on several conceptual and practical issues would highlight how erroneous it is to homogenize the voice of prostitutes.

The discussion on prostitution in India has taken place so far through the entry point of harm, coercion and victimhood. Organizations such as Sanlaap and Prerana have underlined how young girls and women are recruited in prostitution through force and trafficking, and how prostitution involves unequal and exploitative power relations violating human rights. They seek to eliminate this exploitation through national legislations and international conventions. Prerana draws from this anti-trafficking discourse and aims to combat prostitution as commercial sexual exploitation and seeks the socio-economic reintegration of women in prostitution, though only as much as a woman is prepared to go on a sustained basis (Patkar and Patkar 1999).

This perspective has led to collapsing the process of trafficking—the use of physical force, duping, deception, luring or other fraudulent means—with trafficking that need not necessarily be for prostitution. Thus, any migration to work in prostitution becomes trafficking, while any trafficking is seen as resulting only in prostitution. With this point of argument, organizations like DMSC and VAMP have severely condemned the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act, 1986 that addresses prostitution only within the framework of trafficking and consequently criminalizes and marginalizes them.

Advocates of rights of women in prostitution have further challenged this outlook of prostitution as violence. Voicing the women in prostitution, they argue that this permits little space to address violence in prostitution—physical and symbolic—which is caused due to the whore-stigma and criminalization of prostitution and not because of prostitution per se.

Even the limitations of engaging with prostitution within the framework of raids, rescue, remand, rehabilitation and repatriation are strongly contested. The dramatic raid and rescue operations—for instance, when Savdhaan, an NGO in Mumbai forcibly repatriated around one thousand rescued women in prostitution back to their ‘home-state’ by a special train in 1990 or when four hundred and more women were rescued at random in Mumbai in 1996 without any alternative arrangement for them—are seen as deceiving and offensive to women in prostitution, failing to reintegrate these women socially and economically in the society (Aalochana 1998).

The rehabilitation programmes have meant keeping women in remand homes in extremely miserable conditions without providing them any real option for livelihood, but the 'option' to return to prostitution. These programmes are seen as patronizing and moralizing to women in prostitution, silencing their voices and their concerns. Organizations like Prerana and Sanlaap therefore challenge 'rehabilitation' and urge for reintegration of women in prostitution. They focus not only on creating viable economic alternatives but also on the social acceptance and reclaiming the dignity of the women.

Another major argument of prostitution is that violence highlights the dominance of child prostitution. This analysis is extended to adult women, thus conflating women with children and infantilizing women. The state bodies like National Commission for Women and anti-trafficking organizations such as Prerana point out that majority of women in prostitution are minors when they enter prostitution and thus they locate it in the context of sexual exploitation of children. Prerana highlights the unequal relations between children and adults and underlines how relations of domination, dependence and control on the basis of age, results in trafficking and sexual slavery of children (Patkar and Patkar 2004). It sees prostitution, on the one hand, as a repercussion of the dominant models of development that make women, and especially children vulnerable and powerless, and on the other hand, as a consequence of customary practices like the *devadasi* system, one involving dedication of pre-pubertal girls.

Child prostitution is also seen as linked to the paedophile tourism of the men of advanced capitalist countries and simultaneously to the cultural preferences for sex with young sexual partners, virgins, specifically with the increasing AIDS scare. It is now conceptualized as commercial sexual exploitation of children, which seeks to erase the shame attached to the identity of a 'child prostitute'.

However according to Saunders (2005), this framework can undermine the agency of youths in sexual activities by defining them—especially those engaged in sexual practices marginalized by hetero-normative structures, as children. It can result in ambiguous and arbitrary definitions of juvenile and adult prostitution, criminalizing those engaged in commercial sexual exchange and can ignore different strategies adopted by children to erase shame and stigma associated with their lives in prostitution. Moreover, a reference to child prostitution frequently leads to an emotive discussion on children being forced into prostitution, which often glosses over the effects of political economy and patriarchal system that subject the child to prostitution. And hence adopting the notion of choice, it is argued that a distinction be made between child and adult prostitution, whereby adult women are seen as

capable of exercising choice, whereas the child prostitution is not. Such a distinction between children and adult women in prostitution is complicated when children are, by and large, subjected to marriage and to labour to earn livelihood.

In order to counter the perception of prostitution only within the framework of violence, trafficking and victimization, the rhetoric of choice is adopted and thus women's right to migration is foreground in a globalizing context. The definition of women in prostitution merely as passive, unconscious women victimized into sexual slavery has come to be rejected by the organizations which emphasize that the women are rational conscious beings choosing prostitution as an occupation or sometimes as sexual freedom. However feminists point to the structural conditions within which this choice is made and reveal how the poverty along with patriarchal notions of femininity ensures women's consent to prostitution.

Sanlaap views women in prostitution not with pity, as victims or with contempt as criminals, but notably respects them as survivors, as people with rights (Sleightholme and Sinha 1996). This position is akin to those of the women gathered at the first sex workers' conference organized by DMSC, who have argued that most women end up in sex trade after going through many experiences in life, often unwillingly, without understanding fully all the implications of being a 'prostitute'; therefore the choice being rarely 'real' for most women, particularly poor women. Yet it is also recognized that the women take up prostitution for the same reason as they may take up any other livelihood option available to them. They decide upon prostitution as a survival option, as a domestic-worker, rickshaw-puller or a married woman does, and moreover as they stay in prostitution despite it being hazardous, depriving and distressing as many other occupations, they often gain a degree of independence within the sex industry. Thus working in the sex industry is not an irrational act of desperation but a rational choice from very limited options available particularly to poor unskilled women and so prostitution is not seen as a free choice, but a choice as free as other choices made in a patriarchal-capitalist-racist system (DMSC 1998).

The need to recognize choice in prostitution has once resulted into a split in the anti-trafficking approach, making a distinction between forced prostitution/trafficking and voluntary/free prostitution, seeking to abolish the former, while granting respect for the latter. This framework is also adopted by Sanlaap, which aims to eliminate forced prostitution, exploitation and violence within prostitution and simultaneously recognizes and strengthens the rights of women in prostitution. However, most organizations have now come to dismiss this distinction because it serves only to condemn and fight

forced prostitution rather than protecting the rights of women in 'voluntary' prostitution. Moreover this distinction brings in the most frightening division between voluntary, implying guilty versus forced, implying innocent women in prostitution, which reinforces the belief that those who willingly transgress sexual norms deserve to be punished.

The organizations of women in prostitution point out that the anti-trafficking discourse often treats these women less as victims of abuse and more as violators of law and thus challenges women's right to move and migrate. It fails to understand that women are often sole supporters of their family and hence they decide to migrate in search of work. It sentimentalizes the home of the migrated people, ignoring that migrants may be seen as fleeing conventionally and not merely traumatically, from myriad possibilities of being miserable because of prejudices, inadequacies, dangers, violence, domination and suffocation at home. It thus curtails mobility and economic opportunities for women and makes it more dangerous for them to cross borders and thus seeks to keep the 'native' at home (Kapur 2005). Thus, as the limitation of equating trafficking with prostitution and also of distinguishing forced prostitution from the voluntary one are realized now, trafficking has come to be defined at two separate levels—(a) the process of recruitment, and (b) the context of work or services, as one can be an act of choice while the other an imposition of force, deceit or other abuse.

The organizations in post-colonial countries also point out to the racist and imperialist underpinnings of the anti-trafficking discourse, which are revealed through the stereotyping of women of post-colonial countries as exotic and erotic and as inherently prostitutes. The racism is reflected simultaneously in the construction of these women as 'modern-day sex-slaves' who are contrasted with the 'liberated, independent whores' of advanced capitalist countries. The women in prostitution in post-colonial countries are represented as sexually-constrained, tradition-bound, incarcerated in the home, illiterate, poor and civilizationally-backward, and notably as the real or most authentic victim, who is then targeted by the imperialist interventions of rescue and rehabilitation and tightening of borders (Ibid.).

According to Kapur, even the women's human rights campaign is characterized by gender essentialism that marks women only as victimized into prostitution. And hence when the first international sex workers' carnival was to be held in Kolkata in March 2001 to 'celebrate' the lives and struggles of women in prostitution and to demand respect to their basic human rights, some women's groups and some health-intervention NGOs opposed this event on the grounds that it legitimizes and rather romanticizes the oppression of women in prostitution as sex work (Ibid.). It is this victim-status that

seeks ostensibly, to protect human rights of women, invites the states and other bodies to resort to criminal law and regulatory mechanisms to address the issue of prostitution, and thus fails to distinguish between consensual migration, albeit illegal and coerced movement.

Another issue which is forcefully pursued and debated by those working for the rights of women in prostitution is that of legitimization of prostitution as sex work. This debate shifts the discursive field of prostitution from moral to economic terms and seeks to challenge the characterization of prostitution as inherently gendered and oppressive.

However the term sex work does not imply the same meaning when used. The Sex Workers' Manifesto, the most forthright document asserting sex as work, claims that prostitution is not an immoral act nor is it oppression. It is real work and the women engaged in it are, therefore, worthy of respect as sex workers like other workers who are engaged in marginal, sexist, exploitative work, but are able to provide for themselves. Hence, from this stand emerges their right to work and the right to improve their conditions as the other workers in similarly exploitative occupations. For some, as those gathered at the Millennium Milan Mela, it is a way to claim self-respect as sex workers, as those earning their livelihoods by providing much needed services. From this outlook sprung their extreme outrage at being clubbed under the category of beggars under the census drive.

Sanlaap, on the other hand, underlines that prostitution cannot be called legitimate work under any circumstances, recognizing large-scale violence, sexual abuse, inequality, exploitative power relations, force and trafficking involved in prostitution. Yet it outlines prostitution as a strategy for survival for women, in the context of poverty and vulnerability within the family and perceives women in prostitution as sole supporters of the family, as those labouring with dignity (Sleightholme and Sinha 1996).

Thus one can notice different shades in definitions of prostitution, as work, as a survival strategy, as an activity, as earning of livelihood that grants dignity, as work like other marginalized occupations, or as real work providing much needed service in the society.

While marking prostitution as work, its ordinariness as sexual labour performed along with other forms of labour has come to be highlighted. A controversial life narrative, 'Njan, Laingikatozhilali' by an 'unrepentant' prostitute Nalini Jameela rejects the stereotypical and stigmatized description of prostitution significantly, not to claim respectability, but rather to locate women like her in a community of 'ordinary' labouring poor women. Through this narrative, the dominant association of prostitution with sinful and decaying life stands challenged and the ordinariness of sex work in the lives of

poorest women, its place along-side other strenuous, exploitative and demeaning work comes to be highlighted. The threat of sexual violence to women not only at the place of sexual labour or of prostitution but also at the work place and home, and significantly the affection and warmth offered in sex work complicates the boundaries dividing work, sex work and marriage.

In the international debate, while defining prostitution as sex work, it is often compared with other forms of work, specifically those involving sale of bodily services, and it is argued that isolating prostitution for stigmatization and criminalization—on the grounds of wages, need of bodily skills, respect, client orientation, health risks, control over working conditions, violence and invasion of internal private space—is irrational and objectionable (Nussbaum 1999). It's labelling as immoral, being non-reproductive, non-marital sex and as a vice because of unfettered sexuality, of 'bad' lustful women cannot be legitimized as well. It is therefore urged that the social meaning attached to any activity such as prostitution can and needs to be changed as has happened in case of acting or singing. It is further insisted that there is no difference between jobs within work-systems that hypocritically deny the importance of 'selling sex', to their smooth operation, as opposed to those that exploit it as their very reason for operating (Nagle 1997). And hence it cannot be argued that prostitutes have no right to work or that their choice is not work but oppression or an immoral act.

Conversely it is also asserted that prostitution is more morally objectionable than other apparently similar kinds of work in patriarchal capitalism (Overall 1992). It is claimed that while other works need not necessarily be commoditized, prostitution by definition is commoditization of sex, i.e., what is essential to prostitution is not sexual activity itself, but the buying of sexual activity. Moreover it has value only when it is performed by socially-defined inferiors for their socially-defined superiors, while other forms of works like nurturing and domestic work is reversible. Hence it is urged that prostitution needs to be rejected because it is an inherently unequal practice defined by the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy (Ibid.).

This polarization could be found in the organizations of women in prostitution in India as well. DMSC and VAMP assert that prostitution is an occupation like any other and not a threat to public health, sexual morality, social stability and civic order. Drawing parallels between prostitution and other professions, such as those of nurses, film actresses or social workers, they argue that prostitutes are also engaged in giving pleasure to others, in satisfying an important social need, and hence their work is as important and worthy of respect, as these professions. They also express pride in their ability to work and provide for themselves and their families. And hence their right to work,

to remain in the sex industry and to demand a better deal in their life as other workers in similarly exploitative occupations do (DMSC 1998).

Whether prostitution can be conceptualized as sex work or not is intrinsically tied to its constitution as 'sex without love and desires'. Some argue that it can't be regarded as work primarily because it violates the intimate relationship between the self and body. It is also suggested that prostitution is not really about sex or money at all, but about power and sexual subordination, as sex is supposed to be about consensual sharing of one's most personal, erotic parts of physical and psychic being. However it has also been pointed out that identifying and legitimizing prostitution as sex work is possible precisely because it is sex without love (Zatz 1997). It is underlined that first, sex acts or genital encounters can be de-linked from erotic acts or acts of desire; second, the erotic/affective activity can be mixed together with the economic life.

On the one hand, the legal regimes and stigmatizing social attitudes promote the interpretation of prostitution as a fundamentally sexual act, while simultaneously quarantining sex acts in prostitution from the legitimate world of business and commerce. On the other hand the women in prostitution attempt to articulate the sexual exchange in prostitution not as erotic, but as a form of work and also seek to separate it radically from their sex life, though their struggle remains suppressed (Ibid.).

Thus many organizations argue that there is little emotional, erotic involvement in the sex act in prostitution, and hence it is merely physical labour for women in prostitution, allowing them a control over their sexuality. This is revealed through the fact that women in prostitution would never have protected sex with their lover or husband making a fine balance between caution/safety and trust/intimacy, between commercial transaction/love. Conversely prostitution is seen as affording not only economic independence but also sexual autonomy to women in prostitution, enabling them to enjoy sex, to experiment with sexuality without complications. Some organizations assert that sexuality should be given the same kind of credibility and support as any other need and hence prostitution should be seen not as inherently negative, corrosive, immoral or dangerous, but as good in and of itself, as anonymous, recreational, pleasurable and healthy sex.

While Sex Workers' Manifesto asserts that sex is primarily for pleasure and intimacy, and challenges the confining sexual ideology, VAMP rejects that sex has a sacred space and that women engaged into it for other than reproductive reasons or for commercial reasons are immoral or debauched. However, such a position puts these organizations, specifically those in post-colonial countries, at the risk of being cast as dangerous to the culture and

nation (Kapur 2005). In order to recuperate to a position of pleasure and desire for women in prostitution within the framework of Indian culture, there are attempts to celebrate sexual practices such as those linked with *devadasis* and courtesans of pre-colonial social life (Oldenberg 1991, Kotiswaran 2001).

By and large prostitution has been identified as male sexual violence as it foregrounds male supremacist desire and practices, which eroticize hierarchy and objectification of women in prostitution (Jeffreys 1997). Correspondingly, most organizations have urged for a revolutionary analysis concerning who controls the pleasure and factors of production of pleasure. The Sex Workers' Manifesto points out that the ideas about sexuality and sexual practices are socially conditioned and historically specific, and at present they are entrenched within structures of patriarchy and capitalist political economy (DMSC 1998). This circumscribes sexual expression within narrow and strict boundaries of marital relations only between men and women, restricting it as an instrument for reproduction, negating all aspects of pleasure and desire intrinsic to it. It is also realized that sexual needs are acknowledged only for men, and there is no space for expression of women's own sexuality and desires.

The organizations of women in prostitution seek to address this issue by advocating, not 'free sex' which is without respect and responsibility for other's needs and desires, rather the independent, democratic, equal, non-coercive mutually pleasurable and safe sex, which can not be fully imagined yet, but is to be achieved through the movement. These organizations have refused to stigmatize and criminalize the men in red light areas as perverted. They underline that it is their loneliness, alienation and desire that brings them to women in prostitution who provide not a momentary gratification of baser instincts, but a wider range of sexual pleasure which is to do with intimacy, touch and companionability.

The movement of women in prostitution has drawn a parallel between marriage and prostitution. Notably SANGRAM, in an interesting inversion of the victimization of women in prostitution, seeks the 'othering' of the married women who are viewed as being exploited at their husband's will, while women in prostitution are perceived as independent women who can handle the various challenges that life throws at them. Many other organizations compare women in prostitution with all women, who remain trapped in empty, loveless, unequal, oppressive marriages by social pressures, and just for food and shelter, however being granted protection and dignity in family. On the other hand, women in prostitution seek to support their families through their labour, but are denied legitimate parenthood and family. In both the

cases, men's interests are safeguarded while women's sexual needs are not only erased, even autonomy is denied to them (SANGRAM 1997).

Women in prostitution as 'sexual minority' is another claim held by some organizations who define prostitution as a sexual preference or a variation, similar to another forms of subversive sexuality, challenging hetero-normative discourse. Rainbow Planet, a diverse coalition of progressive groups working for the rights of sexual 'outlaws' including sexual minorities, sex workers and people living with HIV/AIDS has sought to initiate a new and legitimate struggle for human rights in India, claiming a place among the communities of resistance. It vehemently rejects the hierarchy of oppression that treats sexual discrimination as secondary and asserts that sexual freedom is the foundation of all other freedoms.

These linkages of prostitutes with other sexually stigmatized and marginalized communities have been underlined specifically at the Millennium Milan Mela which brought out their shared multi-layered experiences of violence and ridicule by the state and religious institutions in the main. The women in prostitution are also articulated as the sacred-healers through their public performance (of what is known as erotic entertainment or sex games), claiming to express their own sexuality creatively. These women seem to have reconstituted, through their performance, as healers rather than as disease-producers, as educators rather than as degenerates, as sex-experts rather than as deviants, and as entrepreneurs rather than as commercial objects. (Bell 1994).

Some women in prostitution, as they start 'speaking', have highlighted their exclusion from a rightful place in the feminist movement and maintained that feminism must change to include both 'bad girls' and 'good girls'. They have forged feminism directly from a particular sex worker's experience, which first challenged the binary of female identity between virtue and harlot existence, and second insisted on valuing women as sexual bodies (Nagle 1997). However this lumping together of women in prostitution with transgressive sexualities has been vehemently challenged, arguing that prostitution is not a sexual practice for women involved.

Thus the organizations of women in prostitution have sought to define prostitution in a heterogeneous framework, suggesting different ways to address the issue. These contestations thus point out that there is no one perspective towards prostitution. Can prostitution be legitimized as sex work as demanded by the DMSC and hence be legalized, or should its definition as sex work be rejected as is done by Sanlaap perceiving it as an outcome of patriarchal forces? Whether women in prostitution be perceived as the victims of commercial sexual exploitation as asserted by Prerana, or as more

autonomous and independent as compared to married women as claimed by VAMP-SANGRAM? Should one seek co-operation and alliances of brothel-owners as VAMP does, or oppose and seek to criminalize them as aimed by Prerana? Should it highlight AIDS control and consequently seek to empower women in prostitution to address the issue, or should it deal with these women in the framework of prevention and rehabilitation? Whether the law should prioritize prevention of trafficking as urged by Prerana or should it focus on recognizing and decriminalizing voluntary sex work as asserted by DMSC?

Section III

Prostitution as Caste-Based Sexual Exploitation: Uncovering the Hidden Voices

In the context of the 'sex war', there is another voice that is articulated, yet is hardly heard. This voice defines prostitution as a caste-based exploitation. It focuses on certain groups of women—such as the *Bedia* and the *Bacchara* women in Madhya Pradesh or the *devadasis* in Maharashtra among others, who are seen as a major source of recruitment to prostitution. This articulation, as revealed through legislations, social campaigns and NGO activities, has often collapsed into the anti-trafficking framework as it seeks to eliminate commercial sexual exploitation among particular lower castes, by taking up prevention and rehabilitation measures among these castes. There is a need for the resurrection of this ignored voice.

Bhor (new dawn) is one of the major organizations focusing on caste-based commercial sexual exploitation. It is an initiative funded by Action-Aid in Madhya Pradesh that addresses the issue of prostitution and trafficking in the *Bedia* and *Bacchara* communities. It works for the rehabilitation of the women who come out of prostitution, and towards enabling them to assert their rights and their dignity. These women along with other women of the community seek to keep vigilance on the trafficking of under-age girls into prostitution. They also attempt to convince the families to get their daughters employed in work other than prostitution. However, it is realized that not only are the families aggressive and angry at this, but even the girls have either lost hope or feel better off than married women confined to the private (Gurung 2006). By emphasizing education, prevention and rehabilitation, Bhor thus enables these women to recognize the oppression and humiliation that comes with these traditional practices.

Some of the international bodies like Human Rights Watch have also acknowledged prostitution as a form of oppressive caste-based labour, along with scavenging and bondage. However this voice has the complication of leading to stigmatization and marginalization of particular castes, instead of highlighting its exploitative underpinnings.

A controversy had arisen over a UNICEF-supported study, which was conducted by Madhya Pradesh Human Rights Commission about caste-based prostitution. This study is seen to have degraded and stigmatized particular castes and their women. This has been challenged for the social contempt it breeds against the women of these castes making it impossible for them to lead respectable lives. Further, the study marks the men of these communities as essentially criminal and condemns them for forcing women into prostitution. The study noted that girls were forced into prostitution by their own relatives, and they had to live with it throughout their life. It thus brands the particular caste as practicing prostitution, and as HIV-prone and consequently legitimizes the separate medical examinations conducted specifically on them (Devraj 2001).

There have been several state endeavours—provincial measures and legislations to combat social practices compelling women of particular castes and communities into prostitution. For instance, the Acts abolishing the *devadasi* practice in Maharashtra and Karnataka or prevention and rehabilitation measures like Jaabali Yojana or Nirmal Abhiyan in Madhya Pradesh. One of the recent efforts has been the legislation to regulate and eradicate the *devadasi* system, passed by the Maharashtra government in 2006, which criminalizes the priest, the relatives of the girl, who is dedicated, and the advocates of this practice and provides for other rehabilitative and preventive measures. Interestingly, these state-efforts have been criticized by organizations seeking to legitimize prostitution as sex work.

In contrast, the NGO activities are glorified for seeking to organize and support women in prostitution, to provide them with a voice, to enhance self-awareness and to promote their human rights (Misra et al. 2005). The NGOs are *uncritically* marked as bridge-builders between the mainstream society and the women in prostitution, ignoring the politics of funding in NGO-activism and its patronizing and often deradicalized attitude among other issues. The state approach is rejected for its preventive and abolitionist measures, which are seen as leading to the loss of respect and of social and economic rights that have been previously enjoyed by these women whom the legislations claim to protect. The practices such as the *devadasi* practice are appreciated for seemingly offering an internal mechanism to protect the women against social stigma by associating prostitution with religion, and

also for incorporating progressive inheritance customs. The state approach is seen as actually stemming from the desire to impose certain moral perspective rather than to improve the well-being of women in prostitution (ibid.). However as the state endeavours are discredited against the NGO activism; it is important to see that these endeavours are an outcome of the long struggles challenging caste-based prostitution. For instance, the legislation abolishing the *devadasi* system in Maharashtra in 2006 is the result of the pressures put forth by the *devadasi* abolition movement for decades together.

The struggles by women in prostitution in a post-colonial country like India have not been a creation of AIDS intervention and anti-trafficking endeavours. These struggles date back to the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as the women in prostitution battled as individuals and informal groups against stigmas and oppressive laws. The seeds of contemporary organization can be traced to this history of debates and collective actions around prostitution. These historical struggles were started by the women in prostitution, more specifically by those who were socially recognized as 'prostitutes'.

It was the site of the *devadasi* abolition movement on which prostitution came to be debated in 1970s and 1980s, wherein the *devadasi* practice was marked, especially by the dalit movement, as superstition and prostitution. Hence, attempts were made to abolish the custom and to rehabilitate the women. The *devadasi* abolition movement noted that *devadasis* formed a major source for recruitment in prostitution, and located the practice in superstition, poverty and illiteracy among lower castes. The practice itself was seen as a form of prostitution supported by the brahmanical religion. Notably, the movement mobilized the *devadasis*, seeking to bring out their voices and was supported by the dalit movement. A flood of writings—fictional and non-fictional—from men in the movement was a significant mark of the movement. These writings were statements on the lives and experiences of *devadasis*, underlining the vulnerability of their lives, their sexual oppression and the life of sexual promiscuity imposed on them, as well as the their role as a village *balutedar* performing various religious functions for a specific village (Kamble 1998, Rajas 1998).

It is interesting to see that a challenge to the *devadasi* abolition movement that had become rather controversial came from a particular section within the *feminist movement*. It was argued that the *devadasi* abolition movement, by marking the *devadasi* practice as superstition and prostitution reflected the contempt for traditions on the one hand, and patriarchal bias against 'free' women on the other. The movement was seen as emerging out of a

falsely progressive puritan morality, which deprived *devadasis* of their greater freedom, coming from not being confined within the marital framework, and of their high social, religious prestige in their unique role of the ritual person. And thus it was seen to have turned *devadasis* into ordinary prostitutes leading a miserable life in the brothels and hence the movement was marked as patriarchal and brahmanical (Datar 2003).

This severely outraged the activists of the dalit movement who attacked the inability to understand the degradation and oppression of the *devadasi* located in the lower-caste rural life. It was argued that not only the *devadasi*'s life was bound within patriarchal framework, but the system was a caste-based one which allowed the high-caste men free and religiously-sanctioned sexual access to the dalit women which could not be mistaken for the freedom assigned to them.

Thus the new social movements of 1970s provided some space to discuss the issue of prostitution outside the realm of morality, yet the rights of women in prostitution remained largely ignored. Interestingly, the issue of prostitution has been addressed more on the site of dalit movement than the women's movement, as was the case of *devadasi* abolition movement. Dalit literature, especially some of Namdeo Dhasal's poetry and Baburao Bagul's stories have been centred on Mumbai's red light districts, located in the settlements of dalit workers and labourers and have underlined the humiliation, exploitation and pain of the prostitute as symbolizing the caste oppression.³ They have also revealed how the prostitute was located in the material life of dalits in Mumbai. The controversy over Dhasal's *Golpitha* was significant in erupting dalit movement—the Dalit Panthers in Maharashtra.

Durgabai Bhagwat, a well-known doyen of the Marathi literary and cultural world, had reiterated the conventional patriarchal argument that the prostitutes should be respected for performing a necessary function for society. This came to be vehemently attacked by dalit activist-scholar Raja Dhale. Dhale commented that if the downtrodden were to be uplifted by giving them honour in this way, then why has this occupation not been taken up by Durgabai herself (Omvedt 1993), thus hitting at the caste underpinnings of prostitution.

Thus when women's movement has been largely silent on the issue of prostitution (Gangoli 2001; Kapur 2005 and Kotiswaran 2001), the dalit movement has articulated its critique and challenge to prostitution as caste exploitation. It recognizes that not only the majority of women in prostitution are located in the lower-caste material life and in poverty, but that prostitution was the sexual exploitation of the lower-caste women, and it

served to destroy the self-respect of these castes, to subjugate them and keep them underprivileged. The *devadasi* abolition movement has put the dalit movement and some sections from the women's movement face-to-face. It raised the significant question of whether placing lower-caste women against the marital framework empowers them and grants freedom to them as women; or deprives, humiliates and oppresses them as lower-caste women.

Similar struggles could be traced from colonial India, seeking to abolish practices that marked lower-caste women as vulgar, promiscuous and as prostitutes. These practices ranged from the 'religion-based prostitution' (as in case of *devadasis* or *muralis*) to 'popular cultural practices' (as in case of *lavani* or *nautanki* performers). Attempts to regulate women in prostitution were also made through the anti-nautch campaigns, as well as through Contagious Diseases Acts. Different groups from among the colonizers and the colonized were engaged in this debate, though not in a polarized way (Tambe 1998). The anti-nautch campaign constituted largely the middle class social reformers who, in the process of self-definition, branded many lower-caste women engaged in cultural labour in the public sphere⁴ and in sexual labour outside the marital framework as immoral and as prostitutes. In contrast to these women the educated yet chaste, the dutiful and self-sacrificing middle class gentlewomen who were significantly located within the home/private sphere, came to be idealized as representing Indian womanhood.

With the changing political economy of colonial India, these different groups of women lost their customary rights and privileges—such as inheritance rights or spaces to perform at elite gatherings—and were increasingly pushed to engage only in sexual labour for which they came to be condemned. The state sought to homogenize the category of prostitute by branding many women operating outside marital framework—such as courtesans or *devadasis* or popular cultural performers—as immoral and as prostitutes, so that these women could be made available for the white soldiers and could be directly regulated for curbing the spread of venereal diseases among the soldiers. Second, this highlighting of the immoral practices among the colonizers would mark the 'natives' as licentious, barbaric and backward, and consequently legitimize colonial rule. From this emerged legal measures and social campaigns attempting to regulate and eliminate 'immoral' practices such as *devadasi* or *murali*, among others. However, the inclusion of *devadasis* and courtesans in the category of the prostitute came to be opposed by nationalists on the grounds of shielding the 'tradition', who consequently sanitized these practices to be claimed as their own. While marking the superiority of India in the cultural sphere in contrast to the material glories of the colonizing-west, any blame of immorality was vehemently resisted.

Interestingly the engagement of non-brahman movements and dalit movements, specifically of colonial Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu in these debates, shifted the terrains on which the prostitution was contested. State measures and anti-nautch campaigns hardly acknowledged the caste-based exploitative nature of the practices branded as prostitution. On the other hand, the non-brahman and dalit movements underlined prostitution as brahmanical exploitation and fought to abolish the practices through which lower-caste women were recruited into prostitution. They highlighted how lower-caste women were engaged in cultural and sexual labour for gratification of largely upper-caste men.

In Maharashtra several attempts were made specifically by Shivram Janba Kamble to create awareness among lower castes against the *murali* practice and to reform *muralis* through marriage. Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar saw prostitution and the *devadasi*, *murali* or *jogtin* practices as a stigma to the caste and appealed to these women to leave their condemned life and to take up a life of respectability (Pawar and Moon 1989). Periyar considered a *devadasi* merely a participant in the structure of sanctified debauchery and hardly blamed her for engaging in promiscuous existence. Notably, he criticized the social codes that denounced a woman as a prostitute but demurred from judging male promiscuity, and pointed out that while the notion of debauchery made the woman an object of public lust, the idea of chastity insisted that she could be possessed and owned by only one man (Rajdurai and Geetha 1998). The Aadi-Andhra reform movement pointed to the politics of non-brahman movement in ignoring the concerns of outcaste *devadasis* and urged for an abolition of the dedication practice (Vijaishri 2004).

It was the non-brahman and dalit movements that gave *devadasis* and other women some space to articulate their voice in this debate. The *devadasis* organized in cases to challenge the practice condemning Brahmanism, the institutions of marriage and family and the brahmanical ideal of the self-effacing, obedient, *pativrata* wife within it. But at times, also to seek legitimization of the practice on account of its religious sanction, refuting its branding as prostitution. One of the *devadasis*, Ramamirthammal, who was a part of the self-respect movement, rooted the practice in superstition and orthodoxy of brahmanism and propagated its abolition through her novel *Dasigal Mosavalai* (1936) (Kannabiran 2003). The *muralis* challenged the moralistic elements in the non-brahman movement that blamed them for promiscuity.

Interestingly the non-brahman and dalit movements are discredited not only for contributing to the decline of much-celebrated economic independence, cultural significance and sexual autonomy of the *devadasis*.

The antagonism of men from the *devadasi* communities has been located in the internal divisions within the community in terms of family structures and performance traditions, and the men's envy for the fame, wealth and honour of the *devadasis* (Srinivasan 1985). These movements are also perceived as reinforcing the upper-caste ideas of purity of community as well as of female sexuality through their demand for disciplining the lower-caste women condemned as prostitutes.

The case of the bar dancers

Reverting back to recent debates around prostitution, the caste-based voice hardly appears to be touched by the voices of women in prostitution. An examination of one of the recent debates about the ban on bar-dancing in Maharashtra that labelled bar dancers as prostitutes, will uncover the complexities of the issue.⁵ In early 2005, the State of Maharashtra proposed to ban the dance bars, with an aim to protect youths from the morally corrupting influence of bar-dancers, and contradictorily also to end the sexual exploitation of women dancers.

A controversy arose as bar dancers, interestingly, along with bar owners, and several others including some sections of feminists opposed the ban and challenged this arbitrary and hypocritical move of the state. They asserted the dancers' right to work arguing that bar dancing was a rightful work for women, especially as many of the dancers came from traditional dancer communities. The ban thus imposed, according to them, a monolithic, elitist cultural standard of puritanical morality in a pluralist society. They insisted that bar dancing was no different from other respectable and legal spheres in the entertainment-industry thriving on the same depravity for which bar dancers were selectively accused. Rather some of the feminists compared bar dancing of condemned 'bad women' with marriage of 'good women', which too, is violent, degrading and sexually exploitative. However the ban gained considerable support from many, largely as it sought to protect public morality.

In contrast to this, some dalit women's groups and leftist women's organizations gave it a conditional welcome as it attempted to challenge the commercial sexual exploitation of lower-caste women. They highlighted that bar dancing was a livelihood option for women and their dependent families, dispossessed due to industrial closures and agricultural crisis with neo-liberal globalization. Hence the ban could be implemented only after the rehabilitation of these women.

They vehemently rejected the legitimization of bar dancing on the grounds of bar dancers being from traditional dancer communities, arguing that it

reinforced the exploitative and demeaning caste-based occupations. It also questioned whether the union of bar dancers allying with bar owners could have the strength to negotiate better working conditions for the bar dancer. Thus, this debate uncovers the complex linkages between the engagements of certain communities in prostitution as a caste-based occupation, and claims of respectability by these communities.

How can either choice or force in prostitution be framed when these lower-caste women enter prostitution? The entry of these women is neither merely because of physical coercion or economic necessity, nor do they have other options of marriage or work—albeit low status, marginalized and strenuous—from which they can choose prostitution? How can prostitution be defined as work when this work is attributed to them because of their caste location and when it marks them lowly in the caste hierarchy, for engaging in sexually promiscuous activities? How can prostitution enable these women to be sexually autonomous when marriage is denied to them because of their particular caste location? The exploration of these questions will be necessary to transform the contours of debates and collective actions around prostitution in India.

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Notes

1. For a detailed account of VAMP's efforts in controlling AIDS, see Meena Shivdas in this volume (Editors).
2. For a further discussion on this subject, see Swati Ghosh in this volume (Editors).
3. For details see Dhasal Namdeo, 1972, *Golpitha*, Neelkanth Prakashan, Pune and Bagul Baburav, *Aai in Maran Svasta Hota Ahe*, and *Vatevarchi in Jeva Me Jat Chorli Hoti*, 1963, Abhinav Prakashan, Mumbai.
4. For an elaborate discussion on the quest for middle class respectability and women performers in theatre being branded as fallen women, refer Lata Singh in this volume (Editors).
5. For details see the email correspondence among feminists on the issue, available on file with the KSP Women's Studies Centre, University of Pune. See Kunda Pramila Ni, 2006, *Dance Bars Ban Debate: A MaFuAa Standpoint*, Dalit Bahujan Mahila Vicharmanch Prakashan, Mumbai.

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II
Through the
Kaleidoscope of Time
Changing forms and
emerging realities

Edited by
Rohini Sahni and
Hemant Apte



5

Ritualized prostitution

Devadasis to Jogins—a few case studies

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The present paper examines the institution of ritualized prostitution, namely the *Devadasis*. It looks at the transformations of this institution on account of the historical forces that have mutated it into a form that has few but striking resemblances to the original institution.

Presently known as *Jogins* in Andhra Pradesh, the paper analyzes five case studies of this form of *Devadasis*, drawing from a fair amount of oral history and contextualizing the same against the background of their living traditions. These interactions with *Jogins* were spread out over a compact stretch of time when we were working on a Project and stayed with *Samskar*, a Non-Government Organization founded by Mrs Hemalata and Mr Lavanam Gora, which through its *Chelli Nilayam*, is working for the emancipation and rehabilitation of the *Jogins* and their children. The gaps in the interviews and the return to academia forced us to re-examine among other things the validity of oral history. This led us to problematizing the question of integrating non-existent categories that were absent in historical literature. For example, the magical powers ascribed to the hair of *potharajus*, the village priests who do not find mention in history, but were a central part of popular culture in Deccan and closely linked to the *Jogins*. Thus the paradigm of Clifford Geertz ‘a way of seeing is also a way of not seeing’ (Hildred and Geertz 1964, quoted Rotberg 1998: 11) was sought to be problematized and thus emerged this study. One of the central problems is the fundamental disconnect between an institution, in this case the *Jogins*, the representation in normative literature and the received meanings of the same in popular culture and academia.

These interviews were carried over a period of three years and through several visits. The etymological origin of the term *Jogin* is said to be from the Sanskrit term *Yogi*. The female gender is *yogini*, which is translated into Telugu as *Jogini*. The *Jogins* mostly hail from the most deprived social groups of the society. A large majority of them are landless, their labour is underpaid, and they are a socially distinct group with alternate mores and values and in adherence to the same, some girls are married to a village deity. Cornered by compulsions of an inherited social tradition, these girls are sucked into the vortex of concubinage and satiate the lust of the village landlords. Once the landlord abandons, they turn from concubinage to prostitution. This is a much localized and regional variant of the *devadasis* who were temple dancers and were appointed in the temples in India to take care of the Gods and their comfort. However there is a lot of difference between the *devadasis* of the past and the *Jogins* of today.

The *devadasis* or temple girls played a centralized role in the religious and cultural life of India from 10th century onwards, as conveyed through numerous texts and inscriptions. Emerging from the concept of divine fecundity as an integral part of agrarian societies, this institution continued to flourish and is in existence even in the 21st century. In the records of medieval period, the temple girls are hardly referred to as *devadasis*, a name that became synonymous with them in the later period. In medieval literature, they are referred to as *Sanulu*, *Sani*, *Sampradayamuvuru*, and *Gadisanulu*. Some times they are referred to as *Munuti Sanulu*, *Pedamunnuti*, *Sanulu*, *Sani* or *Munnuri*, indicating numeric status (South Indian Inscription Vol. IV). They were employed in the temples as dancers, singers, musicians and for offering certain services to the deities. Some of them were responsible for the smooth functioning of the temple administration. The Tirumala Tirupati inscription mentions the temple dancer as *Tiruvudhisani*, who were women attached to the temple and accompanied the procession of deities through the streets, with their set of pipers, drummers, dancers and dancing masters and exhibited their skills in dancing in the streets and before the deities (Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam Inscriptions Vol. II, p. 167).

Historically the temple dancers of India were influential women who were not only acclaimed for their artistry, but also for their untold wealth and influence in politics. In some instances, they enjoyed a very high status and often shared betel leaf with the wives of kings and conversed with royalty as equals (Paes 1985). They were honoured in the public in the past, and even offered seats alongside the figures of royalty. Modern classical dance forms such as the *Bharatnatyam*, originally *Sadir*, *Mohini Attam* and *Odissi* owe their origin to these temple dancers.

The *devadasis* never married a mortal man and they were regarded as ever-aspicious ones (*Nityasumangali*), for they were married to God, an immortal one and hence could never become a widow. There is no conclusive proof that they practiced prostitution though it cannot be denied that, depending on their status, they cohabited with men of their class. It must be remembered that what we call prostitution today was not seen as prostitution, in that sense, in earlier times as the reading of the past is mediated to us in the frames of Victorian morality. We thus have early British writers and translators employing overarching and broad categories to non-monogamous relationships without going into the subtle nuances of the same in a historical context. Thus, we read the same as a corollary of a free or unmarried life but with a certain amount of choice. In a patriarchal society, all spaces, private and public are dominated by men. Hence the choice was whether you remained tied to the private space of one individual or family as procreator for his heirs, or you opted for public space where you were able to pursue arts, and also look after the management of land and property and be available to the donor (Datar 2003: 16).

The temple girls were a product of the feudal medieval world where the production of art and all aesthetics revealed the dominant ideas and hierarchies. As a mirror image of royalty, we see the divinity with regalia, consorts etc. This was the period when there were a number of attempts to authenticate and legitimize the new feudal polity of the period through a parallelism between the deity and the king (Narayana et al. 1987: 348–73). In fact the deity in the temple is equated with the king and a parallel world of authority is reconstructed on the spiritual plane. Ritual worship in the temple is conceived on the same lines as ritual services offered to the king. Since the temple and the God were homologous with the royal court and the king respectively, the *Devasthanas* had to maintain the same bureaucracy as that of the *Rajasthanas*. Therefore the temple girls were the link between the God and the king and served to establish the power of the lord and give it legitimacy in the eyes of the people (Pande 2006: 496).

In fact we often find the distinction between the *Devasthanas* and the *Rajasthanas* court diminishing with the interchangeability of women in the temple services with those of the king's court. In this background of medieval times, it happened to be these girls who crossed from one boundary to another with ease and were the objects of ritual exchange between the king's court and the temple. These girls could also, with ease, cross another boundary, set up by our traditional scriptures, that of an ideal traditional woman, who is a *pativrata* and tied to the home, by not being tied to one man but to an immortal god and the temple (Pande 2004: 30–31). The above shows that

there can be a multiple reading of the position of such women from a normative point of view and also at a considerable distance from the same. A parallel illustration is made by Romila Thapar in unraveling the layers that went into the construction of *Sakuntala* (Thapar 2002). All the *devadasis* were regarded as *Nityasumangali*, women who were auspicious because of their marriage to an immortal. Their toe ring was a symbol of this status.

The *Devadasis* participated in charities, public utilities work and were also involved in elaborate ritualistic services. They came from different social backgrounds, each of them performed a different ritual according to which their status varies. The most important ones came from elite and royal families and attached themselves to the service of the temple and the deity. The King himself made these appointments and often they were daughters of the nobles and other elites of society (Temple Inscriptions of Andhra Pradesh, 1980). A record dated 1390 AD states that the king Achyuta Raya ordered the daughter of Ranjakam Kuppasani to serve as a dancer in the temple of Sri Venkatesa at Tirumala in the year 1531 (Tirumala Tirupati Devasthanam Inscriptions, Vol. III, No. 2, p. 23). Probably their public appearances were restricted to certain ceremonial occasions. These girls represented the hereditary class namely, *sampradayamuvaru* or *kanya sampradayamuvaru*.

Next to these were the *sanis*, described as *nartaki* (dancers), and *gayikas* (singers). These artists were followed by the fan-bearing *sanis*. Besides these there were a large number of temple girls who did menial jobs and came from lower sections of society. They performed duties like supplying flowers or decorating the floor with various designs. Sometimes, to supply flowers to the Gods, flower gardens were raised and temple girls were in charge of maintaining these temple gardens. Duties like cleaning the premises, cleaning the cooking vessels, husking paddy, cutting vegetables and other sundry jobs were also done by these girls (Raman 1975).

The temple girls were paid, generally in kind, with a share in temple property. They were often given a part of the *prasada* offered to the deity. Occasionally they were also paid in cash. Many a times, the donors specified the manner in which the temple girls would enjoy share in temple lands, and deposited certain amount in the temple treasury for their maintenance. The temple dancers acquired a lot of wealth as can be seen from the numerous grants made to the temples (Mysore Epigraphical Reports 1914). They also paid taxes to the State. Indeed such was the prestige and status of the dancing girls, especially the ones that came from elite sections that the kings and noble men had no hesitation in marrying them (Kunjanpallai 1970). The temple girls, therefore, performed a variety of duties. They were in charge of maintaining temple properties, supervising grants or other endowments

of the temple, mobilizing temple resources through leasing out lands and cattle, and performing various tasks connected with the day-to-day running of the temple (Pande 2004: 36).

The girls who were dedicated to the temples were a very important part of the social milieu and elaborate rules and regulations were laid down for their qualification and the performance of their duties. The ritual process of the initiation ceremony for the temple girls was elaborate and public, as that of a marriage performed in the presence of a large group of audience. In order to legitimize this system, elaborate ceremonies were performed and the king, nobility and other sections of people participated depending on the class of the *devadasis*. The ceremony was held in the precincts of the temple and it acquired the aura of a religious function and through this act the community, the priest and the noble men all became a part and parcel of the system, granting it legitimacy. It was necessary that, at the time of initiation, the girl should not have attained puberty. Before her retirement, her caste-group was expected to designate her successor from among their families. The family members hardly refused, for this brought in a lot of socio-religious and financial advantages to the family (Tarachand 1991). Often these were children born as a result of illegal alliances to the mothers of the same profession.

There was an elaborate ceremony of initiation performed to indicate the level of codification and reutilization that went into the transformation of this institution. It is interesting to see here that we can observe the regional elements in the form of traditions, norms, values and cultural practices like dress, gestures that went into the production of sophisticated dance movements (Eugenio 1991). The procedure began with the senior *devadasi* of the first *kudi* (house), presenting the girl's application to the *Yogakkar*. The application took the form of a request to be enrolled as one of the *devadasis* and be granted a *kudi* (house) and *padi* (allowance for temple service). The *Yogakkar* took into account the number of girls admitted in that particular year and the status of the applicant's family and then accepted or rejected the application. If the application was approved, a document was executed with the mother or the nearest female kin of the girl and this was considered as the Jataka ceremony (Pillay 1977).

After this, the marriage or *tallikattu* ceremony of the girl with the deity took place on an appointed day. All the ceremonies of an orthodox Hindu marriage were followed and the priest officiated on behalf of the deity and tied the *tali*, consisting of a triangulate *bottu* bearing the image of Ganesa with a gold bead on either side around the girl's neck (Thurston et al. 1987). She was also initiated into the act of dancing. For two days celebrations of the

'marriage', like feasting and merriment took place. The girl was also taken in a procession through the streets to make every one aware of her identity. With the loss of patronage to the temples, these women lost their regular income and this system withered. Most of these women opted for commercial prostitution and lost their religious mystique and sanctity. As the Zamindari houses declined in status, their traditional patrons also declined. Earlier, these women had acceptance in their own community, which allowed them to keep relations with the family which the ordinary prostitute could not, as this was a product of the long evolution of the village communities where such ideas found acceptance.

A new chapter and an entirely new look starts with the first legal initiative taken to stop the *devadasi* system that dates back to 1934, when the Bombay *Devadasis* Protection Act was passed by the British Government.¹ This Act covered the Bombay state, as it existed then. This Act declared dedication of a woman as an illegal act, irrespective of the fact whether the dedication was made with her consent or not. According to this Act, marriage by a *devadasi* was to be considered lawful and valid, and the children from such alliances were to be treated as legitimate. This Act was adopted in 1947 and was also adopted in the former state of Mysore, renamed as Karnataka in 1972. This Act abolished the dedication of women as *devadasis* to Hindu deities, idols and objects of worship in the temple and the religious institutions. It stated that such a practice however ancient and pure in its origin leads many of the women so dedicated, to the life of prostitution (Madras Act, XXXI of 1947). Hence by 1947, most of the *devadasis* or temple girls were leading the life of a prostitute.

The *devadasi* cult is more predominant in South India and less in North as there are also no large temple complexes in the north, thereby indicating lack of patronage. Most probably when the Turks came to India and attacked the temples for their wealth, the administration of these temples was destabilized. A number of *devadasis* then migrated to the South or took to various other professions. Though the *devadasi* system has been abolished by law today, there are a number of regional variations of this institution. In Kerala they are known as *Maharis*, *Natis* in Assam, *Muralis* in Maharashtra, *Basavis* in Karnataka, *Bhavanis* in Goa, *Kundikars* on the West coast, *Thevardiyar* in Tamil Nadu and *Jogins* in Andhra Pradesh. Most of these women come from the lower sections of society and practice prostitution.

In spite of various Acts and reforms, the institution of *devadasis* is still prevalent today. Many of these women earn their livelihood through street performance, begging or prostitution. The National Commission of Women (NCW) conducted a survey and wrote to the various State governments to

inform them about the number of *devadasis* in their state. The Government of Orissa intimated that there were no *devadasis* except one in Puri. The Government of Tamil Nadu also intimated that there were no *devadasis* in the state. Maharashtra informed that for 'Devadasi Maintenance Allowance', a total of 8,793 applications were received and after conducting a survey, 6,314 were rejected and 2,479 *devadasis* were declared eligible for the scheme. At the time of sending the information, 1,432 *devadasis* were receiving this allowance. However, Andhra Pradesh stated that it had 16,624 application of which 14,339 were identified as *devadasis*. Karnataka stated that it had received 22,941 applications of which 16,560 were identified as *devadasis*.

There is a lot of difference between the *devadasi* system of the past and the *Jogin* system of the present. The *devadasi* system was not confined to a particular caste but spread all over. Unlike *Jogins*, the *devadasis* in the past were not treated as untouchables. Most *Jogins* are *Malas* and *Madigas*, considered the lowest among the scheduled castes. Some scheduled caste communities and some backward caste communities mainly from fishermen; *Tenugu* and *Naikpod* castes practice the *Jogins* system.

The semi-arid tropics of the South are prone to constant droughts and this pushes people to new levels of poverty. Besides people from the low castes do not own land and hence remain dependent on the landed gentry and money-lenders. This situation leads to prostitution. Large-scale commercial prostitution developing in industrial cities extends its tentacles in search of easy victims and the tradition provides legitimacy for this profession (Datar 2003). The main causes for converting young girls to *Jogins* are recurring death of children in a family, regular occurrence of diseases in the house or village, outbreak of disease in the village or pure lust of landlords. The nexus between caste and forced prostitution is quite strong and the *devadasi* system is no exception. Most Indian girls and women in India's urban brothels come from lower-caste, tribal or minority communities. Like other forms of violence against women, ritualized prostitution, is a system designed to kill whatever vestiges of self-respect the untouchable castes have in order to subjugate them and keep them underprivileged² (Narula 1999).

By keeping Dalit women as prostitutes and by tying prostitution to bondage in rural areas, upper-caste men reinforced their declaration of social and economic superiority over the lower castes. The girl, who is made a *Jogin* is given some money but still works in the fields. She lives separately in the village and is used by all the men, including Dalit men. The number of *Jogins* who enter prostitution suggests that this custom is one of the causal factors for recruitment of particular women to become a prostitute. It is the appropriation of this feudal custom by the capitalist market economy and the

urbanization process. The regional dimension is seen here in the fact that this system is preponderant in Telengana which is one of the most backward regions of India and where there is a semi-feudal economy with strong patron-client relationships at the village level (Das 1982). Moreover, unlike other regions, there is no urban economy and the agrarian form of production is dominant. Therefore the agrarian relations go on to reinforce the traditional hierarchies and mind-sets, including the deadweight of tradition seen in the feudal privileges.

The *Potharajus* are the only set of people who can convert a girl to a *Jogin*. This is because of the divine power he has in his tuft of hair, which is not cut since his birth. If any family desires to offer their daughter as *Jogin*, they approach the Potharaju. Village elders may sometimes advise a household to offer a *Jogin* to the village for the betterment of the village as a whole. The *Potharaju* will perform the marriage of the young girl to the local deity along with the yellow thread ceremony, *Mangala Suthram* and adorning of leather, token having the holy foot prints of Yellamma, *Yellamma Paadalu* in her neck. The entire village celebrates this moment as a festival. The transformation of an ordinary girl to a *Jogin* is made in three stages. At the first instance, the *Jogin* girl's age will be three to six years, and she will be married to the God. At the second instance, she will be offered to the village head-man, i.e., Patel, Patwari, Dora or landlord, after attaining the age of puberty. Then onwards, at third stage the *Jogin* will be treated as a village asset. The *Potharaju* is treated as her guru.

In the village festivals such as the *Oora pandaga*, the *Jogin* plays an important part along with the *Bindla* and the *Potharaju* who are non-brahmin priests. This festival is celebrated during the monsoon season, which is a season of epidemics and diseases and also marks the beginning of the sowing season. The villagers pray to the village God or Goddesses (namely *Mysamma*, *Mahalaxmamma*, *Pochamma*, *Pothanna*, *Yellamma*, and so on) to make their villages free from the epidemics and to give them good crops. The *Bindla* and *Potharaju* belong to Scheduled Caste (SC) community and the *Kolupula* or the *Jogin* belongs to SC or Backward Classes (BC) community. The *Bindla* person will do the priestly duties at *Oora pandaga*. He will be assigned villages based on the number of villages and availability of *Bindla* persons. The *Bindla* will chant the mantras (religious chantings) and oversees the proceedings. The *Kolpula* (*Jogin*) will perform the *Rangam* (telling forecast of the village on behalf of the God or the Goddess). Based on her predictions sacrifices would be made.

The *Potharajus* have to perform different duties like giving amulates (*Thayathu*), dancing around the dead body and converting young girls to *Jogins*.

The *Potharajus* exist in the village with their divine powers which is stated to be stored in their hair. A *Potharaju* will be identified by a group of prominent persons in the village like Patwari, Patel, landlords, representatives from different village-level artisan communities like potters, goldsmiths, blacksmiths, carpenters, fishermen, *Neeradi*, *Medari*, and so on.

The *Potharaju's* socio-economic condition is also very poor. They do not get any remuneration for their role in the above festivals, except toddy. In normal days, they beg in their villages or survive on superstitious practices like *Tantrik poojas*, *banamathi* (witch craft) and the likes. Their livelihood depends on annual alms in the shape of grains during the harvesting season. They beg in their villages, along with their family members after grains are exhausted. If they refuse to perform, the villagers will force them into it by intimidating them or resorting to physical torture such as beating them. During this festival, the villagers will offer a goat or a sheep to God, through the *Potharaju*. Amidst beat of drums and noise the *Potharaju* will perform the sacrifice by the biting at the neck of the lamb with his teeth, till it bleeds to death. The blood will be offered to God. This process is known as *Gavu*.

With the intensive efforts taken by the district administration in 2001–2002, almost all *Potharajus* have been rehabilitated. It was in 1988 that Smt Kumudben Joshi, the then Governor of Andhra Pradesh took an initiative and got many *Jogins* married. Nearly 250 *Potharajus* came and cut their hair and these have been rehabilitated under various schemes of Andhra Pradesh Scheduled Caste Development Corporation by the district administration. On 1 August 2002, 41 *Pothurajus* removed their tuft and another 235 relinquished their trinkets, lashes and whips to join the mainstream. With these steps, almost all *Potharajus* have been brought to the mainstream and one can say that their system is almost wiped out, though the same cannot be said for the *Jogins*.

As our case studies will show, the system of *Jogins* continues to exist. Safia Sirkar reports:

Andhra Pradesh has the dubious distinction of topping all states in the trafficking of women. A book devoted to inter-state trafficking named *Shattered Innocence* by Prajwala, a non-government organization reveals that a majority of the women in the age group of 12–35 years in the red light areas of Delhi, Mumbai, Kolkata and Goa are from A.P. The “catchment” areas for the racketeers include almost all the 23 districts spread across coastal Andhra, Rayalaseema and the Telangana regions. Eighty per cent of the victims belong to socially and economically disadvantaged families. Seventy per cent are from backward and drought-prone areas. Eighty-five per cent are illiterate (Sirkar, 2003).

Case 1

Laxmi lives in Taglepalli village in Nizamabad district. She is about 5'4" tall and weighs about 40 to 45 kgs. She is quite fair and neat in her appearance. Her age is about 17 years though she is not sure about this. She is a *Jogin* and we are presenting her case because she was identified as a *Jogin* at the age of five and initiated into it at the age of 11. She is a Harijan and lives in the Harijanwada of the village.

Laxmi's mother had an unhappy early life. When she was about six to eight years old, she was kidnapped from her natal home and forcibly married to a cousin, who was physically handicapped. After she had two children, a girl and a boy, she was deserted. She then came to stay at her maternal place. The mother today is 35 years of age and works as an agricultural labourer, earning between 400 and 450 rupees per month. The son works as a buffalo-keeper earning about 50 rupees per month. In her childhood Laxmi had the chicken pox following which her mother and grandmother made a vow to god that if she survived, she would be given to Goddess *Pochamma*, as a prospective *Jogin*. From the age of five, she has been designated as a *Jogin*.

When Laxmi reached puberty at the age of 11, a grand ceremony was organized in the village temple and every one in the village attended it. There were a lot of decorations with festoons, lamps and incense. A sheep was also sacrificed. The *Potharaju*, the traditional priest performed the ceremony, whereby she was married to the Goddess. Laxmi thought it normal that though she was married to the Goddess, she had to first have sex with the priest and then be the keep of a toddy tapper, who brought her a *Mangalsutra* and new clothes. She had to perform dances in the temple and village gatherings whenever invited. She had to also perform dances in front of dead bodies and when the villagers placed some coins on the dead body, she had to pick these up with her mouth. This ritual was enacted till the dead body reached the funeral site. She was the one who led the procession.

The toddy tapper visited her whenever he felt like but she was never allowed to visit his house or even touch his wife and children because of her caste background. Though the toddy tapper had physical relations with her, he would not even have water in her house because she was an untouchable and she found nothing wrong in this. Two years back she gave birth to a boy who died soon after his birth. When we met her she was five months pregnant, and remained sick most of the time.

She thought that there were many disadvantages in being born a girl and the case was not the same with boys. Since she was designated as a *Jogin* there were many restrictions on her. After puberty, she was never allowed to

play or go alone to the market. She was never allowed to laugh aloud or talk to members of the opposite sex. She felt no exploitation in this arrangement because she thought that she was being looked after by the toddy tapper. She was quite aware that he was free to leave her whenever he decided and this, she attributed to her fate of being born a woman. She felt that may be life for her unborn child, if she was a girl, might have some ray of sunshine, though she felt that if she had a boy there were likely to be no problems.

After *Samskara*, a voluntary organization working in the area, started literacy classes, she did go to these some times, though she was not very clear what it meant to her life. She felt that working in the field as an agricultural labourer was more useful in terms of the income it fetched. *Samskara* has brought in some awareness in the village and asked the *Jogins* not to dance in front of dead bodies. It has also prevented new *Jogins* from being initiated. All this has made Laxmi very insecure and alienated. She felt that if all this meant that the toddy keeper could not visit her, then she did not know how to support herself and might have to look for another man to support her. Laxmi is completely locked in the social world that made her a *Jogin*.

Case 2

Jangamani was twelve when she was forced to become a *Jogin*. Her village had a severe drought and her parents, on the advice of upper-caste Hindus in the village, dedicated her to the local goddess, *Yellamma*. She was married to a *potharaju* (priest-representative of the local deity) and declared a *Jogin*. The same night, a village Zamindar raped her. He stayed with her for three weeks, after which he declared her available to other men in the village. The drought ended soon but Jangamani's life continued. Not only did she have to sleep with any man who wished to do so, she also had to dance in front of dead bodies at funerals and beg at each house in the harvest season. To Jangamani, religious prostitution was a normal way of life. She had three children and she took care of them with the earnings she received through prostitution. She did not have any land, so she could think of no other way of livelihood. She saw her daughter becoming a *Jogin* because she felt that her job was very noble and she commanded a lot of respect. She believed that it was because she had become a *Jogin* that the drought of her village came to an end. We tried to talk to her and explain how the system had exploited her but she thought that that was what the Gods had destined for her. She asked us who she was to question the Gods and had there not been drought in her village she would not have become a *Jogin*. *Samskar* has intervened and

was providing education to her daughters and encouraged her to lead a life of her choice. It was only then that she realized that she had a choice of not leading the life of a prostitute. She is one of the many *Jogins* in Nizamabad district today who have managed to rise above an oppressive tradition. A dent is being made at the source of the tradition itself.

Case 3

Synamma is a sex worker in the town of Bodhan. She was five years old when her grandmother was combing her hair and discovered that there was a knot in her hair and it was getting matted. This was a sure sign that God had wished her to be a *Jogin*. When she was 13, a marriage feast was organized which was attended by all the villagers. She remembered being very happy because she was the centre of attention and she was dressed up in new clothes. There were drums being played and she was married to the village God. After the marriage, she was raped by the *Potharaju* and the only memory she has is of him reeking with liquor and her experience being very painful. However, she had no respite and soon every other night there was a new man from the village. She remembered sleeping with many men and many times she refused to entertain men but her parents would not listen. Her father became her procurer and decided on the price. Her hut had a separate room whose door would open from the back-side and men could enter quietly from here. She led this life for eight years and when the clients' number reduced she started working as a coolie. But her earnings were not enough to take care of her family of three, two boys and one girl. She then moved to Bodhan town and took a room on rent. She started moving around the roads and soon she found a large clientele, and till the time we met her she was quite satisfied with her life and stated that this was the only skill she had. She wanted a different life for her children but was not sure that she would be able to give that to them. She did not want to go back to the village or even be associated with the work of *Samskar* and other *Jogins*.

Case 4

Jayamma is in her early thirties and belongs to Rudrur village. She was destined to be a *Jogin* because her family had vowed that if their fourth-born was a son they would make their eldest daughter a *Jogin*. When she was eleven she was dedicated to goddess *Pochamma*. She saw the other girls in

her village being married and she had thought that she was also being married like them. She was very excited about her marriage and did not know what her future held for her. The only memory which she had was of sleeping with the Patel of the village and then with the *Potharaju* followed by a series of village men. She was given a separate room in the hut and every one in the village recognized her as a *Jogin*. In return for her services she was given food and clothing. Most of her customers left her grains and clothes and she survived thus. She then started working on construction sites because her earning through sex work was not sufficient. Here, also, because every one knew who she was, she could not say no to the contractor who started visiting her by night in her hut. The moment she became pregnant the contractor dissociated himself from her on the pretext that she was taking too many leaves and was not attending to work regularly. She then moved out to another town and started doing construction work. At night when a labourer visited her and left some money with her she found it useful and thus continued to be a sex worker. She had been given land by the government but it lay idle. On being asked why she preferred to be in the sex trade, she said that it gave her a sense of power over men. She was able to choose the men she could sleep with. Earlier, young and old alike would come and force themselves upon her and she had no say. At the moment she could reject men and decide with whom she wanted to sleep. Earlier she was paid in kind (mostly clothes and grain) but now she demanded cash.

Case 5

Shobana is from Govvur village. When she was 10 years old, her brother suffered fits at regular intervals. Her mother thought dedicating her 10-year-old daughter would cure her brother and though she became a *Jogin* her brother was not cured of his ailment. Shobana remembered her marriage vividly. The whole outcaste hamlet of the Madiga community (Harijan community) was invited to the wedding. The small hut was decorated with mango leaves and branches. A *pandal* was erected with Palmyra leaves. The guests drank arrack and were dancing. Shobana was dressed up as a bride. She was brought to the dais and placed before the deity which was made of two bundles of straw. She remembers a *mangalsutra* (a symbol of marriage in the form of a necklace made with a thread, yellow in colour) being tied around her neck. Her first memory after the marriage is of the landlord, Dora, arriving in the hut and taking her into his possession. He would often send across grains and vegetables for her and this was much-welcomed by the family as they

were better-off than the other villagers who did not have the luxury of eating like them. She was now the main breadwinner of the family as her father would spend his time in drinking arrack supplied by the landlord and work in his fields as a daily-waged labourer when work was available. The landlord had paid her father rupees 200. She bore the landlord two children but he never claimed her children as his own. Soon the Dora became interested in a younger *Jogin* and his visits to her hut became irregular and after a while they stopped completely. Shobana started entertaining other men from the village. Since she was not educated she survived on the earnings, which she received from her clients in Govvur village. She was determined that her two children would have a better life, and she strove to give them education. She, then, came in touch with some volunteers of *Samskar* who had just come out of curiosity to see if they could be of any use to her. Initially she was very much scared to become a member for she had only been exploited all her life. In *Chelli Nilayam* she met many other *Jogins* who had quit prostitution and whose children were being taken care of by the organization. She decided to stay back and has now learnt certain techniques of agriculture which enables her to working in the fields. Her daughter works as a teacher in Hyderabad but she does not keep in touch with her mother. Shobana realized that probably her daughter did not want to acknowledge the fact that her mother was a *Jogin*. Shobana did not have the address of her daughter and was not sure what she was doing, but some one in the village had told her some time back that her daughter was a teacher in Hyderabad. She felt it was good for her daughter to leave her past behind otherwise she would never get any respect.

While there are many studies of rural indebtedness in India pointing to the vicious circle of agrarian poverty, drought, exploitative interest rates and the subjection of the peasantry, this scholarship has not extended to other areas. A beginning has been made by looking at the causal relationship between alcoholism and the depression of the rural labour market, prompting the government to take action. Surprisingly both the above phenomena are pan-Indian and have drawn a great deal of attention and hence theorized adequately. We have also seen that these studies are prompted by cues from the field, i.e., grassroots movements like loan-waiver movements and the anti-arrack movement (Pande 2005: 212–26). In the case of the *Jogins*, such factors are absent. Compounding this is the fact that this is a purely regional phenomenon.

Regional histories and traditions are acting as dead-weight on the society and this is contested in Telangana by the Naxalites and other groups. Thus, a combination of agrarian society that has not modernized but still has the

vestiges of feudalism and feudal culture locates these institutions in the transitional stage of modernity. It is here the understanding of the past, particularly evolution and transformation of village communities is vital to the understanding of the *Jogin* system. We may thus conclude by saying that the *Jogin* system is a reflection of the cultural and economic relations that are prevalent in Telangana. It is here that the traditional forms of dominance, i.e., treating women as property is fully expressed as village consent.

In the ultimate analysis, the cost of maintaining this institution is borne by women and that too by women from the Dalit and most backward communities. The insular and localized nature of village economy and, by extension, the village cultures have transformed the institution of the *devadasis* into *Jogins*, debasing them from time to time. This debasement is seen in the emergence of newer rituals that are agreed upon by the entire village. In the economic context, the decline of traditional zamindari houses and concurrent impoverishment has led to two sets of developments i.e. newer and wider base of patrons who emulate the culture of their masters by maintaining women as keeps to bolster their prestige and satiate lust. Second, impoverishment has forced a large number of women to become *Jogins*.

We thus see that whereas the *devadasis* were few in number and at the service of the village elite, the *Jogins* are more in number and have a larger clientele, a reflection of the emergent dominant groups and expression of the politico-economic power into the cultural domain. The rise of intermediate and non-zamindari castes as prime social actors has also contributed to the perpetuation of this institution in Telangana in its most debased form. Thus, there is a considerable distance from the concubine of the inscriptions to the *Jogin* who is more of a public property where the relative autonomy of sex is eroded since she has no economic independence and very few choices. She is ultimately converted to a lowly prostitute, selling her body for survival whereas the only saving grace is the nomenclature of the *Jogin* which links her to a historical past and characterizes her mildly in the popular discourse for reasons of legitimacy, which the patrons draw from this relationship. In actuality, this distinction is only a linguistic one as the ground reality indicates that economic compulsions reduce a *Jogin* to a sex worker.

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Notes

1. The editors would like to add here that already beginning the late 1860s, temple dancing girls, temple servants and others were convicted under the Indian Penal Code. See Parker, Kunal (1998), A Corporation of Superior Prostitutes: Anglo-Indian Legal Conceptions of Temple Dancing Girls, 1800–1914, *Modern Asian Studies*, 32, 3, Cambridge University Press, Page 561.
2. For a detailed discussion on prostitution as caste-based exploitation, refer to Anagha Tambe in this volume (Editors).

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6

Ethnographic study of community-based sex work among Nats

R.C. SWARANKAR

Women belonging to *Nat*, *Rajnat*, *Bedia*, *Kanjar* communities of Rajasthan have been practicing commercial sex for a long time. Historically, *Nat* women were known for their song and dance performances especially on festive occasions such as weddings or in the case of a birth in the house. They were gifted with cash and kind for their traditional skills, demonstrated in the form of song and dance. They were part of the *Jajmani* system and had relationship of '*Jajman-Jachak*' (pattern and performer) in the traditional social structure.

Women, particularly, belonging to caste *Nat* used to perform *Notanki*, street plays, dance and music, and were involved in prostitution as well. *Rajnats*, a clan of the *Nats*, were associated with the princely houses. *Nat* communities, lead a nomadic life and were involved in the occupation of entertainment, *Khel-Tamasha* (street plays) to people. The women from this community were engaged in dancing and singing. Prostitution locally known as '*dhandra*' practiced by these women, has permissiveness by the *Nat* community. Their perception and value system about sex and attitude towards sexuality and sexual relations are different from the normative pattern of high caste Hindus.

It is estimated that 25,000 women belonging to *Nat* community are identified as sex workers. The present study on sexual behaviour of female sex workers belonging to the *Nat* nomadic community in Jaipur is carried out with the following objectives:

1. To make an ethnographic documentation of *Nat* families in their socio-cultural context.
2. To study the socio-economic, psychological and situational factors resulting into commercial sex by their women.
3. To understand their perception and practices related to sexual behaviour.
4. To investigate the inter-relationships and interdependence at the levels of:
 - (a) *Nat* female commercial sex worker (FSW) with other members of family and kin;
 - (b) FSW with those in sexual trade, i.e., hoteliers, transporters, middlemen, clients, and so on;
 - (c) *Nat* community with castes and other social groups in the village(s) and surroundings.

With these objectives, the study attempts to profile the socio-cultural and economic background of the *Nat* community. From this, we can document the type, extent and network of interaction and inter-relationship among the women (from the community) practicing sex work, their clients, sex traders and caste groups.

Research Methodology

Both secondary and primary data using qualitative as well as quantitative methods were used in the study. As secondary data—literature, directly and distantly related to the objectives of the study mentioned above—was reviewed. Primary data of qualitative and, to some extent quantitative types were collected from the respondents by trained investigators during November 1999 and October 2000. Research tools such as observations related to commercial sex activities, key informant interviews, in-depth interviews, semi-structured and structured interview schedules were used to gather information from the field.

Nats are distributed in almost all the districts of Rajasthan. Four hamlets were selected—two hamlets on National Highway-08 (Jaipur–Ajmer), one on state highway of Jaipur, and one in the interior, also in Jaipur district, the state capital. *Nat* women in prostitution were interviewed from the sampled hamlets in the eastern district of Jaipur and adjoining areas. Truck drivers and other clients, depending on their cooperation were asked to share information and experiences with female sex workers of the *Nat* community.

Dhabas, parking and resting places of truck drivers, grocery shops, and liquor shops located close to such road side hamlets of FSWs were used as the contact points.

Description of Nats

The *Nat* being entertainers, were traditionally patronized by the Rajput rulers. *Jagirdars* used to invite *Nat* women at the time of birth, marriage and other ceremonies. From this position of being entertainers, prostitution or commercial sex *dhandā* has now become the primary occupation of *Nat* women.

In the social framework of the *Nats*, the traditional caste Panchayat continues to be a strong and effective political institution. A *Nat* girl who has accepted the *dhandā*, cannot make nuptial alliance within the community, but she is allowed to marry outside the community. Clients from other castes, known as *kajja* in *Nat* language are free to have sex with a FSW, but a *Nat* boy is not allowed to have sex with *Nat* FSW. Such a boy can be socially boycotted from the *Nat* community.

Early marriage is preferred in the case of an alliance between a *Nat* boy and the *Kanjar* girl, which is possible by paying the bride price. Relatively affluent families manage to get girls for their boys in marriage from the *Nats*. Child marriage too is prevalent among the *Nats*. A *Nat* woman who is a sex worker does not marry. FSW is supposed to abandon the *dhandā* after having a *ghar janwai* (son-in-law who lives at her residence).

In case of a nuclear family, it comprises of a *Nat* woman who is an FSW, her children and *ghar janwai*. On the other hand, in case of a joint family structure of the *Nat* caste, there are one or more FSWs, unmarried sisters with or without *ghar janwai*, brothers, unmarried and married with their wives and children and parents. Although the family structure of the *Nats* is patriarchal, the women, particularly the FSW, are the axis of the economy of the entire family.

Women occupy lower status in the patriarchal male-dominated social order of the *Nat* community. Despite the FSW being an earning member of the family, she is considered lower in status than a married woman. Marriage of the male members is considered essential to sustain the lineage amongst the *Nats*. An FSW, thus earns to meet the expenditure of the marriage of her brothers.

Nats, traditionally, have been associated with the Rajputs. Inter-community marriage is not allowed by the community. *Nat* women practicing

commercial sex, (*dhanda*) are looked down upon by the people living in the nearby villages. Villagers have experienced difficulties in marrying off their sons and daughters in villages where *Nat* women are pursuing *dhanda*. The *Nats* live a socially isolated life from the caste villages. They are socially ostracized and are barred from entering the main village. The caste endogamy of *Nat* is fast disappearing. The *Nats* led a nomadic life in the traditional social structure, which has progressively declined as they started living a sedentary life outside the caste villages.

Socialization for Becoming FSW

The *Patelan* (retired FSW) is the woman who initiates the socialization of a girl to become an FSW. Such a girl comes in close contact of retired FSWs and eventually, with the clients and their activities. Elderly married women control the younger FSW in the family, as seen at two hamlets. A working FSW describes her work and occupation to the girl undergoing the process of socialization. The woman in the *dhanda* spends time to engage clients in her occupation and allied activities.

Nath Utarai

The *Nath* is the nose ring worn by a *Nat* girl for the first time. The first initiation of sex with the client is referred to as *Nath Utarai*, literally meaning the removal of this nose ring. Once initiated, the girl is expected to follow the norms of the practice, which include being bound to sex as an occupation, spending nominal time with clients, forbiddance of emotional attachment with clients, refusal of *Nat* males as clients, among others. These norms are taught and passed over from one generation to the other, from the retired FSW to the working FSW.

Learning about sex behaviour

After *Nath Utarai* the *Patelan* (retired FSW), acquaints the newly inducted FSW about the sex behavioural, and secrets of the profession (e.g., minimum time for penetrative sex to be given to clients) after which such a woman is placed into indiscriminate commercial sex with clients.

In one of the cases of the survey an FSW from *Teelawala* had visited hotels at Jodhpur earlier. The earnings from dance in hotel are more than the

commercial sex practiced by an FSW at her native hamlet. In the hamlet, the FSW charges Rs 60 from a client and for staying overnight a client has to pay Rs 200–500. The maximum income of an FSW per night from some special client(s) may be Rs 3,000–5,000, as stated by an FSW.

Sex traders

The *Jhumars* get women to work as FSWs, preferably with the consent of their husbands. It has been observed that a large number of *Nat* community women have migrated to Mumbai for sex work. The retired FSWs, involved in sex trade are termed as ‘Aunty’ or ‘Madam’ in Mumbai, who provide the accommodation and place to FSWs for sex work. In case of police raids, the financial burden of rescuing the *Nat* FSW is equally shared between the *Mukhi* and the FSW concerned.

The Working of *Nat* Community Female Sex Workers

Nat FSWs are classified into two categories—local *Nat* women working as FSWs and, outsiders who are hired from other villages. FSWs are housed as tenants in the houses owned by the retired *Nat* FSW. In the hamlets observed, it was found that the *patelan* is responsible for introducing the girl/woman to the clients. A fee of Rs 10 is charged from each FSW for the use of place for performing sex with a client.

Migratory nature of operations of FSWs

The working of the FSWs is dependant on the number of clients at a particular place. It has been observed that when there is a decline in the number of clients, the community migrates to another location to attract new clients. There could also be a possible replacement of the existing community of *Nat* women, with new FSW, thereby retaining the novelty factor. FSWs are taken to other villages under a contract, which materializes between the FSW, the *Patelan* and the sex traders.

Sexual behaviour of migrant *Nat* community FSWs

Sexual behaviour of the *Nat* community FSWs with clients in Mumbai is different from the one that is practiced in the native hamlets of Rajasthan.

In Mumbai, an FSW has to remain at the disposal of a client for a longer period and that pays her manifold more when compared to the rates received by her at the native place. The use of condom depends on the choice of a client. On an average 2–3 clients per day could be engaged by an FSW in Mumbai, unlike her native hamlet where she would have to cater to more number of clients. In Mumbai, FSWs go around with the clients for sight seeing, watching movies, and so on. The enjoyment can go into revelry and smoking, offered by the clients.

Analyzing the Sex Work Practice of a *Nat* FSW

Profiling the age for entry and exit from sex work

A *Nat* girl is perceived to be sexually mature soon after the onset of menstruation. Keeping this in mind, the age of 13 to 16 years is considered ideal for initiating the girl into prostitution. The economic, traditional and family conditions of the *Nat* community are responsible for this early initiation into sex work. The heavy amount received in lieu of the first-time sex (*nath utrai*), forms a lucrative option of earning money. On the other hand, the preferences of clients (for e.g., the beliefs that sex with a young girl enhances sexual pleasure and cures STDs) are equally responsible for early initiation of *Nat* girls.

The *Nat* girl continues in sex work as a profession till she reaches 35–40 years of age. Here, if the offspring of an FSW has started earning, she may withdraw herself from practicing sex work. But if the prevailing economic condition is not favouring her retirement or if she is fit physically, she may prolong her stay in the profession. It was observed that an equal proportion, 35.7 per cent, of sex workers had been working for 4–6 years and more than 6 years. The remaining 28.6 per cent were relatively new, with experience of 1–3 years in the trade.

As the FSW approaches her retirement age when she would not be physically able to continue her profession, she tries to settle down by finding and marrying a suitable, preferably, a better-off partner. This is a precautionary measure to ensure security in her old age.

Documenting the Place of Sex Work

In *Dantri* hamlet, *kutchha* houses constructed of mud with small rooms are used as sites of sex work. These rooms are built exclusively for this purpose.

FSWs on rent are also brought here from outside. Such rooms are without proper ventilation and electricity. One *charpoy* (a knitted cot), a mirror, a small container for used condoms and earthen pitcher of drinking water are kept inside the room. Light connections are not available in all the houses. Here a tunnel type structure is dug to rescue FSWs in the situation of a police raid. In *Chamand-Ka-Mand* and *Dantri* hamlets, beddings are usually not found on the cots, while in *Teelawala* and *Bandar Sindri*, bedding or bed cover with pillow were seen on the cots (*charpai*) used for sex trade.

Profile of the Clients

With the highways and their connectivity, local as well as outside clients of FSWs have increased over the decades. Majority of clients of FSWs are truck drivers and labourers; army men, local political activists, police officers and college students are also their visitors. The clients go straight into the hamlets, close to the highways. Boys act as pimps in assisting FSWs to trap clients, particularly the new ones.

Most of the clients are 20–30 years old, though it could range between 20–45 years irrespective of marital status and occupation. The seasons of the year do not have any significant impact on business. Usually the regular clients come between 9 and 12 in the night. Clients visiting late night are those who commute on the road. According to an FSW at *Bandar Sindri*, clients start coming after midnight; sometimes they may come earlier depending on their convenience. According to an FSW—‘We are not selective about clients. All types of clients approach and the only concern is money’ says a FSW at *Bandar Sindri*.

Dealing with the clients is of two types—one is directly by the FSW herself and the other is through the *patelan*. Majority of FSWs prefer clients who are healthy, handsome and are not drunk, clients who leave silently after sex. Some FSWs prefer servicing college students to truck drivers as their clients.

With regard to drunken clients, the opinions were divided. Two-fifths of them were not in favour of drunken clients if a choice was given to them. As high as 50 per cent of FSWs took it to be a part of their occupation and life, in which it is not the type of client, but the money that matters.

Types of Sexual Behaviour

Sexual behaviour of FSW varies according to her sexual partners, namely her clients, her lover and her *ghar-janwai*.

With a general client, sex is just the penetrative sex. A female sex worker avoids indulging in any other sexual activity except penile penetrative sex. The client too, after sex wants to leave the place as soon as possible due to the fear of police and to save his identity from recognition by known people. A general client being unknown, does not develop any attachment with the FSW and vice versa. Clients who are drunk or untidy are ignored by FSWs, except for their money.

Sex with *yaar* (lover) is another practice through which sexual pleasure is derived with a person with whom FSW develops sentimental attachment. Such individuals are usually the regular clients who develop an affinity for the FSWs and may become their *yaar* (friend/lover).

The *ghar janwai* is treated like a husband by the FSW. He owes economic responsibility and is entitled to enjoy a sexual relationship with the FSW-turned wife as desired by him. He usually does not use condom. The sexual contact of the FSW who attained the status of wife is confined with *ghar janwai*. There are cases of *ghar janwai* who stay for a short duration or even permanently with such women in *Nat bustee*.

It was inferred from a few FSW respondents that the meaning of sex perceived by them is merely copulation. Kissing, fondling, hugging and other such activities are taken as meaningless sexual activities, which are neither encouraged nor practiced with the clients. Oral and anal sex are neither practiced, nor liked by the FSWs. If a client demands or approaches for oral or anal sex, the FSWs do not give in to their demands. A majority (80 per cent) of FSWs opposed oral and anal sex while the remaining 20 per cent were neutral and no FSW has favoured such sexual practices.

Conclusion

The caste panchayat is a strong and effective political institution, which governs the socio-sexual behaviour of the *Nats*. It perhaps, requires rethinking in the changing scenario by the caste panchayat members and *Panchs*, the social elite. It is equally important to emphasize that the *Nat* women are sex workers, not by the social sanction of the caste panchayat alone. It is more so due to the society, patriarchy, freedom to the males to have sex outside the family and caste and the involvement of sex traders. The existing situation calls for the integration of the *Nat* caste with the mainstream society to become the beneficiary of development and democracy in Rajasthan.

7

Male sex work (MSW)

BINDUMADHAV V. KHIRE

This paper gives an overview of MSW (Male sex workers) with respect to MSM (Men who have Sex with Men). The paper is based on qualitative and quantitative data derived from:

1. My personal experience of running a Men's Sexual Health Organization 'Sampathik Trust' Pune.
2. Information obtained by talking to various community members through Humsafar Trust, Mumbai.
3. Pune/Pimpri Chinchwad Municipal Corporation (PCMC) MSM survey done by Humsafar Trust, Mumbai and Sampathik Trust, Pune for Pathfinder International in 2005; and
4. Information obtained by talking to various MSWs in Pune (through Sampathik Trust) and Mumbai (through Humsafar Trust).

The research presented here is based essentially on information obtained from Pune and Mumbai, however, despite cultural differences, similar situations are believed to exist in other big cities and towns in India. The paper however does not cover areas such as Homosexual Sex Phone Lines, Pornographic Magazines, CDs, and so on.

Background

In India, prostitution is generally equated to Female Sex Work (FSW). It is unimaginable for most men and women that men could be engaged in sex work irrespective of their sexual orientation. Almost all debates, policies and

laws related to sex work are based on the assumption that prostitution is ‘sexual gratification provided by a woman to a man for cash or kind’.

It may come as a surprise to the uninitiated that a lot of male sex work takes place in India. Male sex workers provide sexual services to male members of all economic classes, religions, caste and age. For the uninitiated this is an invisible world that the person will not see unless he/she seeks it out.

The reasons for this are many. First is the legal barrier. IPC 377 (defined by the British in 1860) makes any sexual contact between two men (adult and consenting, with the act done in private), punishable by fine or imprisonment or both. The exact wording is—Of Unnatural Offences:

Whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall be punished with imprisonment for life or imprisonment of either description for a term which may extend to ten years and shall be liable to fine.¹

A similar law prevalent in Britain was abolished in 1967, but the same law continues in India.

This effectively makes any kind of non-procreative sex, a crime punishable by either a jail term or a fine. The law is extremely vague as to which acts are acceptable. It technically makes oral sex, mutual masturbation, and anal sex illegal even amongst heterosexual married couples. The law is also not clear as to which sexual acts are legal for castrated men, intersexes and the like.

This law has also been applied for sex with under-age boys. Currently Naz India Foundation has a PIL pending in Delhi High Court requesting the court to read down the law to exclude consenting adults of same sexes. The law is rampantly used for harassment and blackmail even in cases where there is no prostitution involved. It follows that MSM sex work has to be a clandestine activity, away from the eyes of the law and invisible to the hoi polloi.

Second is the conservative attitude of the Indian society, which considers sex (even amongst heterosexual relations) a taboo topic. It is doubly taboo to discuss alternate sexualities. Even today, sex education in schools (if at all) avoids discussing important issues like intercourse, different types of sexual acts, and so on. Condom demonstrations are shown (in the context of STD/HIV prevention) without informing the youths of the process of penile erection and insertion of the penis in the vagina. Topics like, oral and anal sex are never discussed. Masturbation, pre-marital sex is severely discouraged. Homosexuality is not discussed and if at all the topic comes up it is considered as a perversion, abnormality and sickness that has to be cured at any cost.

Indian culture, like most Asian cultures, has a very stereotypical way of looking at manhood and a man who openly loves another man—emotionally

and sexually—faces a lot of stigma, isolation, ridicule, prejudice and discrimination. In this context most homosexual men are not able to come to terms with their sexuality. Many men do not have the courage to come out and they end up getting married (to women).

In addition to IPC 377, other laws used on FSWs, can also be applied on MSWs. While there is no specific law against prostitution there are laws against importuning, using space for immoral purposes, obstructing traffic, living on immoral earnings, and the like that can also be used on MSWs.

As a consequence of its illegality, perceptions of manhood, conservative attitudes of sex amongst men and women, male sex work happens secretly.

Scientific Constructs and Cultural Identities

Constructs

Men who have Sex with Men can be categorized into Psychologically Homosexual, Psychologically Bisexual, Behaviourally Bisexual (but Psychologically Heterosexual), M-to-F Transgenders, Adolescent Experimental phase, M-to-F Transsexuals² and some Intersexes.

Till recently there were no political identities related to alternate sexualities. With the gay movement in the US and Europe, only in the last ten years or so have alternate sexualities started to group together as political entities for demanding rights. The scientific categories/political categories, in India are known only to a few Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex (LGBTQI) organizations. There is little knowledge of the scientific/political identities that the queers in the West used to address themselves. Most of the population (heterosexual and queer) is unaware of these identities. Most will identify with a social/cultural identity (some times without knowing what it exactly means).

Indian cultural identities

Any man (or castrated man) who has sex with men is generally considered to be 'third gender' (*Tritiya panthi*). The words *hijara*, *gandu*, *chakka* are also used derisively for such people.

Most men, if asked what do they exactly mean by the words, give vague explanations like *Tritiya panthi*—half man—half woman, *hijara*—men who wear female clothes (e.g., sarees) and clap, a man who is not a man, a man who is either infertile or impotent.

None of the above terms are scientific and are all derived out of ignorance or specific cultural context. Hence there are no precise definitions for them and most of the words are used as forms of ridicule. There is no political identity associated with any of the above. Which is why I prefer using the scientific categories and would prefer to do away with the cultural context entirely. But since both, the MSWs and the general public, are currently unaware of the scientific constructs I need to use the cultural constructs too.

A loose mapping of the cultural entities to the scientific entities:

Gandu: Homosexual.

Chakka: Homosexual, Transgender, Transsexual.

Hijara: Could be either Homosexual, Transgender, Transsexual.

Characteristics: may or may not be castrated, may or may not wear feminine clothes, may or may not do *manti*. Will have a hierarchy with *Nayak* at the top with *gurus* at the second rung followed by *chelas* (disciples) of each guru at the third level. Many of them are illiterate/barely literate. The only way they can survive is to do *manti*³, *Bidas*—sex work, or thefts. Many of the *hijaras* do sex work.

Jogtas: Some of them are homosexual, bisexual, transgender, transsexuals.

Characteristics: *Jogtas* (similar to *Jogins*) hail from the Hindu religious community. Some of the *jogtas* may do sex work. There is a difference in rituals and culture between *jogtas* and *hijaras*.

Koti: M-to-F Transgender, M-to-F transsexual, passive homosexual. Many *kotis* are feminine, indulge in receptive intercourse. The term is commonly used amongst those belonging to low economic strata and less educated. Many *kotis* join *hijara* clan so they can do *bidas* and *manti*, without harassment from other *hijaras*.

Panthi: Insertive partner of a Homosexual, Transgender or a Transsexual.

Categories of Male Sex Workers

Generally MSWs will fall into two categories:

1. Street Based—Male sex workers soliciting clients at cruising areas (stations, parks, toilets and roads) fall into this category.

2. Non-Street Based—Masseur sex workers who provide services to the client (either at their homes or at massage parlours), sex workers soliciting their trade on the internet, high-price call boys, all fall in this category.

Street based sex work

Territories

The clients are generally sought out at various sex-sites located in and around the city. The *hijaras* (eunuchs) have territories marked and there are severe penalties for *hijaras* stepping into some other *hijara* clans' territory. *Kothis* may also be punished for trespassing into *hijara* territory (if they haven't become a part of a *hijara gharana*). To avoid punishment an understanding may be reached between them. It is generally understood that 50 per cent of the earnings of the person who is intruding has to be handed over to the *hijara* clan of the territory.⁴

Hijaras generally work six to seven days a week. They may have one fixed site or move between a set of sites. There is generally no fixed time-pattern. Sometimes because of police raids they have to abandon a site and move on to another. Sometime a site (e.g., a toilet) gets demolished and they have to seek out a new site. Word of mouth quickly ensures that the clients and MSWs know where to seek each other. Sometimes they may go on pilgrimages and do sex work there. Trade is generally brisk at some places of worship. The extent of trade gets bigger when there are religious festivals or political conventions in the city.

How many sex workers?

How many of such sex workers are there? For example, how many are there in the city of Pune? a few? a dozen? a hundred? If I look at sex work as a 'sexual service provided for cash' I would assume about a couple of hundred each in Pune and PCMC (with a combined population of 37,03,286 Census 2001—Statistics and Economic Directorate, Pune). But this is a tricky question. We first need to understand what exactly constitutes sex work.

Difference between MSW and FSW

The difference of status of men and women in society, different levels of literacy, financial independence, freedom of movement, freedom in accessing various services, cultural concept of manhood and womanhood, all these reflect in the difference in dynamics of MSWs and FSWs. These differences are significant and hence MSWs need to be understood separately from FSWs.

For FSWs (either brothel-based or non brothel-based, rural or urban) the transaction is generally clearly de-marked. For services rendered she gets a certain amount of money, which is negotiated in advance (unless the customer becomes her regular partner or 'husband').

In male sex work, the transaction may not always be so clear. The differentiation between sex work and pleasure is, very often, difficult to differentiate.

'Pleasure Web' a term used by Ashok Row Kavi describes the dynamics of how men seek pleasure from other men. The form of transaction may or may not be defined or agreed upon previously. The line between sex for cash/kind and sex for pleasure is very vague and the MSW and the client may cross the line repeatedly.

Direct gratification

The client will visit known cruising areas. He will loiter around and observe people. (Sometimes the client may be introduced to an MSW through an intermediary who may or may not charge for the introduction.) A little bit of experience generally gives the client an idea of who is and who isn't a sex worker. Either the client will approach the sex worker or vice versa and strike a conversation leading to services available and terms of payment.

In this form the terms of the transaction are generally clear beforehand in terms of acts involved. (For example, mutual masturbation, body sex, inter-femoral sex, oral sex, anal sex; condom use, or non-use.) The place of sex is also discussed before hand; if it is a lodge the client is generally required to pay for the room. Sometimes the sex worker may have an understanding with the hotel manager who will charge more and give a certain percentage to the sex worker.

Charges

The charges have a wide range. They vary from how good looking the client is, whether he is old or young, how desperate he is, how desperate the MSW is, whether the MSW is good looking, whether the MSW is young, middle-aged, old, whether MSW has other competition, whether the client is new or an old timer (if an old timer—what has been the previous experience of the MSW with the client), how many tricks has the MSW turned today, whether the environment is conducive to a longer wait (e.g., if it is pouring heavily there may not be many clients around). On the lower range, it could be from Rs 10 for a hand job to Rs 30 for anal sex. On the higher range, it could be Rs 500 for 2 hours of oral, anal sex, annilingus and additional lodge charges, of about Rs 400.

If the client is satisfied with the services provided he will, in addition, to the agreed upon price reward the sex worker in cash or kind and/or will approach the specific sex worker next time the services are needed.

With the advent of cell phones, accessing a male sex worker who has a cell phone has become easier. They may share their number with the client. Subsequently the client can call the sex worker and fix a place, date/time for the next meeting.

Indirect gratification

In this mode, the contact may be through meeting at the cruising site, through a cell phone or being introduced by someone. Negotiation is, more or less, the same as done in direct gratification. The difference in indirect gratification is the payment.

Charges

Instead of money (or may be in addition to money), the client may take the MSW to a dinner, and/or provide him with alcohol. Or if the client is an auto driver/taxi driver he will offer to give the MSW a free ride to his home or to the next cruising spot. If the client is a regular, the MSW may take fancy to a t-shirt or some ornament and ask the client to buy it for him. If the MSW really likes the guy and the sex, it is possible that he might not demand any charges from the client, but request him to meet again.

Delayed gratification

Judging a client may give the 'sex worker' an idea about his 'worth'. In such a case, instead of charging him outright, the sex worker may indulge in free sex with him for weeks or months and then expect returns for the transactions either through direct or indirect forms over long term. Here, the sex worker may even initially turn down the payment made by the client. After the client tires of the sex worker (or vice versa), the sex worker may pass the client on to other sex workers.

Profession

Hijaras are either allowed to do *manti* or sex work. they are not allowed to do both. Some who end up doing both, if caught (because of a complaint lodged by another *hijara* with the *nayak*) are fined by the *nayak*. The fine is arbitrary and can be anything ranging between Rs 1,000 and Rs 5,000.

They get up in the morning and go out for *manti* which helps them earn something between Rs 20 and Rs 300. They also get invited for *bidas* (through

a middle man who may or may not be a *Hijara/Koti/Jogta*). The *bida* will entail dancing to Hindi songs. In addition to a *dholak wala* (the drummer), *petiwala* (harmonium player), there could be 2–5 *Hijaras/Kotis/Jogtas* involved in the dance. This may net them about Rs 200 to Rs 900 per person for each *bida*. The concept of a *bida* is associated exclusively with the marriage season. When there is no marriage season there are hardly any *bidas*. During marriage season there may even be 15 to 20 *bidas* in a month.

It needs to be understood that *Kotis* and *Jogtas*, who are more literate and have a family, may have a different profession. They may study in college or may be working in some place. In such cases some of them may supplement their primary income by doing *manti* and/or, *bidas*' (and sometimes sex work) when in need of cash.

Relationships

Gurus and *Chelas* (disciples)—*Hijaras* have their *Guru* as their father, mother. They also name relations amongst themselves (e.g., sister, daughter and the like). *Hijaras* may have a male partner or a series of partners. Just like the *hijaras*, the *kotis* and *jogtas* will form relationships amongst themselves. The *jogtas* have their *gurus* (*Dev-Rushis*). Some of the *hijaras*, *kotis* and *jogtas* marry and have families. They stay with their parents and children. They may have a regular male partner or a series of casual partners. The partner, generally, does not stay with them all the time. He may be a married man who drops in now and then for sex (and mostly in exchange for money). Many of the partners may not be around when needed in a crisis or emergency. It is seen that these relationships in some instances are exploitative in nature with each using the other for what its worth.

In many instances, the family is not aware of their sex work. In some cases the family is not even aware of their doing drag for *bidas*. Many *Kotis* and *Jogtas* will take extreme care to hide this part of their lives from their families. They will collect their make-up kits, female clothes in a bag, go out to a friend's place, put on make-up, sarees and then go out. Before coming home they will change again, wipe out all the traces of make-up and walk in as a 'respectable' man. One of them told me that it is improper for us to make our families ashamed of us for what we do. They should not suffer due to the work we do. It should not affect our children. We do not want our children to be brought up in this kind of an environment. There are cases where the families are aware of their doing drag for shows (though rarely sex work), but they have no choice but to accept it (since some of them are the sole-earners of the family).

Permanent sex workers

Some of the MSWs are permanent sex workers. Their means of livelihood depends on seeking clients and having sex with them. If they are pursuing other professions, the earnings are meagre and not sufficient for their survival or they want more money quickly to sustain their relatively lavish lifestyle. That leaves only two choices—sex work or theft or both.

Temporary sex workers

1. **College Students:** Some college students indulge in sex work (on and off) depending on their financial needs. They may seek clients through internet or through their contacts with other student sex workers. In order to support a lavish lifestyle these students indulge in part time sex work. Because they are in their early twenties they tend to charge more for their services (and clients are more than willing to pay them their price).
2. **Men Who are Out of Work:** Some out-of-work men (heterosexual, homosexual, bisexual) generally from lower-economic class, indulge in sex work. They may not do sex work when they are financially secure. But if they are out of work for a long time or they need to raise immediate cash they may resort to sex work.

Conflicts do arise between permanent sex workers (especially *hijaras*) and temporary sex workers because of this unwelcome competition for the clients. If an understanding is not reached the temporary sex workers may be beaten up and driven out of the territory. This came up during some of the focus sessions we had conducted. The temporary male sex workers' charges vary on the same lines as other MSWs.

Sex acts

Most of these acts happen in homes, lodges, abandoned places, some in urinals or in open spaces at night. Mutual masturbation, oral sex and anal sex are the most commonly occurring acts in sex work.⁵

Use of condoms (flavoured or otherwise) for oral sex is almost nil. Flavoured condoms are not available in semi-urban and rural areas. The shame associated in asking for flavoured condoms is high. Sex workers do not want to shell out money for them (the plain ones are distributed for free by Trusts like ours. We in turn get them for free from the state government e.g., Pune City AIDS Control Society (PCACS).

Anal sex needs more space and privacy. In a place where there is no privacy, the job has to be finished quickly. Inculcating the discipline of consistently

using a condom (properly) is difficult. Clients are able to tempt them with more money for having unprotected sex. Because of ignorance or need of money or a 'don't care' attitude on part of the MSW (and the client) the use of condoms for anal sex is very low.

Interfemoral Sex (thigh sex): Some of the *kotis* and *hijaras* get the client to indulge in thigh sex. They apply Vaseline to their thighs and press them together. This is only possible in darkness and if the client is drunk.

Exploitation of sex workers

Because of social stigma and the illegality of the trade, these communities are exploited at various levels. Policemen may ask for bribes to allow them to work a beat, they may also force sex workers to have sex with them (many times unprotected). Some of them get beaten up and robbed by thugs. Some have reported rape at knifepoint. None of these get reported to the police as all of them consider police to be worse than the anti-social elements. Sometimes clients are known to exploit the sex workers, by robbing them or threatening to beat them if they don't provide services for free.

Many, being in need of love and affection, fall in love with *panthis* who more often than not are anti-social elements. They tend to demand money on loans (never to be repaid) periodically. Most sex workers shell out the money because of love or fear of losing the *panthi*. Many realize their mistake too late after having spent a considerable amount of their savings on their *panthis*.

Hijaras, *kotis* and *jogtas* may also be exploited by their *gurus*. *Gurus* may make them work (household chores, doing *manti* and the like) but, most of the time, they are not there for support in times of crises. If a *chela* is sick (especially with HIV) he is more often than not left to fend for himself.

While there is a lot of exploitation amongst the communities, genuine friendships are also seen in a few cases. Some *gurus* are known to be good, who protect their *chelas* and look after them.

Exploitation by sex workers

Some sex workers may have interfemoral sex with some of their clients by misleading them into believing that the client is having peno-vaginal sex with a woman.

There are some sex workers who are thieves, cheats and blackmailers. They are known to exploit their clients. Some sites in Pune are known to be frequented by sex workers, who are known to entice clients only to rob them later. Since the client has come seeking for paid sex, he cannot go to the police and complain.

A few sex workers may also indulge in blackmailing their clients. They stand in a urinal to urinate—which is a cruising spot—wait for a client to come in, stand at the next urinal and take a peek at their private part. The sex worker will then pretend to be offended create a ruckus and threaten the client with police action if the client does not pay up.

Non-street based sex workers

Masseurs

Some of the male masseurs are sex workers and charge for services rendered. The masseurs may be homosexual, bisexual or heterosexual.

Parlours

Some sex workers work in a parlour and the client can extend the massage service to mutual masturbation, oral sex and anal sex. The charge indicated by the masseur may give an idea of whether it is only a massage or something more than that.

Home visits

Some masseurs (who do sex work) do home visits. Not much is known about them as they service a select group of clients. Generally, one client refers the male masseur to other clients. In this way a network of clients is established. Mutual masturbation, oral sex and anal sex can happen at the house of the client. The more savvy ones may seek clients through the use of internet by advertising through various email lists.

Lodge masseurs

Some masseurs who do sex work, work near bus/train stations. After a client approaches them they may go to a lodge for massage and sex. Sometimes a gang of anti-socials may follow a masseur and client into a lodge and barge in the room, create a ruckus and threaten police action if not paid. During the survey we had conducted, when our survey team had approached a masseur, the masseur and the survey team were followed by such a gang.

High class models

Big cities are known to have male models that provide sexual services to rich clients. Their operating dynamics are in some respects different from lower economic strata male sex workers. They can operate alone or as part of a ring.

Ring

There is usually a co-ordinator of the ring. He will keep a catalogue of all the models he has working for him. The catalogue will list all the details (physical details, sexual preferences, and so forth) of each male model working for him. Once the MSW becomes part of a sex worker ring he will generally not go out to seek clients on his own.

First contact

A prospective client comes to know about the ring through an existing client. On giving a call to the co-ordinator, the latter will try to verify the credentials of the client, as there is risk of harassment and/or violence from an unknown client. After the existing client vouches for the prospective client the co-ordinator will discuss the details of the client's sexual needs, desires and financial issues on the phone. It is after this interaction that the model will be sent over to the place at the given date/time. The co-ordinator I met, specifically told me that whenever a new client is introduced, for the first time he is the one who provides sexual services. This ensures that in case the client behaves badly or has ulterior motives, his models are spared. After he is convinced that the client can be trusted, for future sessions he provides other models.

Most of the models are in their twenties with their education varying from secondary education to degree. Some of the MSWs are homosexual, some bisexual and some heterosexual. Some may be married to women; some may have a boyfriend on the side. Heterosexual male models are, initially, not comfortable with homosexual sex but eventually get accustomed to it.

Oral sex and anal sex are most frequent acts desired. Some clients seek male sex workers for special acts like golden showers and the like. If the client is satisfied he may also give a tip to the sex worker. The ring co-ordinator, I talked to, mentioned with pride that there has never been a single penetrative sex act without a condom. The models and the clients are both aware of risks of unprotected sex.

Sex with women

There are also instances where women call male models to have sex with them. It was reported to me that women are a bit cautious with the male models. They are also more reserved when it comes to sexual acts. Most are only comfortable with peno-vaginal sex. A few times, husbands invite MSWs to have sex with their wives. The husband watches them. Rarely the husband may ask more than one MSW to have sex with his wife. A bisexual sex worker commented that 'when having sex with a man, one engages in

a variety of sexual acts, the man is more trusting and hence the sex is more fulfilling as compared to having sex with a woman.’

Financial gain

Those sex workers I talked to, made it clear that they will not discuss the financial aspect of their trade. They only relented to say that—payment made by men to have sex with men is generally more than payment made by men to have sex with their wives. When asked for the reason, one sex worker said ‘men think that male sex worker will enjoy having sex with a woman so why should he be paid more?’ Men, who want sex with the male sex worker are, generally, very generous.

Exploitation by clients

Clients were, generally, reported to be trustworthy. They cared for the MSW. They also behaved well (even when drunk) as their reputation was at stake. There was only one instance cited where the client inflicted severe beating on three sex workers on two different occasions. Because of shame, the first two sex workers had not complained. The third sex worker, who went through the same ordeal, complained and the client was blacklisted.

Exploitation by sex workers

It was admitted that there were some MSWs who worked alone and exploited the clients by robbing them. The co-ordinator mentioned that it was because of them that the entire business, which runs on trust, was getting a bad reputation. There were also some sex workers who tried to get their clients to get to orgasm as quickly as possible, which is wrong. If they were charging money for services, it was important for them to satisfy the client so that the latter came to them again and again.

Reasons for sex work

1. Illiteracy: Some of the *kothis* and *hijaras* are either completely illiterate or barely literate. Since they are in possession of, practically, no skills it is difficult for them to get jobs. Earnings of *manti or, bida* are not enough for survival which is why they have to resort to sex work.
2. Discrimination: Some of them are very feminine and hence even if they are qualified (some of them are graduates, double graduates) hardly anyone is willing to hire them. Homophobia, misunderstandings about members of alternate sexualities gives rise to open discrimination. So even if a person is qualified to do the job he will be the last choice to be considered (and sometimes not even then).

In addition, feminine men are looked down upon and it is feared that their presence in the organization will cause unnecessary tensions. There is a hidden fear that these men may approach other male employees (or indeed vice versa) for sex and it may be difficult to keep a professional atmosphere in the organization.

3. **Different Class Structures:** Coming from different social and cultural background the class difference also makes it difficult for *kotis* and *hijaras* to get jobs because of the difficulty in working with different class structures.
4. **Business and Pleasure:** Sex work can easily allow men to mix business with pleasure as it gives them easy money. For example, a sweeper may earn about Rs 3,000 to Rs 5,000 per month (full-time job) whereas if he does sex work (in his youth) he is likely to earn Rs 4,000 to Rs 10,000 per month. There is also an awareness that money can be made only while they have good looks and body. As they age the earnings go down and so will the demand for their services. So they try to make as much money as possible while the going is good and easy.

Reasons for clients approaching sex workers

Many clients are homosexual and need male intimacy. Since they cannot marry men or keep long-term relationships with men (because of their own marriage and family responsibilities) they have to seek MSWs for sexual gratification. Some clients are aroused by feminine men (*kotis* and *hijaras*).

Some clients have mentioned that their wives are not willing to do some of the sexual acts with them. Hence they seek sex workers outside for these acts. Though why they approach *hijaras/kotis* instead of women is not known. It is possible that since *kotis* and *hijaras* resemble women, the men can convince themselves that they are having sex with a woman. Some clients enjoy the variety of men they can have sex with.

Addressing the Needs of the Sex Workers

The layers of stigma, mentioned by Ashok Row Kavi, involves being poor, being illiterate, being MSM, being effeminate, being MSW and being HIV-Positive. Some people are stigmatized for being all of the above. With such a heavy burden, some of them tend to suppress some of these by hiding their sexual orientation or their HIV positive status or hiding the fact that they are involved with the trade of sex work.

It is important to provide sex workers a place to relax, provide them basic skills and support services. While attempts to do this are on, a lot needs to be done in this area.

Services generally provided are as follows:

- (a) A Drop In Centre
- (b) Support Group Meetings
- (c) Legal Services—Providing legal support in case of police harassment/arrest.
- (d) Medical services—Condom provision by outreach workers at cruising sites, making MSWs aware of STIs/HIV/AIDS; taking them for examination and testing (for STIs/HIV) to clinics.

Problems in Reaching Out to Sex Workers

It is very difficult to address occasional sex workers, masseurs and high price call-boys, as most of them do not want to be known as sex workers and deny that they are sex workers. Some of the *hijaras* and their *gurus* also refuse to admit despite ample evidence that some of their community members are doing sex work. Hence it is difficult to work with these community members.

Sometimes some sex workers are recruited as outreach workers as they have good networking. Unfortunately some of the outreach workers do get harassed by the police. Carrying an identification card may not help (though they need to carry it at all times during outreach work).

One of our outreach workers (who is also a sex worker) was talking about safe sex issues to a person in the evening (around 6 pm). A couple of policemen, on the beat, came to him and threatened to beat him up if he did not leave the area at once. Despite the outreach worker mentioning that he was working for an organization he was forced to leave immediately. The client panicked and left.

One of our outreach workers (who is not into sex work) had his bag snatched by a policeman for a search. The policeman wanted to check if he was carrying a penis model for condom demonstration (Generally a penis model can be used as a dildo. It becomes easier for the police to harass the outreach worker for carrying a sex toy). Since our organization (currently) does not allow penis models to be taken outside of the office the outreach worker was let go.

The positive side of sex work

They are able to provide sexual services that are badly needed by clients. They are able to fulfill a major need.

Many of the economically challenged sex workers would have to resort to anti-social activities to support themselves and their families, had they not resorted to sex work. I have come across families where the sex worker is the only earning member of the family.

Sex work makes them financially independent. There is less need to beg or borrow money and find other means to repay it. Hence while some feel ashamed of doing sex work, it also indirectly helps them retain their self-esteem, as they do not have to depend on someone else for money.

Some sex workers form a good bond with other sex workers and are known to help each other in crises.

Special case: Boys

There are a lot of adolescent boys (12–16 years) who provide sexual gratification for money. Some of this is out of peer pressure or emulation, but most of the sex work is not done under any duress or compulsion. These are not just singular or isolated cases. Groups of such boys may frequent cruising sites or establish their own areas.

Addressing the needs of such boys is impossible for an MSM NGO. Making them aware of issues related to risky sex, providing them with condoms is not possible as the NGO may be accused of tempting/encouraging boys into sex work.

Taking them for STI examination/treatment cannot be done without consent from their guardians, which cannot happen as the guardians are either not aware or are not willing to admit that the boy is a sex worker.

It is also possible that there might be resistance from the boys for such interventions as they may be worried that the NGOs will try to discourage them from doing sex work.

Acceptance

To improve the conditions of sex workers the solution generally given is to rehabilitate them or re-integrate them. Both of these are ugly phrases, as neither is based on dealing with sex workers (and sex work) non-judgmentally and non-discriminatorily. The need of the hour is for accepting sex work as

an occupation (and pastime/pleasure) without being judgmental about it. The need is to legalize sex work. This will make it easier to provide various medical, legal, economical services to sex workers to qualitatively and quantitatively improve their living standard.

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Notes

In writing this paper I have referred to various sources which include the Indian Penal Code 1890, The PIL filed by the Naz Foundation, India in the Delhi High Court, the *Report on Mapping and Needs Assessment of MSM in Pune/PCMC* which was based on a survey conducted by Humsafar Trust Mumbai and Samapathik Trust, Pune for Pathfinder International, Pune and a study done by the Humsafar Trust, Mumbai, on HIV-related Risk Behaviour of MSM in Mumbai and Thane.

1. Penetration is sufficient to constitute the carnal intercourse necessary to the offence described in this section.
2. (Special category M-to-F Transsexuals: In this category, are those who have either undergone sex reassignment surgery or castration. Technically they are women, but have been considered in this paper as traditionally, culturally, they associate with MSM and not with FSWs.)
3. Manti is *hijaras*, *jogtas* asking for alms at shops.
4. FSWs generally stay away from *hijara* Territory. There are instances of friction between FSWs and *hijaras* when working in a common territory.
5. Some of the clients claim that they come to MSM for oral sex because their wives refuse to have oral sex with them. It is seen that relatively very few FSWs (especially in rural areas) indulge in (or admit to indulging in) oral or anal sex.

Appendix

- MSM: Men having Sex with Men.
- MSW: Male Sex Workers (In this paper it is used only in context of MSM).
- FSW: Female Sex Workers (In this chapter it is used only in context of heterosexual sex work).
- Koti*: Approximation—Transgender.
- Panthe*: Insertive partner of a *Koti*.
- Hijara*: A community of people with their distinct religious, cultural rituals. Generally earn their living by doing *Manti*, *bidas* or sex work. The members of the community could be any of the following—transgender, intersexes, homosexuals (Lately it is seen that some heterosexuals dress like *hijaras* and do *manti*, *bidas*, sex work).
- Jogta*: A religious community with different cultural rituals from those of *hijaras* (Some people can belong to both *hijara* and *jogta* communities).
- Guru*: Senior *hijara*.
- Chela*: Disciple.
- Nayak*: Senior *hijara* exercising extra-legal power over the *hijara gharana*. Similar hierarchy is also present in the *Jogta* community.
- Panthe*: A *panthe* is a man who generally plays the ‘active’ role with a *koti*, *hijara*. He is generally expected to be macho, marry a woman (be a ‘real’ man) have children. If he is into sex work he is generally the active partner when having sex with men, *hijaras*, *kotis*, *jogtas*. Sometimes *kotis* and *panthis* may reverse their active/passive roles if the incentive is high enough. This is generally acceptable (being versatile) in big cities like Mumbai or Pune. But as you go to the rural areas *panthis* are expected to follow the rigid stereotypes of being the ‘man’ and stick to it even if he desires otherwise. So he cannot wear nail-paint, put on henna on his hands, grow his nails, act feminine, be passive with a man. If a rumour goes around that the man has been passive with someone he will never be called a *panthe* again.
- Queer: Community of non-heterosexual people. It is used as a general, non-derogatory term for people of various non-heterosexual identities.
- Gay: Homosexuals with a political identity—those who have accepted their sexual orientation, are open about their sexuality and work for Gay Rights.
- LGBTQI: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex.
- Manti*: *Hijaras*, *Jogtas* asking for alms at shops.
- Bida*: Dancing at weddings and christening ceremonies and blessing the families.

8

Ethnographic profile of female sex workers of Dharwad, Karnataka

AMBUJA KOWLGI AND VIJAY KUMAR HUGAR

Dharwad district is situated in the northern part of Karnataka state. A place with a dry climate, Dharwad has been the district head quarters from the time of the British rule and is described as a place for retired people and students. It is known as an educational centre since pre-independence era and has a serene quality to it. The pre-independence feel still lingers in the place with its buildings and roads lined with trees, which are more than 100 years old.

Because of the presence of numerous educational institutions, students from different parts of Karnataka and other parts of India are drawn to Dharwad. In contrast, Hubli, one of the talukas in Dharwad district is a commercial hub. Hubli-Dharwad are called twin cities, and are 22 km distance apart and the gap almost being filled in by industrial areas, residential areas, hospitals, hotels, colleges and Government offices. Both cities, together, have a municipal corporation (Hubli-Dharwad Municipal Corporation—HDMC).

Growth in Dharwad, in terms of entertainment, appears to have frozen in time. The seven theatres there from the 1970s are still the only ones offering entertainment. The only drama theatre has closed down. A few 'big' restaurants have come up only recently. There has been quite an increase in the number of bars.

This chapter tries to outline the profile of the sex workers (*dhande maadavru*) coming from such socio-economic background.¹ The data presented here

has been drawn from the HIV/AIDS intervention programme taken up by the Bhoruka Charitable Trust in partnership with ICHAP (India–Canada Collaborative HIV/AIDS Project). The data relating to the sex workers have been obtained from the enumeration figures of sex workers operating in Dharwad since November 2003.

When one looks into the recent history of *dhandā* (sex work) in Dharwad, it is found that in 1960s and 1970s, brothels on the main road and in the market area were a common feature. However, now it is full of commercial complexes. One of the Directors of a local NGO related that in the 1970s traders pressurised for commercial purposes and gradually the brothels disappeared. Now there is no ‘red light area’ in Dharwad, while Hubli still has one in some of the older parts of the city.

Apart from the absence of red light areas, it is the average age of the sex workers in Dharwad which makes an ethnographic profile of sex workers of this region unique. In contrast to sex workers in other places, the sex workers operating in Dharwad are in the age group of 30 and above. The trend that can be observed is that the sex workers who retire from other cities start operating in Dharwad. Compared to average age of sex workers operating even in Hubli, Dharwad has a high average age, i.e., 35. At this age, it is observed, in Bangalore, Pune and Mumbai many women retire from sex work.

The sex workers in Hubli are younger than those in Dharwad. A sex worker reports—‘Those from Hubli are fashionable, they apply lipstick, put on lots of make up, not like us. Here the sex workers are 50 years old. Many of the sex workers have grandchildren’. Generally when a sex worker no longer gets *giraki* (party/clients) in Hubli, she shifts her attention to Dharwad. Elderly sex workers are able to attract younger clients because the latter are known to prefer older women. One of the older sex workers says—‘Because of the increase in the number of part-time sex workers, the business for full-time sex workers has reduced’. There are often conflicts if the younger sex workers enter the area of operation of older sex workers.

Sex workers find it convenient to come from the villages and operate in Dharwad rather than Hubli. A sex worker says, ‘I can say I am going to sell vegetables and come to Dharwad because it is near my village’. Dharwad is also convenient because the market area provide places of soliciting and there is not much police trouble as well. Even if any policeman asks where she is from and what she is doing? Usually she can say—‘I have come here to meet my relative or to buy something’. Most of the sex workers have been in this business for 15 to 25 years. The average number of clients per day per sex worker is less in Dharwad as compared to Hubli.

Presently most of the sex work occurs surreptitiously. The sex worker does not prefer her own villagers as clients, as neighbours and some times, the family comes to know about the work they do. It is possible to work without others coming to know because about 92 per cent of the sex workers come from surrounding villages. Generally these women do not visit solely for the purpose of sex work. Some of them come to sell vegetables and fruits (180), some as agricultural labourers (250) while others come as construction workers (411).² Hence the term 'part-time sex workers' has come into use. Those coming as vegetable vendors or construction workers along with their work take one or two clients per day at the end of the day and they operate secretly. Often there is a fear that their neighbours or people from their villages may identify them while soliciting. Some of the sex workers from the surrounding villages also come to Hubli-Dharwad under the pretext of work even though they may be full-time sex workers. They bring their lunch boxes with them and come in the morning. They keep their lunch boxes in the pan shop or some other petty shop, solicit and then leave in the evening at the same time as the other daily-wage labourers leave.

Constructing a Profile of Sex Workers in Dharwad

The sex work typology in Dharwad can be classified into two types—full-time and part-time sex workers. Full-time sex workers are dependent entirely on sex work as their source of income. The average number of clients for them per day is around four. Sex workers come from the surrounding villages of Dharwad from within a radius of around 40–50 km. Distance is often mentioned in terms of the money they pay for their tickets like—'It is Rs 6 or Rs 7 to Dharwad from our village'. They spend around 12–15 rupees per day on travel. If they go on construction work as in case of part-time sex workers, they get around Rs 50 per day as wages. In case of sex work they get between Rs 100 and 200 on certain days by taking 2–3 clients per day. Apart from the money, the clients also have to feed them. Some sex workers also ask for alcohol. However, in these post HIV/AIDS awareness days the sex workers drink as little as possible failing which they may forget to have protected sex.

The charges are by the hour. Generally, it is for one hour. The client may ejaculate twice or even thrice. Charges for the night are higher, around Rs 500. Older clients pay more than the younger ones. If they are young they say—'If not you, I will go to someone else'. But the older clients do not have much choice because sex workers also prefer not to go with older clients.

A typical day of a sex worker follows thus—she finishes her household chores by 10 in the morning and comes to Dharwad around 11 and looks for a client and if she finds one then she is with him till 12.30. In the afternoon, she goes to a different place so that she is not noticed by any policeman. Then in the afternoon again she goes with two or three clients and around 6–7 p.m., she leaves Dharwad.

The spots where sex workers generally solicit are local bus stops, main bus stand and the market area. The sex workers keep wandering around in these spots with a bag in their hand. They do not stand in one place for more than one hour for different reasons, like finding new clients and fear of being recognized by people around.

Part-time sex workers are those who are involved in another source of income besides sex work. The primary source of income may be vending (vegetables, fruits and flowers), construction work or agricultural work. Compared to full-time sex workers, there is more secrecy in operation among part-time sex workers. It is often the clients who are able to identify the part-time sex workers in contrast to full time sex workers, who are more obvious in their appearance to general population. Part-time sex workers, generally, sit alone on the outskirts of the market with vegetables. Whenever a potential client negotiates, whatever goods they have for selling are kept in charge of the neighbouring vendor/seller or they ask the client to come later. They do not let the clients affect their business.

Typically, in the case of part-time sex workers, soliciting takes place simultaneously with selling. They, at times take a client during the day when the customers are few or sell the remaining products at a lower price before the day ends and go with the client. The loss suffered in product sale is made good by the money procured from the client.

Generally negotiations (*hondsudu, chaukasi*) begin with double the amount a client is likely to pay. They say—‘If we start with Rs 250 per hour, we can be certain that the client will agree for at least Rs 125–150’. The client has to pay the room rent in case they go to a lodge. The sex workers bargain tactfully and make the client agree for the amount they have in their mind and are capable of judging the client’s spending capacity. There are also sex workers who do not bargain much and feel pity for the client and accept whatever he can afford. As one of the sex workers says—‘How much does he earn in a day? If he earns Rs 100 and if we ask all of it, how will he be able to give that much? He has to take back money to his family as well’. Sex workers show a certain concern about the clients’ spending capacity.

In case the clients ask that the sex worker be naked then the client is charged Rs 50–60 extra. It is often the clients from the cities, like students,

who have such demands. Sex workers say clients from villages (*girakigolu*) are respectful (*maryadastru*) and that they don't have such demands. They behave with them like the married wife (*maadkond bendti*). Sex workers often tell clients, 'We are doing this for money because there is no other way; why do you trouble us with such things, just do what you want and go.'

In case the client is taking her to the cinema theatre, the ticket price will be Rs 15 per head and Rs 50–60 will be paid to her. In theatre generally masturbation is done. The client asks her to massage and may ask (*yerad birdi bichchu*), to undo two buttons of the blouse.

Finding a safe place to have sex is one of the crucial decisions involved. One of the reasons for this is that lodges deny them rooms for the fear of being identified by police. For instance, a sex worker who does not 'appear' (by her mannerisms) to be like a sex worker will be given room, but they may refuse a sex worker who is infamous. Strict police vigilance is the reason for this kind of behaviour by lodge managers.

Often sex workers, during their 'bargain', insist on going elsewhere other than lodges. The amount that the client spends on the room rent has to be spent on them in terms of food and liquor or has to be paid to them. The clients who do not have much to spare and cannot afford room rent may say that they will give her some Rs 20 for going to open places.

The part-time sex workers are not particular about finding a certain number of clients everyday. This gives them a choice as to whether they would take a client or not because they have a primary source of income. Sex work is an additional source of income. In case they are not able to find a client on a given day they take home on an average Rs 50. A part-time sex worker says:

I began working and a *mestry* (contractor) asked me to have sex with him. I had heard from others that if I refuse, either I will lose my job or will be given difficult and heavy work. And I started having sex with him and got into sex work and it became a way of supplementing my income.

Most construction workers do more sex work on Tuesdays as it is their day off and also most daily-wage labourers get their wages on Tuesday.

Almost 50 per cent of the sex workers are married. The details of the marital status are—married 472, separated 173, widowed 107, deserted 51 and unmarried 34. Most of them have two or three school-going children in their village. Part-time sex workers are currently married while many of the full-time sex workers are separated. Even if they are married, in most cases their husbands do not provide anything. In case of widows or separated women there is no one to take care of the family and the natal family at times

cannot support her family. Women bear the children's responsibility and sex workers say—'This *dhanda* is work which we can do without any skills'. There are a few sex workers who said that they enjoy the work they do. One of them said—'If I don't find two satisfying clients and two bottles of beer, I cannot sleep at night'.

Dual-life as sex worker-house wife is easier for part-time sex workers than for full time sex workers. At home and in their villages these women are seen as vendors or daily-wage labourers. They also escape police harassment and there is less public recognition. In the villages where they live they lead people to believe that they are involved in some work in Dharwad. And when they come to Dharwad for sex work it is often just the clients, shopkeepers, hotel waiters and other sex workers who are able to identify them. The moment the client and sex worker find each other; they go to hotels in the middle of the market area. Neither of them wants to bargain on the street about things like place, money, food and liquor.

Whether full-time or part-time sex worker, because of the secretive nature, the moment their work is done they transform into a typical village woman with the saree pulled over the head half-covering the face and leave the place immediately. The sex workers often use the toilet in the bus stand as changing rooms.

The families of some of the sex workers know that they are into sex work whereas other are suspicious. When a spouse doubts the sex worker responds—'why do you doubt? Have you seen me having sex *hattyadudu* (lit. penetration)? If we are working with other people we have to talk to them and even have tea with them at times' and some defend themselves by telling their husbands or partners—'provide me and my children properly or else I will do this'.

The neighbours and the people in the village also comment—'She goes to Dharwad all the time, she is doing it. But we can't say anything, because we know what we are doing is wrong *tappu*'. Children are, often, kept unaware. Older children learn about what their mothers do and often there are differences with them.

A sex worker narrates—'My son ran away to work in Goa because he did not do well in school and could not find any work here, but my husband hit me everyday saying he ran away because I do this *dhanda*.' He blames her and makes her responsible for what happened to their only son. She says that he got drunk and broke all the tiles of the roof. Most sex workers say—'Our life has become like this, we don't want our children's life to become like this. Even if we want to stop this and go for construction work, they would still ask us for sex and harass us. What do we do?' Some of the

sex workers leave their children with their relatives so that they are not affected by their lives.

The number of part-time sex workers is more than full-time sex workers. The ratio of part-time sex workers to full-time sex workers is 791:50. The number of clients is low, and sex workers do not find it feasible to depend entirely on sex work. Among the still-operating, out of the enumerated sex workers, 120 are literate and 719 illiterate.

Most of the sex workers have entered the business directly without anyone's help. If a new sex worker comes, they are able to identify her.

She doesn't go to any store or market to buy what she wants, she hangs around with an empty bag (*khali cheela*) and these new sex workers even go and talk to the clients. They ask for the time and walk away from him and then smile at him or even ask if he wants to go with her.

One sex worker, who is 35 years old relates how she came into sex work:

I have two grown-up children and my husband is in a well-to-do job. I was married off when I was very young and my husband is much older than me. I had an affair with a younger man whom I knew before marriage. When my husband learnt about this, he broke my leg. But after separating from the other man, I found others. I find clients and tell my family that I went to pay phone bill or something like that. I have been like "this" for the past 6–7 years.

Another sex worker, around 16 years old says she was cheated and abandoned by her lover, and when she was walking on the road crying, the madam (with whom she now stays) saw her, took her in, consoled her and gave her a glass of water to drink (probably mixed with some intoxicant) and told her to rest in the room. When she woke she felt she had been sexually assaulted. She could not even walk. The madam asked her to stay with her and said she would pay her and thus she got involved in sex work.

Full-time sex workers are relatively more visible when compared to part-time sex workers. The full-time sex workers are often seen wandering in populated areas like local bus stands, near cinema theatres, without any apparent reason. When asked as to how one sex worker was able to locate or identify another they would often say—'She will be chewing *pan* and will be carrying an empty bag and is not really very well groomed.' The police also use these very traits in locating sex workers. In an interview a police constable tells us that 'good women' may be standing at the bus stand waiting for the bus and the moment the bus comes they leave but these women ... buses

come and go but they don't leave unless they find the client. The clients are able to identify them by their body language.

Some lodges are very well-known as places where sex work takes place. In such lodges, if a person wishes to stay for two days, accommodation is not provided. But a visitor for two to three hours for the purpose of sexual activity, is given a room. The rent per room begins with Rs 30 per hour. After an hour is up the room-boys knock at the door. This is often done at the instruction of the sex workers themselves. Because most of the times the client wants to spend more time with the sex worker and, further, at times, the clients may be drunk. There are also houses where rooms are lent for sex work. These places are also preferred because there is no police interference and there is a feeling of safety and also the rents are low ranging between Rs 10 to 20 an hour. Open places like a nearby lake, open places with trees and shrubs, big buildings under construction, play grounds without any source of illumination, areas near railway stations are also used.

Around 10 sex workers can be found in the market at any given time. At any given time around 30 sex workers are present in all the 'hot spots' together. Often, familiarity develops between clients and sex workers. The clients ask for the sex workers even though this is a street-based operation. There are fights amongst sex workers when a more or less permanent client is taken by another sex worker.

Many of the sex workers residing in the slums of Dharwad operate only in Hubli for the purpose of maintaining secrecy. Sex work is slow in Dharwad—'*Dharwad mein dhandha mand hai*' is what sex workers often say. Often the sex workers who are no longer in demand start operating in Dharwad. Many of them who are around 40 years of age, are the ones who were previously operating in Hubli.

The in-flow of the number of sex workers decreases during the sowing and harvesting seasons as there is work available in the villages. According to one of the older sex workers 'more number of women come for *dhandha* in case there is drought, or there is no work available, nor food to eat'. Economic benefits of sex work are more compared to any other work. The sex worker gets food to eat because that is part of the bargain. And most often, if she is not hungry, she asks the client to get something packed for her so that she can take back home.

Exploitation at the work-place is another reason for women taking up sex work; they either turn into part-time sex workers, or quit construction work entirely and become full-time sex workers.

The monthly income from sex work depends on the typology and nature of the sex worker. Based on the number of clients, the average monthly

income is between Rs 700–1,500. Bargaining often takes half-an-hour which is followed by the clients seeking the sex workers after which they go to a near-by hotel and negotiate over tea. The client goes ahead and the sex worker follows to the decided place. While coming back the client stays behind and the sex worker comes on her own. The use of the condom is also a part of the negotiation. ‘Give me Rs 10 less but use the condom’ is what the sex workers say. During negotiation they generally order snacks or food and in case the sex worker has eaten already, she asks the food to be packed.

Generally the money is taken before sex and in case the client refuses to put on condom, the sex worker says that she will go away. Because, he has already paid her the money as well as the room rent he agrees to put on a condom. Sex workers say—‘Very few people refuse the condom these days because people hear about AIDS everywhere—radio, TV, newspaper, even those from the villages too agree’. Some of the clients bring condom along with them.

Clients also have preferences. If they are tired of going to the same sex worker, they ask her to introduce them to someone else. ‘They want the woman to be plump, healthy, and new’.

Some of the sex workers are known for soliciting and negotiating but not having sex. They go with the client to the hotel, eat and drink tea and get snacks packed and ask for Rs 20–30 and say—‘I have a bus to catch’ or ‘There is someone from the village I know so I cannot come with you’. They say—‘I can take you to someone I know, you can go with her’ and introduce the client to another sex worker. Only if the client is offering lots of money or if the sex worker actually likes the client, do they go with him. Such sex workers spend time with 2–3 such clients a day, and earn their livelihood. ‘Men are often fooled *phashigi beeltaaru* and we earn’. When a client calls 1, 3–4 sex workers go together. They are all fed by the client.

Sex workers do not like to go with certain kinds of clients. One such category is those who tear the tip of condom. Some clients say they feel shy to wear a condom in front of the sex worker so they go inside the toilet put it on and come back. Having learnt from such experiences, sex workers pull it up and see if the head of the penis is exposed. They say—‘If the client agrees for her to put the condom on him, he is *niyattiddava* trustworthy and if he goes to put it on by himself we do not doubt him’. Sometimes the client, adamantly, refuses to put on condom; then the client is threatened that the manager will be called. Sex workers warn each other about such clients. Some clients, after being persuaded the first time around, agree without trouble the next time.

Sex workers also do not like to go with abusive clients. They pinch the breasts, thighs, squeeze tightly and try to kiss on the mouth ‘*baayig bai hachchudu*’.

Even if such clients offer more money, the sex worker does not like to go with them. They fear that diseases would spread through mouth-to-mouth kissing. Another category is the older men. As one of the sex workers says—‘His (client’s) hands will be shaking, he can’t see properly, nor hear and they want me to go with them. What will other sex workers and others think of me, that I have conned an old man, the hotel waiters also laugh when they see us with such old men’. One of the sex workers relates—‘I go only with the *giraki* (old man). If he does not have pan in his mouth; he has bad breath and I cannot stand it’.

Sex without payment also occurs. If one goes for construction work, generally the *mestri*, the construction in-charge, asks the woman to have sex with him; he takes her to a partially completed room and sleeps with her. Such things also happen in the villages. The landlord asks the older woman about the young girls who have attained puberty to be brought to work. The older women are paid and for the sake of this money they bring a girl to work with them after a couple of days, the landlord calls the girl and has sex with her. He tells her to keep quiet and that he will help her family by giving grains or some financial help. The girls keep quiet because the family can do with extra money and grains. The landlord generally sends a bag of grains straight from the field to the girl’s house so that his wife does not come to know. The girl tells her parents that she told the landlord about the family problems and he has sent the grains. The parents say—‘Oh! He is so good, continue to work on his land’. In the villages, sex work takes place even in the jungles and fields. It is not sex work as such but a form of compromise, i.e., ‘*settlement*’.

Police also come in the category of least-preferred clients because they do not pay and use their position to have sex with the sex worker. When the sex worker asks for money they show their identity card. However the sex workers give in once or twice and then they try to manipulate them emotionally into paying by saying—‘We are doing this to eat/survive *hottige*’.

Sex workers themselves act as pimps. There are also cases present where the auto drivers act as pimps. There exists a bonding between sex workers and pimps. The auto drivers bring clients and get commission from clients and for the sex worker he acts as a bodyguard in case clients choose places, out of the way. For the sex workers residing in slums, it is often auto drivers who help to find houses for rent.

A common feature of sex workers residing in slums is that they constantly move from one house to another. One reason is the fear of being recognized and another is contempt and scorn of the neighbours and house owners. They are often made to vacate the house, in case their work becomes known in

the streets where they live. Sex workers without husbands find it even harder to find houses because owners are particular about the kind of family that is moving in.

In-flow of clients is more if the monsoon is good, and after harvest. In a week the in-flow of sex workers as well as clients is more on market days. The clients are generally farmers and labourers from surrounding villages. Between the first and tenth day of every month the number of client in-flow increases because they get their salaries. 'During this period the clients come without us calling them but after 10th or 15th they will turn their head the other side and go'. Before a major festival like Diwali, the client in-flow reaches its peak because men from the surrounding villages come for buying and also selling. During winter also the client in-flow increases.

Sex workers prefer *nirodh* to any other kind of condoms, they say—'It is better for us, not costly and easily available, we get 20 rupees from the client and we cannot afford to spend 10 rupees for two condoms'. They feel both kinds have the same use. And the perception is that different kinds of condoms are for 'college girls' (young girls) and not for them. Because *nirodh* is available free, the clients agree to use them; they do not want to spend money on them.

One of the full-time sex workers, who has received treatment for STI and is cured, shared with the group that earlier she would go with as many as 10 clients in a day. But after she started to acquire information and awareness she has become concerned and feels scared to go even with a few clients. She says she has reduced the number of clients and also is particular about condom use. She knows that her husband has relationships outside marriage so she even insists on condom use with her husband as well. Condom-negotiation with partners is said to be extremely difficult due to various reasons. One of the most important reasons is the secrecy involved in sex work. The partner often asks—'Why do you sleep with other men? Is that the reason you are asking me to use condom?' Many sex workers end up with pregnancy and have to spend money on abortions.

Motivating the sex workers to get HIV-tests done is a daunting task. They feel insecure regarding their status. They feel—'We are better off, not knowing. What if everyone stops talking to us? How will I live if I am tested positive?' However, many do get tested. Out of the referred sex workers 160 have tested and 120 of them are HIV-negative and 40 positive.

To conclude, the narratives of one of the sex workers sketches the life of a sex worker. She says:

I was taken to Pune at the age of 15; there I had to cut my hair short and apply colour to lips and face and stand outside the door of the house. Whenever police

came I was hidden in the house because I was young. But once I was caught on the threshold and my aunty who had kept me said that she has come from the village for a visit. But looking at my painted face they were able to identify that I was doing *dhandu* or sex work and then because of the police trouble I ran away from there and came to Dharwad.

Here there is no need for fashion and there is not much fear of police. If the police takes us to the station, the officers say—‘I am fed up of seeing the same faces; go catch thieves. Why do you drag these women into the station?’

People who live near my house, know that I do this; but what to do? Boys in the village swear *baigolu* when they see clients coming to my house and I say shut up and go. I take good care of my clients, because they have come to me. So I ask them to come by the back door so that they don’t have to hear anything. I wake the client in the morning and give them tooth paste, comb and powder for them to get *ready*. I am doing this and earning my livelihood and providing for my children who live with my sister. I don’t want my life to affect their life.

Notes

1. Dharwad district has a total population of 16,04,253. Percentage of scheduled castes population is 8.2. The sex ratio for the district is 949 while 71.6 per cent of the population is literate. The percentage of urban population to total population is 55.0. Percentage among total workers: cultivators—25.8, agricultural labourers—27.5, household industries—2.9. The average size of operational holdings is 3.14 hectares, compared to 2.41 for Karnataka and 1.69 for India but the land is arid. Gross irrigated area is 9.37 per cent compared to 18.05 per cent for Karnataka and 30.72 for India.
2. The numbers in the bracket indicate the authors’ sample survey numbers.

9

The invisibles

*A study on Kolkata's call girls**

ISHITA MAJUMDAR AND SUDIPTA PANJA

She may be the seemingly self-confident executive, a company asset. Or she may be the typical middle-class housewife walking past you, leading a child by the hand. Or she may be just a college girl who usually 'hangs out' with her friends in discos. Yet, all it takes is a phone call. A 'contact' for a 'programme', and these housewives, executives, actresses, college students shift to their identity as call girls.

What economic constraints, childhood misfortunes, compulsions from relatives and advice from friends or peers drive them to this profession? What is their life like? How do they cope with the emotional and physical stress or with diseases like STD or HIV? Just how extensive and elaborate is the call-girl network in a city like Kolkata? These are some of the questions addressed in this study.

The Rationale for Studying 'Call Girls'

Being non-brothel-based sex workers, call girls are not confined to any distinct geographical boundary. Their inter-city, inter-state and inter-country mobility, multiple partners and sexual practices make them not only vulnerable to a wide range of diseases such as STIs, RTIs including HIV but also make them potential carriers of these diseases. Their clandestine mode of operations makes them virtually invisible. They belong to the mainstream and have access to their upper-middle class and elite clientele with ease. Most call-girls have a better academic and cultural background than commercial sex

workers. It can be reasonably assumed, therefore, that call-girls can influence a change in the attitude or behaviour of their clients. Lack of documentation on this well-established group and few efforts at intervention make this present study so much more important.

Background

Since call girls are non-brothel-based, highly mobile and invisible, it is quite natural to assume that their mode of operation is very discreet and without any co-ordination. But in reality, call girls have a well-structured networking system. The research team, in order to identify the call girls and their network, made a number of visits to different hotels, resorts, massage parlours, dancing schools, fitness clubs and so on. For this, some middlemen were identified, who introduced the research team to some call girls. Subsequently, rapport was built up with these women and primary information was collected. Then, following the protocol, more information was collected for interpretation.

In call-girl terminology, a network is known as a 'line'. Here, the agent plays a pivotal role in all transactions. They know, not only the client's requirements and his willingness to spend but also the profile of 'his' call girls or their 'demand'. 'Demand' in agent terminology is the valuation of a call girl's beauty, physique, connection with the glamour world, and so forth whereas 'programme' is the word used when referring to the actual encounter with the client. It is always the agent's responsibility to fix the 'programme', that is to negotiate the rate of the call girls, the services required by the client, the venue and the time convenient to both the parties. Often these 'programmes' are held in hotels or guesthouses. Sometimes residential units, like the agent's house, are rented for the purpose.

Each agent has about 10–15 call girls working for him. Sometimes a call girl might work for different agents or even develop her own network, therefore playing the dual role of call girl and agent. The exchange of call girls between agents is also common when agents feel that the women working under him do not exactly match the demands of his client. He then borrows a call girl from another agent.

The call-girl networks in Kolkata have two distinct variations based mainly on areas of operation—the intra-city network and the inter-city network. The intra-city network involves 85 per cent of the total call-girl population and the inter-city network sustains 15 per cent.

The intra-city network comprises two distinct sub-networks: the core city network and the suburban network, each accounting for 62 per cent and 38 per cent of the intra-city call girls respectively. Each sub-network serves a

Case Study

TG 432, an agent, narrates his experience with the network:

From mid-1996 to end-1997, I ran call-girl networks in Dubai and Bombay. But gradually, Russian girls captured the Dubai market and the demand for Indian girls fell. So I was compelled to return to Mumbai. At present I have a network only in Mumbai.

In Mumbai, I have a flat where I often keep girls I call through agents in Mumbai and Kolkata. There are five agents in Kolkata who regularly supply me with girls according to the specialization I place before them.

On one occasion I made an agreement with some girls at the rate of Rs 90,000–Rs1,20,000 per month for a period of 2–3 months. For this sum, the girls were bound to attend 2–3 programmes every day. Fifty per cent of the payment was made before the girls reached the flat. The remaining 50 per cent was paid at the end of the contract period. I don't know how this amount was shared between the call girls and their city agents. I also have about 20 girls working in my network. There are local girls and are given 50 per cent of whatever they earn per programme.

Establishment costs, like arranging the programme, venue etc., are mostly borne by the client or party. If I have to do it, my cut in the deal goes up. I often operate the network from my office in the share bazaar. I have a list of clients whom I contact regularly over the phone and supply call girls as requested. Most of the clients belong to the business community. The most generous clients are always those from the gold business. Their presence is periodic but whenever they do well in business, they indulge themselves with every luxury and let money flow. I make a lot of money from them.

different class of clients. Their modes of contact also differ according to their personal/parallel identities. It may be through phone-calls, agents, massage parlours, bars, hotels, the glamour world, and the like.

The inter-city network embraces cities like Bangalore, Hyderabad, Delhi and Mumbai. The network in Mumbai is most active with the highest rates in the country and draws a large number of call girls from Kolkata and other cities (Kolkata's call girls are preferred by Mumbai agents because 'they are very well-groomed'). The modus operandi is simple—local agents sign contracts with the girls and then contracts are drawn up with their counterparts in Mumbai. Once in Mumbai, however, the call girls are answerable only to their Mumbai agents. The chain of 'contacts' often extends to Dubai where Mumbai agents tie up with sex-trade networks in that city.

Objectives of the Study

1. To study the socio-economic backgrounds of call girls.
2. To study the networking system of the call girls, the agents and the client and the modus operandi of the profession. To study the range of prices and work-pattern involved.
3. To assess the knowledge, attitudes, behaviour and practices of call girls with reference to sex and sexuality, use of contraceptives and disease profile and the need for medication.
4. To study the reproductive health of call girls in order to assess the degree of vulnerability to diseases like STD and HIV, and similar problems.

Methodology

Study of population and sampling

The world of the call girls ranges across social classes. There are differences not only between class and age groups, religion and profession (parallel), but also between clusters under each agent of the call girl network. So, a disproportionate, stratified, random sampling method was adopted in order to develop a generalized view of the homogenous strata and cluster sampling was adopted for the heterogeneous strata.

The sample consisted of 136 participants of whom 100 were chosen for questionnaires and administration and 36 for interviews.

Tools for data collection

Here, both textual and contextual data were utilized all the way from the research-designing stage to analysis. A review of literature was found important in the initial stages. This was followed by collection of empirical data through three distinct techniques of data collection—in-depth interviews, questionnaires and focussed group-discussions.

Since call girls are a very secretive group and the network not very transparent and tangible, the identification of the study population was a major hurdle, but that was finally overcome. In addition, research workers had to maintain a high level of confidentiality making the work that much more difficult.

Focus on Kolkata

Kolkata is the native city of the implementing organization. There was, therefore, an obvious advantage in terms of convenience and familiarity with terrain. Relationships and information networks could be set up with great ease. There was also the challenge of producing a current and conclusive survey in a city where little or no previous documentation of this nature existed. The research involved certain procedures like convincing members of the target group of their important role in the study and their vulnerability to STD/HIV and that they, voluntarily, seek help for their problems through counselling or clinically. So, the proximity of the target group was a very important factor. Finally, keeping in mind the inevitability of a targeted action plan in the future, it was necessary to trace the international (geographical) and residential locations of this group.

Ethical issues

The study adopted a code of ethics of which the most important were:

- Maintain objectivity and integrity in research.
- Respect the subject's right to privacy and dignity.
- Protect subjects from personal harm.
- Preserve confidentiality.
- Acknowledge research collaborations and assistance.
- Convincing subjects of the utility of the research for the greater good and obtaining their consent.
- Using leaflets/cover story/others to convince subjects of the importance of his/her role.
- Making it possible for participants to voluntarily seek help for their personal problems as in a clinical or counselling situation.

Findings of the Study

Mode of contact

Direct contacts are made at their work places, i.e., beauty parlours, massage parlours, shops they work in, holiday resorts, through phone calls and exchange of personal cards in hotels. Sometimes they leave their cards with the clients. More than 80 per cent of the women work through agents. The rest, that is 20 per cent, work directly.

Network

As stated before, 85 per cent of Kolkata's call girls work within the city and 15 per cent travel outside, mostly to Mumbai, Bangalore, Hyderabad, Delhi, and other cities. A few women have also served clients abroad in Dubai, Europe and so on. Importantly, the flow of women is always centrifugal, i.e., women travel from Kolkata to other cities.

Call girls joined the network through friends, relatives, film/TV directors, beauty parlours, dance schools and other associates.

Work timings

Some women in this profession work long hours. Thirty-three per cent of those interviewed maintained usual office timings—10 am–5 pm. Twelve per cent worked during afternoons, and 53 per cent for a few hours in the evenings, i.e.,—3 p.m.–8 p.m. Two of the girls said they were ready to work at any time of the day. Only three women spoke of working night shifts. The usual work pattern for 81 per cent was 2–3 programmes a week. Ten per cent worked thrice a week. Just four per cent worked four days a week. None of the women worked all days of the week.

Money charged per programme

<i>Rate in Rupees</i>	Rs 1,000	Rs 1,000–2,000	Rs 2,500–10,000
<i>Percentage</i>	62%	29%	9%

Payments were based on number of clients, place and time of programmes. The rates doubled at night. The upper limit per programme depends on the client's mood and the satisfaction. Sometimes it goes up to between Rs 20,000–30,000. The rates vary according to the type of 'service' offered and the 'quality' of the girl in terms of her beauty and physique. In a majority of the cases, transactions were made after the programme. Call girls mostly use hotels, resorts, guest houses or even private flats and homes of agents.

Nature of clients serviced

Seventy one per cent said they did not have fixed clients, followed by 13 per cent who had two regular clients. Only seven per cent confirmed that they had a fixed client and nine per cent were handling 3–6 clients.

Years in the profession

About 65 per cent of call girls were new in this profession (less than two years):

<i>%</i>	<i>Number of years</i>
65	Past 2 years
25	3–4 years
9	5–8 years
1	13 years (women who were above 35 years of age)

The social background

- A majority of the call girls are Hindu (93 per cent) and belong to the upper-caste.
- All of them fluent in Bengali and comfortable with both Hindi and English.
- Husbands of many have good income, family income for most (56 per cent) ranging between Rs 8,000–10,000.
- The parents of some are well-placed.
- Most are married (76 per cent), some of them separated, divorced or widowed.

They worked as beauticians, masseurs, tailors and private tutors and also ran shops and boutiques. A large number were sales girls, which also brought them in close touch with various types of potential clients. Next in line were housewives who were driven by economic needs or had husbands who were alcoholics and who used to visit call girls. A still larger section was of high school and college students.

Family and social life

Most of the call girls have a family set-up and have a distinct status within the family, like wife, daughter, mother, and so on. This helps them maintain a social identity that is far removed from the sex trade. Moreover, 60 per cent of the girls have a professional identity which helps them to conceal their link with the sex trade.

For girls who do not have a steady parallel profession, the situation is very different. Some of them confessed that their family members were very reluctant to enquire about their lifestyles. And even if their families were

fully aware of what was going on, they would put on a show of ignorance to avoid social stigma because they needed this flow of easy cash.

Many call girls are reasonably good parents. Call girls are rarely social and do not even mix with neighbours. It is not that they do not miss a social life nor do they not enjoy the company of friends. On the contrary, they have an intense longing for a normal social life. Most call girls are shy in front of strangers and relax when they are with clients.

Unlike full-time call girls in cities like Mumbai or those in the West, the ones in Kolkata, rarely, face the psychological problems that beset the others. They are more sociable, less prone to loneliness, less cynical and less emotionally unstable. The social support systems that the other sex workers may lack or refuse to accept seem to work as a healing touch in most of the cases from Kolkata.

Job satisfaction

In general, most of the call girls seemed happy with their profession. Even though all had economic reasons for pursuing it, not all seemed to have been driven into it. Many were from well-to-do families. Some call girls were proud of their profession. It was giving them ‘economic security, food for the family, education for children and helping them to survive with dignity...’. They refused to belittle their profession. Some of the needy ones admitted that they had no alternative. A large chunk of the income earned was spent on themselves, mainly on clothes, cosmetics and other items of personal consumption.

Many call girls tried to justify their choice of such a profession. One said—“...my husband has numerous affairs. So what is wrong if I do the same thing?” However none of them wanted their children to be call girls when they grew up. Some also asked why women should be called ‘bad’ if they joined the profession. Their response was on the lines of ‘...no one blames men for chasing women—we don’t go after them...’.

For some, sex trade helped them to overcome adverse situations and achieve what they wanted. More than 85 per cent of the women interviewed said that this profession gave them easy cash in the absence of other job opportunities. Nearly 30 per cent said that besides the extra income, they enjoyed the sexual act, five per cent said they were in the profession because they wanted to build a career.

It was obvious from several interviews that there was hardly any awareness among call girls that some day, with age, they would need to abandon their profession. Those who earned well from parallel professions declared that they wished to continue. Sixty per cent would quit given an opportunity

while 24 per cent liked the profession and would not shift or quit even if given a choice.

A similar attitude was noticed among agents for whom earning easy money was of prime importance and wished to continue their agency. Clients too did not have any qualms. Most of the clients did not consider the practice of visiting call girls for sexual gratification as 'bad' or 'immoral'.

The initiation

Many of them seemed to have taken up this profession mainly for financial gain and economic necessity. The gentle shove into this world was mostly given by close friends (67 per cent), acquaintances (15 per cent), neighbours (6 per cent) and the husband's friends (5 per cent). Those in the acting business obliged important personalities to get 'good and remunerative roles', while some obliged their teachers 'to get good marks'. Slowly, this became a compulsion and their way of life. Only one person disclosed that she had entered the profession because her mother too was a call girl. But in some cases, compulsion stemmed from basic psychological needs. One girl came from a broken family where she had no one to confide to after she was sexually abused.

Vulnerability

The demands that the profession makes on the call girls—to be highly mobile, to remain invisible in society, have multiple sex partners and a range of sexual practices—make them extremely vulnerable to diseases. The factors that, directly, make them vulnerable to diseases are multiple sex partners, irregularity in condom usage, lack of awareness of symptoms and preventive measures with regard to STD/HIV/AIDS. Among the contributing factors are the myths and misconceptions with regard to ways of contracting diseases and their relative youth, 11 per cent are below the age of 20. Intercity network (around 15 per cent), chewing-habits, especially of tobacco, and oral sex also contribute to their vulnerability.

The vulnerability factor was the most decisive finding in the whole study. One look at the statistics and one can comprehend the seriousness of the problem—Irregular condom use showed as much as 64 per cent among the group; type of sex practiced indicated 30 per cent vulnerability; symptoms of STD showed 24 per cent vulnerability; and treatment-seeking behaviour with regard to STD shows 46 per cent vulnerability.

The percentage of STD infections among them was found to be somewhat higher than that of the general population, obviously because of their

sexual behaviour. A large number suffered from insomnia and fever, cough and cold and depression, a clear sign of their physical and psychological problems. Thirty per cent of the target group underwent induced abortion.

The treatment-seeking behaviour of the call girls showed a marked preference for modern treatment facilities. It could be because of their high education levels. So, by providing awareness-generation programmes on various health related problems, especially in the reproductive field, there is a possibility that they could lead disease-free and healthy lives.

The most important point to be noted here is that over 65 per cent of the sample supported that the most effective measures to prevent STD is the use of condoms during sex. A striking point to be mentioned here is that over 50 per cent of the target group became aware of STD/HIV/AIDS because of intervention-programmes run by the Bhoruka Public Welfare Trust.

Notes

About Bhoruka Public Welfare Trust

Bhoruka Public Welfare Trust was established in 1979, with the aim of providing health care services to society. Bhoruka is well-known for its role and expertise in the various aspects of haematology as well as in a broader range of public health services and also has its own Research Centre for Haematology and Blood Transfusion. It started community development work in areas of sexual health and reproductive and child health, particularly the prevention and cure of STDs among groups practising high-risk behaviour like truck drivers, helpers, call girls and migrant workers. The organization also has the leadership in different intervention projects, training and research initiatives.

*Definition of call girl

This study, after analysis of the core characteristics of the group in Kolkata, puts forward the following definition:

Call girls are non-brothel based mobile commercial female sex workers who may operate independently or through a pimp, for approximate programme rates that vary between Rs 800 and Rs 30,000. The minimum number of programmes undertaken per week may be between 2 and 3, arranged most often, in places like hotels, resorts, private flats, massage parlours, etc. All these girls are literate and come from middle and upper-middle class families or white-collar groups; most of them hold other regular jobs from which they are able to earn a considerable amount of money.

III

At the Interface

**Economic, social, legal and
health perspectives**

**Edited by
Rohini Sahni and
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10

Markets, histories and grass-root evidences

Economics of sex work in India

ROHINI SAHNI AND V. KALYAN SHANKAR

Prostitutes stand at the flash point of marriage and market, taking sex into the street and money into the bedroom. Flagrantly and publicly demanding money for sexual services that men expect for free, prostitutes insist on exhibiting their sex work as having economic value (McClintock, 1992).

What is it that essentially constitutes the economics of sex work today? In terms of the exchange, it is the economic value of the sexual services provided and availed. Starting from soliciting for a customer, to finding one, to negotiating a price and concluding with the service by itself, one can identify the series of events that culminate in this transaction. If sex work is an issue of livelihood for women, it is the frequency and the regularity of these economic transactions that determine their livelihood. Sex work as an economic choice, or as having economic value, emerges from this consideration.

But is the economics of sex work limited to these transactions alone? From the spatially concentrated nature of the individual, frequently-occurring transactions in a red light area (RLA), and their visible availability, these micro-level activities alone come to represent the involvement of economics in sex work. However, they are merely the culmination points of a series of economic transactions that precede these ultimate exchanges. So how does economics come to influence a sex worker in the course of her life-span? How then to view the economics of sex work in its entirety encompassing all its past and present manifestations?

The answers to this could be enquired from the journeys of the women themselves, by studying the underlying economics of which they become integral parts. But this would have its limitations. On a larger scale of time, the threads of these individual journeys would remain isolated unless woven into the historical context in which they have evolved and functioned. These individual journeys, therefore, need to be juxtaposed with the journey of prostitution in India by itself, providing us with clues to tracing the broader economic transformations affecting the individual women. This paper attempts to understand the economics of sex work as observed in India today in the context of its historical transformations.

Contemporary Journeys and the Quest for Livelihoods

At a broader level, the contemporary economics of sex work would comprise three stages. First, it is the recognition of sex work as having economic value, and the process of discovering it or arriving at it.

A part-time sex worker says,

I began working (at a construction site) and the *mestry* (contractor) asked me to have sex with him. I had heard from others that if I refuse, either I will lose work or will be given difficult, heavy work. And I started having sex with him and got into sex work and it became a way of supplementing income (Kowlgi and Hugar, in this volume).

A Delhi based newspaper brought the case of a Nepali girl named Sharda into public notice. A father from rural Nepal sold his daughter for Rs 500 to an agent. The agents transport the girls across the border into India in trucks. On the Bihar border, they are re-sold to another set of agents. They are sold once again to brothel owners in cities like Mumbai or Delhi (Apte, 2002).

These examples are representative of the extremity of economic circumstances that precede the entry of the girl or the woman into sex work. The former case is illustrative of how a woman may herself come to recognize the potential of generating income through her sexuality. In the latter, the sexuality of the young girl is being exploited for generation of a single lump-sum payment for the father. The difference here is of who made the decision of this economic choice, and who the beneficiaries are.

This contrast notwithstanding, there are issues common to both cases. First, it is the consistency of attitude in laying claim to women's bodies. In the former case, it was the contractor who staked a claim whereas in the latter

it is the father. One can discern an attempt at trying to derive economic value through this claim; in case of the father, there are explicit monetary gains arising from the sale. But even in the case of the contractor, it is a covert economic gain by coercing services for free what would otherwise be charged by a sex worker.

In the journey of a woman's recognition of sex work as an earning option, the economic circumstances discussed earlier, and more like these, emerge as the immediate causes influencing this decision. These causes have higher visibility and, in the process, divert the attention from deep-rooted social and economic processes operating underneath, of which they are mere outcomes.

Gender discrimination or the withdrawal of support structures at the maternal or marital homes could be some of these social undercurrents (Nag 2001); coupled with the prevalence of poverty (Gangoli 2006), associated illiteracy and inaccessibility to avenues of skill-building. The quest for means of livelihood continues nevertheless. The recognition of sex work as a choice for women needs to be placed in the larger perspective of these immediate or long-standing circumstances. The following text from the Sex Worker's Manifesto (DMSC) illustrates this better:

Our stories are not fundamentally different from the labourer from Bihar who pulls a rickshaw in Calcutta or the worker from Calcutta who works part-time in a factory in Bombay. Women take up prostitution for the same reason as they may take up any other livelihood option available to them (222–25) (Ghosh in this volume).

The comparison between the choice of being a physical labourer in case of a man, and a sex worker in case of a woman needs to be understood in the context of the limited choices available to both men and women in the unskilled labour markets. In the face of dire poverty, illiteracy and limited choices of employment in the Indian context, addressing livelihoods is a matter of serious concern, particularly in case of women. For example, the urban daily wage rate for a female casual labourer in the year 2000 was as low as Rs 38.20 on an average; in case of a rural female casual labourer, it was even lower with an average of Rs 29.40. The casual female labourer finds work only for 4.3 days per week. As a casual labourer, a woman can hope to earn Rs 657 per month in the urban area and Rs 506 in the rural area (Ghose 2004), if she is fortunate to find any work at all.

In their search for sustainable livelihood, women not only have to suffice with poor, meagre incomes bordering on the poverty line¹, but also cope with the patriarchal power structures that increase their vulnerability of sexual exploitation at work, or at home. This further limits the economic choices

that she may have, or she can avail of at different junctures of her life. Vulnerability is not solely limited to poverty, which explains the existence of highly educated, upper class call girls (Bhoruka Public Welfare Trust 2004). Under these circumstances, sex work emerges not only as a strategy for survival, but also gets recognized as a viable economic option.

After having recognized the possibility of economic gains, the second stage of the economics of sex work comprises of the woman's involvement with the profession. The decision here is whether she is engaged in it full time, or uses it as an alternative occupation to supplement her income. What differentiates the women across these options is the existence of familial support structures or connections to the mainstream; the part-time workers, also referred to as the flying ones, are still part of a family, with husband and children, however flimsy these ties may be. They could also be engaged in economic activities such as contractual labour for construction work, house maids and vegetable selling. This veil of alternative identities either at home or at work enables them to perform dual roles within the family as well as of a sex worker. The loss of these veils could shift the woman from a part-time to a full-time sex worker.

Sex work as a part-time choice is also a seasonal alternative for income generation. Cases have been observed where women arrive at urban brothels during festive seasons to tap the surplus demand for paid sex and return with the money earned. Another set of observations points to young girls who enter urban brothels with the economic motive of earning quick money for their dowry, following which they cease to be sex workers.²

For sex work to become a livelihood option for a woman, the frequency and regularity of the services availed from her become important. For example, the hamlets of sex workers might themselves migrate to different places to attract new clients as in case of the *Nats*³ (Swarnakar in this volume), or the individual woman may enter the networks of urban brothels. The difference between the two cases cited earlier could be understood in terms of the prevailing physical structures where sex work takes place. In the first example, the structures (or the hamlets) themselves are migratory while in the latter, the structures (or the brothels) are stationary. Common to both cases is an attempt of the sex workers at ensuring higher frequency and regularity of clients for attaining stability of incomes.

In an urban context, the physical structures could be differentiated as the overt and covert locations of sex work. A brothel in a RLA for instance, is a conspicuous location recognized as a venue for sex work. A lodge or a hotel, or public spaces such as gardens outside the RLA could also be venues; but these are mainstream structures that get tapped, rather than used exclusively for the purpose.

The existence of a RLA enables a spatial concentration of the activities of soliciting, negotiating and delivering of services. In its absence, the chain of these events gets scattered and would require different physical structures. The dependence on mainstream structures then gets warranted. The soliciting and negotiating would happen at a different location (highways, public spaces and so on), followed by transportation to another location (lodges, hotels and the like) for the service itself. The existence of RLA in a definite locale in the city and the concentration of sexual services within these geographical or structural limits is what enables a closer study of the economics involved.

Within the precincts of a RLA, the core service of sex work culminates in a host of complementary services, which together form a complex structure of commercial activities. In terms of structures, this manifests as central or primary structures, which are the brothels themselves, or certain lodges; and secondary or lateral support structures, like the restaurants, eateries, laundry shops, beauty parlours, garment shops, wine shops, who derive their customers in the form of sex workers and their clientele.

Structures are not just concrete frames for the practice of sex work, but also have an impact on prices quoted. The social apathy towards the area (arising from the stigmatized nature of the profession) results in sparse allocation of economic resources for provision and servicing of the public infrastructure in the area, like electricity, water, public toilets and garbage disposal. This negligence is exacerbated by the apathy of brothel owners in improving the structures or facilities, resulting in congested, dilapidated working spaces for women. The threshold prices quoted and negotiated have to be in synchronization with this locale, its ambience and facilities provided; *making the price a function of not just the service alone.*

These structures are representative of the woman operating from there as well as the economic status of the clientele visiting her. A girl from a less privileged background would operate from a more shabby structure and typically gets a client from the low income strata. Neither can she afford to quote higher prices nor would the client be able to afford it. A call girl on the other hand, operating in a more up-market ambience, derives the benefit of better physical structures which gets incorporated into higher prices. Thus, the structures by themselves are determinants of the range of incomes that could possibly be generated by the sex worker.

The issue of generating income through sex work then depends on the ability of the woman to find her place in this hierarchy of structures that exist. Again, factors such as her social background, her education levels and economic desperation, to mention a few, determine her place in this finer

differentiation of structures from where she can operate. Having found her place in this hierarchy, the sex worker needs to sustain this position for continuous income. Her position is a fluid one; she may slide down the hierarchy to operate from lesser paying avenues with increasing age or deteriorating health⁴ or higher competition from younger sex workers. Sliding down the hierarchy could also involve migrating from urban brothels to semi-urban structures, correspondingly lowering her incomes.

Throughout this working span, one can discern the constant struggle of the sex workers against fluctuating incomes which need to be aligned to their expenditures on themselves or on their children. The woman may also be involved in supporting her family through a series of remittances which form another important economic dimension to her work. Under these circumstances, the issue is how much can she possibly save for her future? For there emerges a time when the woman would no longer be able to provide those services, or would not be demanded of her services frequently, or would not be able to command her price for the service. This would comprise of the third stage of a sex worker's life.

Do the economic benefits of brothel-based prostitution suffice once women actively cease to be sex workers? With an increasing vulnerability to HIV, do the economic costs of the profession become too overbearing, wiping out all economic benefits derived from a lifetime of being a sex worker? Does a sex worker end up being poorer than from where she began?

Here, the issue is of economic opportunities foregone on account of being a sex worker. Can a sex worker avail of alternative avenues of employment after she has retired from the profession? Does she have alternative support structures that would sustain her living? Does her stigmatization as a sex worker and as a possible carrier of HIV add to the economic costs or opportunities foregone in the absence of alternative support structures?

In the addressing of immediate means of livelihood, these long-run economic costs get overlooked; but once the regularity of income through sex work wanes, they re-emerge and have to be dealt with. Remittances are often unidirectional and serve to support family members, who cannot be relied upon for support post retirement considering the stigma borne by the sex worker. The cost of her stigmatization then manifests purely in economic terms, in terms of the loss of support structures.

Alternate support structures have come to mean rehabilitation of women predominantly active in the profession, or that of young girls. But such efforts have paid little attention to her economic status, which may deteriorate further in the process.

If you have not given her meaningful livelihood, a meaningful economic alternative, the sex worker that is rescued from here goes to other red light areas, and after some time, comes back to the same red light area. We have found that girls become poorer each time they are rescued; when a girl is arrested and taken away, her belongings, her money—anything precious to her is left at the brothel. When she comes back, it is all gone—so she has to start afresh. And once she's rescued, to come back to any place, she has to pay a bribe. (Nicole, 2003)

The three stages described so far differentiate the journeys of sex workers as observed in a contemporary context. But how is a sex worker of today different from her counterpart in days of yore? How is the economics of sex work today different from what it was in the past? As part of a profession that has its own histories, what are the legacies inherited or lost by sex workers today? This paper attempts to delineate the economic strands of sex work; not only by taking its present into consideration, but also by placing it in the context of its past.

Of Histories, Hierarchies, Skills and Transformations

Fleeting through historical references of sex work in the Indian context, one can discern a hierarchy of prostitutes operating at different points in time. These forms are diverse, and each has its distinct social and cultural journeys. Here, the intention to delve into history is not to comprehensively overview the journey of prostitution in India by itself. Instead, the examples quoted here would serve the purpose of charting the underlying economics of hierarchies among prostitutes, and how they were synchronized with the socio-cultural milieu of the times.

In references of prostitution from ancient India:

The *Ganika* (courtesan) because of her youth, beauty, training and accomplishment belonged to a superior class status. With an extensive, elaborate and apparently expensive education, she could frequently name her price; A Jain text says that 'a courtesan who had a faultless body and whose attainments were complete may charge 1,000 *karsapanas* per night.' (Bhattacharji, 1987). In her status as a salaried employee the state enabled the setting up of establishments with lump sum grants of 1,000 *panas* to the head courtesan and 500 *panas* to her deputy, presumably to enable them to buy jewellery, furnishings, musical instruments and other tools of trade, (Kautilya trans. Rangarajan 1992), with clearly defined legal status, authority and obligations (Sternbach 1951).

For a *rupajiva* (literally one who lives on her beauty), occupying a lower rung than the *ganika*, her fees were 48 *panas*; she usually lived with actors, wine sellers.... It is obvious that she kept company with people who controlled ready cash. (Bhattacharji 1987)

Still lower in the hierarchy, the *pumschali* (a common whore) did not have any fixed fees; she could only demand money on marks of cohabitation (Bhattacharji 1987).

In case of *Devadasis*, or temple dancers⁵, a form tracing its existence between the third century and sixth century AD (Apte, Sahni 2005); and its forms continuing to date:

The temple prostitute (*tridasalayajivika*) got paid by the temple authorities and her income was fixed by tradition. Ksemendra's *Samayamatrka* says they were paid in grain as remuneration and that they were employed in rotation. (Bhattacharji 1987)

Coming into the 19th century, the *devadasis* still

performed a range of ritual services, derived incomes from endowments associated with their offices, and enjoyed considerable prestige within 'traditional' Hindu society. (Parker, 1998)

Taking another instance of courtesans from a chronologically later period:

In the 1860s in Lucknow, 'a *randi* (a common prostitute) ... charged a nightly rate of five rupees and often more; *tawaiif* (courtesan) insisted on a hundred rupees a night and also received lavish gifts of jewellery and property. (A male labourer was only paid two to four *annas* (one rupee = 16 annas) and a female labourer only half that). A century later, with the number of generous patrons on the wane, the disparities in income were only slightly less ridiculous. A contractor pays women labourers between seven and ten rupees a day, and a well-known *tawaiif* charges three thousand rupees for a musical evening. Most have regular income besides, from investments, rents, and sale of produce from orchards or shops.' (Oldenburg 1990)

Coming over to colonial times, 'over the course of the nineteenth century, *commercial sex* between colonizing men and local women rather than concubinage or other more permanent or monogamous liaisons became the preferred practice' (Levine 1996). In contrast to earlier periods, we find hierarchies of a different kind emerging here, ethnic in nature, and without skills as a qualification for that gradation;

European prostitutes in Bombay assumed the status of permanent outsiders, embodying a 'lesser whiteness' than British subjects but an identity that was nonetheless superior to Indian prostitutes. (Tambe 2004)

These examples from history are not exhaustive, but they illustrate the existence of hierarchies among prostitutes and entertainers. The capacity to earn across the hierarchies was reflective of the social status, and varied exponentially at the higher rungs. Skill sets, it could be observed, were vital for determining the earning capacities. Accomplishments in fine arts emerging from years of training were the criteria for a higher position; this not only ensured higher incomes, but also created a distinctive status for the woman.

Formerly, the elite forms of prostitution were trained for the purpose. For the *ganika*, 'altogether seventy two arts and sciences had to be mastered by her' (Bhattacharji 1987). In case of the *tawaiifs*, the *ganewalis* (singers) were perhaps the best educated of women. The more talented, also trained under the best music and dance *ustads* (masters), even if only for brief periods' (Kidwai 2004). With regard to temple dancers, 'a regionally specific and long-standing *devadasi* tradition equipped women with considerable skills in poetry, music, dancing and polite conversation' (Levine 2000).

The hierarchies are existent even to-date, however, the skills acquired exclusively for the profession are no longer the norm. The call girls, or the more elite of sex workers in the contemporary hierarchy derive considerably higher incomes, but are not trained in the profession; their skill-sets—like better education or poise or grooming, evolve independently, not for the profession. A typical inhabitant of an urban brothel has practically little or no education, or any other skill-sets that could be employed.

The contemporary hierarchy of sex workers in India is reflective not only of denudation of skill-sets, but also the de-linking of culture, religion and prostitution. The refinement in the profession, a link from the past, manifesting in the form of art and culture, singing and dancing have been eroded in colonial and post-colonial times. In case of dance,

Sadir (dance) practiced by the *devadasi*, and housed in the physical context of the temple, its immediate theatre, fused ritual-form and religious fervour, into one non-dualistic whole. And the *devadasi* symbolized this fusion till she and the dance were ousted from the temple in the first half of the twentieth century by civil laws that prohibited temple dancing (Meduri, 1988).

Or as in case of the courtesans:

The public concert hall replaced the courtesan's salon as the home of the fine arts. Progress in the liberation and education of women also contributed to

the further decline of the courtesan milieu. On the one hand, women were better able to provide the intelligent, cultured companionship which men had previously found only in the red light district; and correspondingly, it was no longer considered reprehensible for women from respectable backgrounds to perform in public, whether as amateurs or professionals. Hence, courtesans of sufficient talent and renown were able to support themselves solely by performing in concerts, for their new patrons, the bourgeoisie. Conversely, those less-skilled in the fine arts remained in the *cakla* (red light area) and were obliged to rely increasingly on prostitution. Courtesans continue to perform *ghazal* and other light genres in the urban red-light districts today, but the quality of such performances is generally low, especially since upper-class music aficionados no longer visit such establishments. (Manuel 1998–1999)

Coming over to contemporary times, hierarchies now are purely income-based, rather than skill or culture-based. The prostitute as a creator of culture is no longer the case. Instead of being a participant herself in the cultural milieu, a sex worker today is a borrower of mass culture whether it is popular commercial films or television, shaping her appearance and influencing her identities.

A *devadasi* today does not have her exclusive space any more, and may work in the same brothel as a common sex worker. Her ability to earn would be determined by her ability to compete with the scores of sex workers of all ranks, not just within a selected coterie of 'Devadasis'. In the current status of market-based sex work, a woman has lost her support structures in terms of family or alternative employment avenues due to stigmatization; but if we take a glimpse from the past, her loss is much deeper considering her ousting from the support structures of art and culture.

Also, this transition from heterogeneity of religious and cultural practices of sex work to homogeneity of market-based, or brothel-based sex work correspondingly reflect a shift in the economics involved. An important feature of this transition is the shift from economics of kind, to the sweeping uniformity of the economics of cash. In the present market-based urban framework, sex work is largely economic in nature. The predominance of economics is also manifested in the 'no strings attached' emotional space of a sex worker as a service provider.

Earlier, factors such as beauty, youth, looks were able accompaniments of skills creating a composite refined image of the prostitute. In today's context however, factors such as beauty or youth, have come to the fore as the predominant, determining factors of a sex worker's capacity to earn. These factors have a high degree of subjectivity to them; what may appeal to one client may not entice some other. A sex worker is not in a position to claim qualities

or accomplishments, which are unique to her, making her easily replaceable. Thus we have a situation where any sex worker could be substituted by another, who would again be measured by the same subjective criteria.

The market of service providers has transformed from a product differentiated market, to a homogenized one that resembles perfect competition, with a large number of service providers and receivers. The woman is no longer a price-maker and is reduced to the status of a price-taker.

At this juncture, after ancient and medieval transformations, and colonial upheavals, the current homogenized, market-based practices of sex work might give the impression of standardization of prostitution. But transformations are more dynamic, and in recent times, the triggers of change have not been cultural, but epidemiological in nature, resulting from the rise and proliferation of HIV/AIDS. AIDS would form another trigger for transformation in the institution of prostitution; global in origin and spread, sparking off a series of ramifications of its own, the results of which have been felt in India as well. Though health concerns have been instrumental in shaping the profession in the past (particularly in colonial times⁶), the impact of AIDS is manifold and far-reaching.

How has AIDS brought about a transformation within the framework of prostitution in India today? What have been its economic ramifications? Firstly, the onset of AIDS and its proliferation among sex workers (Avert 2006) has accentuated the uncertainty to the profession, by compounding it with uncertainty of life. How has this changed the functioning of sex work at an individual and institutional level?

At an individual level, the most obvious impact of contraction of HIV/AIDS would be on the working span of a sex worker not only in terms of the duration but also the quality of that duration (considering her susceptibility to infections). This correspondingly has an impact on her income and expenditure. At an institutional level, however, she is easily replaceable. Contrary to a skilled sex worker whose loss would be difficult to compensate, a sex worker today bears the risk of being easily substituted. Skills exhibited by her predecessors are now part of the mainstream cultural spheres, so they are not at risk of being lost. Consequently, as a result of AIDS, what are lost are the lives of women and the breakdown of the fragile economic systems sustained by them at an individual level.

The vulnerability of a sex worker to AIDS could be understood across the following binaries of possibilities. Firstly, whether she is aware of HIV/AIDS. Secondly, whether she could follow up her awareness with the capability to enforce the prevention measures. A negative response across either of these binaries would make her vulnerable to the disease.

Societal responses to this vulnerability have a strong economic dimension, with massive allocation of funds⁷ directed towards preventing the spread of AIDS with the sex workers (also certain bridge population) as the focal points of targeting. Across all high-risk groups or individuals, only sex workers emerge as easy targets for intervention considering their concentration in the physical structures of RLAs (discussed earlier).

Thus, the way HIV/AIDS has transformed contemporary sex work is by creating the necessity for the economics of intervention to be combined and synchronized with the economics of sex work. Through the different strategies adopted for intervention, the agencies responsible for them have sparked off a fresh review of sex work, bringing in a new set of outlooks, and adding to the 'discourse on sex work'.⁸

In the following section, we present the results and analyses of a survey conducted by us in the Red Light Area of Pune (India) in 2004–05.⁹ This localized study of brothel-based sex work has the following objectives. It attempts to understand the dynamics of hierarchies (which correspondingly have an impact on income-ranges) existent in the brothels today, and the factors affecting them at an intra or inter-brothel level within the RLA. It analyzes how prices get constructed at the grass-roots operational level; and through this study of prices, it comments on how means of livelihood get shaped in the course of working as a sex worker.

Grass-Root Realities and the Quest for Means of Livelihood

The RLA in Pune¹⁰ today could trace its origin to a structure called *Bavankhani* (literally meaning fifty-two chambers), located in the centre of the city and dating back to the 18th century (Gazetteer of Bombay Presidency 1885). It forms one of the earliest references to brothel-based sex work in the city. Though prostitution did exist earlier, predominantly in the form of mistresses and keeps (Shirgaonkar 2001), the introduction of *Bavankhani* represents a case of 'economics of cash' markedly different from the 'economics of kind' prevalent earlier. It is also an attempt at framing the institution of prostitution in separate physical structures, aimed at servicing not the nobility, but targeting a lower section of the society (soldiers in this case).

Starting from a location called *Shukrawar Peth* (where *Bavankhani* was situated), the next waves of proliferation led to the extension of brothel-based sex work into adjacent lanes. These lanes and by-lanes housing the physical structures of sex work together form the RLA of Pune as we know it today.

The area now, as a consequence, forms a complex network of lanes combining those with a historical origin (Dane Aali¹¹, *Cholkhan Aali*, *Shalukar Bol*); with the new ones (like the Bata *Galli*, deriving its name from a Bata shop, Medical *Galli* named after medical shops in the lane). Across all the lanes, the brothels are interspersed with other commercial shops; the area is still a central location in the city, densely populated, and bustling with commercial activities, in addition to its identity as a centre for sex work.

In terms of physical structures, there are a total of 365 brothels located in 11 congested lanes and by-lanes, with varying concentration of brothels and commercial shops across the lanes. As part of the research methodology, the tool of Social Mapping was used by the authors to get a tentative geographical understanding of the area; together with the number of brothels across the lanes, concluding with an estimate of the number of resident sex workers operating from the area. The mapping exercise showed that there are approximately 5,000 resident sex workers operating from a hierarchy of brothels, with different incomes.

Based on this mapping exercise, the authors conducted a survey of sex workers using an interview schedule. The sample was made as representative as possible with respondents chosen from every lane, across the hierarchy of brothels. The total sample consisted of 180 sex workers, with in-depth personal interviews of some sex workers who were more articulate than others. The authors have supplemented this with in-depth interviews of NGO personnel working in the RLA.

Typically, across all the lanes, one could observe scores of girls or women clustered together, either soliciting for customers, or negotiating for an agreeable price. These activities are what an individual sex worker would engage in, in order to generate her income. But is it this solicitation or display that fetches income for her? In a way, it performs the role of generating a client for her. But the issue of price is still to be determined. It is here that the role of soliciting as a determinant of income becomes secondary. How old is she? How healthy is her appearance? From which lane is she operating? Who are her competitors in that lane and how many of them? A multitude of such subtler factors get incorporated into the price quoted and negotiated. Even before her soliciting, her prices are already defined by the structures she hails from. Although the prices quoted are seldom lowered, giving the impression that it is the woman who determines the prices, she is, in reality, a price-taker.

In the negotiation on prices, HIV/AIDS cannot get factored because of the asymmetry of information existing between the sex worker and her client. Neither of them could be aware of their HIV status; and even if aware they

might not reveal it to the other party. This would be the case until either of them would show symptoms of ill-health, creating a perception of being HIV positive. Incorporation of this perception of HIV could happen at a structural level, in terms of the labelling of certain brothels as sites of higher risk, which would affect prices. At a larger level, it has been observed that there is a general perception of the entire Red Light Area of Pune being an HIV-infected area.¹² Informally, through discussion with NGO personnel, it was revealed that clients are apprehensive of visiting brothels from the area, and would rather approach sex workers scattered at other locations in the city. There is also an increasing tendency among sex workers of soliciting not in the area, but at other public places, making use of mainstream structures (hotels or lodges), which may have a cleaner image.

Bhattacharya (2004) in her study on brothels and brothel-clients in the RLA of Pune mentions the differentiation of prices, with sex workers living in 'middle-level brothels' charging between Rs 70–100, and the sex workers in the 'low-level brothels' charging between Rs 40–50. This categorization is income-based, but would also reflect the behavioural patterns of the sex workers operating there. The lower rung brothels could be at a higher risk of housing an HIV infected woman. First, it could be on account of her sliding down the hierarchy due to worsening health status. Second, alcoholism has been found to be more rampant among the sex workers and the clients in the low rung structures, and may result in poor enforcement of preventive measures.

The prices for sex work as stated by Bhattacharya earlier are centrally tending values taking just the structures into consideration, and are suggestive of the range of prices. But within this range, the precise 'spot' price could exhibit significant variations.

What could determine the 'threshold' range of prices, and what could get incorporated into the final 'spot' price? Scanning through the factors that determine the price for sex work, it could be discerned that there are distinctive features that firstly construct the range within which the precise spot price could be located. The prices on the one hand are a function of the structures and their ambience; on the other hand there are factors intrinsic to the woman herself.

The general range of prices is identified taking the following factors into consideration, which are integral to the woman.

Time spent with the customer

In Pune's RLA, as also in many other cities in Maharashtra¹³, the most important factor that determines the *benchmark* range of rates is the amount of

time spent with the customer. A one-time service lasting for 15 to 30 minutes determines the basic price. As the amount of time spent increases, the price increases as well. A sex worker in Pune's RLA charges on an average somewhere between Rs 50 to 100 per customer per act.¹⁴ The same sex worker can charge Rs 300 for an hour and Rs 1,000 for the entire night. If she has to go out of the brothel with a customer, she may charge up to Rs 3,000 for the whole visit. In a way, it is her availability that costs higher than the service by itself, presuming that she has foregone her opportunity of earning with some other customer.

This system of time-bound cash transactions is an attempt at servicing more customers, resulting in higher earnings. But it also brings in a high element of uncertainty to the profession because it would amount to continuously going through the cycle of soliciting and negotiating before the service. Typically for an urban brothel-based sex worker, it is this pre-service activity that constitutes the bulk of her time spent.

In a non-time bound system as in case of 'economics of kind' involving a patron-mistress relationship, the time spent for soliciting becomes impertinent. Not only is there an assurance of patronage, but the conservation of time could be channeled into leisure or the acquisition of skill-sets. The urban sex worker, on the other hand, lacks such assurances, and is constantly on the stand-by searching for prospective clients, resulting in extremely irregular working hours stretching across the entire day and night.

Time spent with the customer as a crucial determinant factor also brings in other economic nuances into play. First, it enables external participation of 'the flying ones' into the profession, because of the assurance of generating money in a stipulated time frame. This is brought into effect through the hourly renting of spaces for practicing sex work in lodges and brothels as well.

Age, the 'looks' factor and its stability

Apart from the time spent, the age and looks of a sex worker are considered important in determining the range of prices. The younger she is, the higher is the basic price per act as well as for each longer duration.

When a young girl begins as a sex worker her price can be as high as Rs 300 for a short encounter. The first phase however, involving peak price per act, lasts only for a short time of 6–8 months. As the girl/woman becomes an established sex worker, the price comes down and stabilizes in a lower range. Age no longer is her asset in determining her price, and gets replaced by a higher level of soliciting.

A large part of the sex worker's stay in the profession comprises of this more stabilized range of price, significantly lower than the peak price. This stable phase could last up to 15 years, or up to the age of about 35 years subject to the contingency of her remaining in good physical shape. For example, a girl of 20 who has been in business for a few years and a woman of 30 may charge the same price (Rs 100) if both of them look relatively equally attractive and belong to the same brothel.

The consequence of contracting HIV would be borne by the sex worker in terms of a reduction in the time span of this stable phase of incomes. The death occurrences due to HIV in Pune's RLA have been in the age-group of 30–35 years. After contracting, a woman would live for 8–10 years. It can be corroborated that the infection is likely to be contracted early in the profession. This could be on account of high exposure to clients.

During this phase of stable incomes, the sex worker may have also had a child; she may not keep good health and may even look ill as a result of the hazardous nature of her profession (HIV or otherwise). The once-stable rate thus deteriorates and again stabilizes at a much lower level (falling as low as Rs 30–40). The woman then may continue to work for a few years at this lower rate before ceasing to be an active sex worker.

The income derived by the sex worker needs to be constructed taking these weighted averages into consideration that vary across her lifespan, rather than a single average figure of her income. It could be the lure of the peak prices that may induce a girl/woman into the profession. But as mentioned earlier, the predominant earnings of the sex worker materialize in the stable stage, where her earnings per act are significantly lower.

The complexity of age as a factor could also be gauged from its long standing repercussions on the composition of sex workers in the business. 'With a higher number of younger girls in the business, the older ones would be rendered out of business' (Seshu in the discussion in this volume). The traf-ficked girls, largely comprising minors, are the ones who fetch a higher price per act. On the other hand, an older woman who enters sex work by choice after having traversed a string of other professions would have to be content with the more stabilized prices. In a way, it is 'forced' sex work that fetches an assured higher price than 'choice', at least in the context of brothel-based sex work.

Placing clients across the hierarchy of brothels

The hierarchy of brothels gets constructed both by its ambience as well as the groups of sex workers operating from there. A typically higher-rung brothel

would have better ambience as well as younger girls, attracting more affluent clientele; the brothels housing Nepali girls would be a typical example. A middle-rung brothel would have relatively older girls/women operating from its premises, and the facilities would be lower in quality. A lower-rung brothel would have fewer women, generally much older in age. The facilities here are abysmal, with the absence of even basic amenities like sanitation and water. For the sex workers operating across these hierarchies, the rate of her peers determines her perception of her own price.

Across the hierarchy of brothels, there is a common occurrence of select clients getting differentiated by the sex workers as their 'lovers'.¹⁵ In such cases, the sex workers may or may not charge them money, but there are strong indications of a relationship.¹⁶ A sex worker may have a child from him, and the client may offer monetary support for raising the child (though he is under no obligation to do so).

Importantly, the sex worker offers exclusivity to such clients by non-use of condoms, exposing herself to transmission of HIV from them. Thus, the moment a sex worker steps beyond the economics of her profession, and brings in a personal angle, she risks contraction of HIV, jeopardizing her business and existence.

Ethnic origins of the sex worker

It has been observed that the girls/women from Nepal charge higher than their Indian counterparts. The brothels that work with girls/women exclusively from Nepal charge higher rates even when the Nepali brothel is housed in the same building as other brothels with Indian girls. Among the Indian girls/women it was reported that those coming from Andhra Pradesh had a more professional attitude towards earning their living. They maintained better health and physical shape, avoided pregnancies and were more determined to earn as much as they could, with a clear intention of quitting the profession with financial gains. Women coming into the profession from Karnataka or interior Maharashtra showed a lack of such planning or professionalism, reflecting in lower rates.

Within this broad range of prices, many finer nuances act in tandem to arrive at a definite 'spot' price.

Aspects of presentation

When the girl/woman enters the 'stable rate' category, the way she presents herself matters in determining the exact rate. Her physique or figure

(mainly large breasts), would be vital in soliciting customers, and would increase her bargaining capacity with them. Her intrinsic features like fair complexion would fetch her better bargains; so would the external appearance she has created for herself, in the form of clothes or hairstyle.

A sex worker's display of herself is what would attract a client; it is a promise of pleasure, and whether the customer finds any assurance in that display. Some sex workers though older are more capable of 'displaying' themselves as confident individuals that a customer may find attractive. They could earn more than someone who is younger who may not have yet 'learned' to display herself with confidence.

The urgency of cash

Across the cases, it could be observed that the above factors notwithstanding, the spot prices are strongly influenced by the immediate need for cash by the sex worker. These immediate requirements of money would comprise of loan repayments or expenditure on children. A girl/woman perceives her own needs of earning and her economic compulsions to quote her rate.

The research also revealed a tendency for the rates to fall during the 'lean' periods. Typically, the end of the months when the number of clients decreased, the women tended to lower the rates.

Sometimes the manager of the brothel with her experience of rates charged by different sex workers plays a role in determining the rates. She/He is well aware of the economic status of the girl/woman in question. She/He is also aware of her outstanding loans, her expenditure, needs and so can 'nudge' a particular rate for a particular girl/woman.

Contrasting the red light area through prices

The Red Light Area in Pune could be contrasted across its lanes through the use of selective parameters like higher and lower concentration of brothels, composition of sex workers and their ethnic origins. The segregation of these factors across the lanes comes to influence the spot prices.

Murgi Galli is the street with the largest number of brothels and resident sex workers. There are as many as 92 brothels here with about 2,000 sex workers. There are many brothels here that exclusively house Nepali girls/women. The girls from Nepal and even the Indian girls that operate here, are apparently very young, and could be the victims of flesh trade rather than working here voluntarily. The average age of girls/women in this street is lower

than the other lanes. As observed earlier, the girls from Nepal charge higher than their Indian counterpart, but if the Indian girls are very young they too may charge high. It has been reported that there is a marked difference across the hierarchy in terms of enforcement of preventive measures against HIV, high-rung brothels being particularly careful in guarding their sex workers.

On the other hand, Bata *Galli*, a narrow by-lane, comprises of 19 brothels situated in six buildings with a total of 152 resident sex workers. Most of the brothel residents in this by-lane are migrants from Andhra and Karnataka. The rates in this by lane are lower than usual mainly because of older sex workers operating from here. They typically charge somewhere between Rs 40–50 per customer. There are also a few flying ones who make use of the brothel premises in this lane. Unlike in *Murgi Galli*, which comprises exclusively of young, resident sex workers, the flying ones find it more convenient to operate from Bata *Galli* in view of lesser competition.

While the above cases of *Murgi Galli* and Bata *Galli* illustrate the contrasts of concentration and ethnicity of women, *Dhamdhere Bol* exhibits a contrast between the women sex workers and the eunuchs. On this narrow lane, 41 brothels function with over 400 resident sex workers. Of these 41 brothels, 17 are homes for eunuch sex workers. In this lane, the eunuchs, being more aggressive, attract a higher number of the customers by charging lower prices, resulting in fewer customers for the women. The eunuch sex workers charge half the price per act than the average price of women sex workers. Also, eunuch sex workers offer oral sex, which is usually avoided by women sex workers. As a result of this intra-lane competition, the average rates for women sex workers here, even for the younger ones, are lower in comparison with other lanes.

Distribution of Incomes and Access to Money

The general accounting system of division in a typical brothel splits the incomes such that the sex worker gets only 50 per cent of her total earnings, while the remaining 50 per cent has to be surrendered to the brothel manager/owner. This division of incomes is not of recent origin, as earlier references also indicate a similar figure (Punekar and Rao 1962). These income figures again need to be placed in the context of our earlier discussion on prices availed across different ages.

A young girl, who fetches the maximum price, and services a high number of clients, should ideally earn a high income at the end of the month.

But she may have been bought or trafficked, and consequently, may inherit this cost of her purchase as a loan. For example, a girl who may have been bought by the brothel for a sum of Rs 30,000 inherits this sum as her personal loan which would have to be repaid to the brothel. In this initial stage of high earning, she may have to forego her claim to money to compensate for the loan till it is repaid in its entirety (usually over a span of 3–6 months). In comparison, there are girls/women in the stable phase of earnings who receive their 50 per cent at the end of the month, but their rates being lower, the total earnings are lower as well.

The earnings take place on a daily basis but the splitting up of income is not done immediately after the payment received from customer, not even on a daily basis. The system works as follows. Every sex worker gets a set of tokens (similar to small plastic disks used to play board games) on which she puts some mark for her identification. Each token denotes Rs 50 or some such basic value. This means that if the girl has earned Rs 100 from a customer, she would give two tokens to the brothel manager. Now every time she serves a customer, she may have earned Rs 50 or 100, this amount she gives to the manager along with the tokens indicating the amount. The brothel owner thus accumulates the cash as well as the tokens of the respective women. The cash is usually secured in a safe, while the tokens are deposited in boxes (resembling a piggy bank). This procedure of depositing the tokens and the cash continues for a whole month.

At the end of the month, the brothel remains closed for half a day or so, while all the inmates of the brothel and the manager sit down for the monthly accounts. Each girl's collection of tokens is returned to her along with half of the money she has earned in a month. For example, if a girl has collected 100 tokens, she has earned Rs 5,000 in a month if the token is worth Rs 50. At the accounting meeting she will get Rs 2,500 as her income. Glass bangles of different colours are used as tokens across some brothels but the system is essentially the same.

In this meeting itself, the sex worker has to pay for her monthly expenditure of food, water, electricity and any other expenses to the brothel keeper. The money left eventually is her actual income. Thus, even if a sex worker earns as much as Rs10,000 a month, she not only parts with half of her earnings, but also pays a further sum for food and other expenses. From this stripped income would come the money for her own expenditure on children, clothes and make-up, medical expenditure, liquor and tobacco, not to mention her remittances.

Income forms the main source of access to money for a sex worker. Being tipped by the customer forms the other. It was revealed that if a customer

is satisfied he would tip them some times, but not every time. The amount of the tip ranged between Rs 10 to 20. The more interesting aspect of the tip was that if the basic rate was quoted lower than usual, the customer was more inclined to tip. But if the basic rate is on the high side, the customer would not tip. A resident sex worker does not share the tip, as she does her income. So she could be more interested in quoting a lower rate and get a tip rather than quote a higher rate, which she would have to share with the brothel keeper.

From the mechanism of income distribution, it is amply clear that the distribution is highly skewed against the worker. The distribution amounts to the sex worker paying a heavy 'rent' for her working place, as high as half of her income, exclusively for 'being a part of a brothel'. Not stopping at this, the prevailing pattern of distribution converts a cash generating system of business that should provide her access to liquid money, into a monthly wage-generating system of services. So sexual services do constitute 'work' like in a factory with wages. But it is without any consistency of income, or any benefits of work like stipulated working hours or weekly holidays.

This lack of access to money also prompts a sex worker to borrow funds for her expenditure. Again, lack of access to mainstream banking systems and credit facilities, coupled with her illiteracy, compels her to borrow either from the brothel owner or the money lenders. The rates of compound interest charged on her are exorbitantly high. This depletes her income further, limiting her capacity to save for the future.

Estimating the Turnover

According to Sanlaap, a Calcutta based NGO:

Assuming there are 20,000 sex-workers in Calcutta, each with a gross average earning of Rs 100 a day, the total turnover per day is Rs 20,00,000 and Rs 6,00,00,000 per month and an average turnover of Rs 720 million. Only a small part goes to sex-workers, the rest to recruiters, middlemen, agents, pimps, brothel-keepers, live-in partners, liquor sellers, the underworld and the police (Gangoli 2001a).

Constructing similar estimates for the 5,000 sex workers in Pune's RLA:

It was found that on an aggregate, they provided service to about 5,000–20,000 clients every 24 hours and the charges range between Rs 30 to Rs 100. This results in an approximate daily turnover of Rs 1,50,000 to Rs 20,00,000 directly due to sex work alone.

However, the sharing of income shows a stark contrast in the income patterns of sex workers and brothel-keepers within the RLA. The brothel keepers earn much more than individual sex workers since most of the costs incurred by the brothel keepers are retrieved from the resident sex workers. Also a sex worker's working life span may be 15 or 20 years, with altering incomes. The income patterns of a brothel however, would be more consistent with their earnings sustained through the purchase of new girls.

In terms of investments, sex workers are reported to buy gold. However, savings as such are not very high, resulting in meagre investments. The brothel-owners on the other hand, earn enough every month to invest in purchase of new girls, giving continuity to their business. The money is not spent in improving the infrastructure of the brothel; instead it is invested in other profitable avenues like real estate, or STD booths or restaurants. As a result, there are alternative sources of income for the brothel-owners even considering the unlikely situation of not earning from the brothel itself. The sex worker has to depend entirely on her work to bail her out, and does not have any such alternative investments as insurance for her future.

Conclusion: Addressing Livelihood through Sex Work

Contemporary sex work in India is market-driven characterized by the economics of cash, which form its foundations. Its historical connections with art and culture becoming increasingly vestigial over time, sex work has come to be represented flagrantly by its economic connotation.

Probing the repercussions of this market orientation on the journeys of sex workers reveals the economic vulnerabilities of contemporary sex workers. Firstly, the transformation from a product-differentiated market to perfect competition exposes the brothel-based sex worker to the risk of easy substitution, leaving her with little control over prices. Across the denomination of hierarchies among sex workers, operating from diverse structures, the income patterns have their own set of irregularities and uncertainties to be dealt with. Further, the economic benefits of her work do not get accrued to her alone. In spite of being the creator of wealth, the division of this wealth is skewed; her share of benefits forming only a miniscule part of the larger economics of the profession.

Not only stripped of her earnings, the long-run economic costs borne by a sex worker are much larger considering the loss of support-structures and stigmatization. Viewed from a historical perspective, she is already stripped

of her skill-bases and the ability to contribute to art and culture at a societal level. In these circumstances, the onset of AIDS compounds the uncertainty of her profession with a potential risk to life.

The need for intervention against HIV/AIDS is indisputable, but the pattern of intervention sought would need further dialogue. The contraction of HIV among sex workers is not on account of a lack of awareness, but resulting from their inability to enforce preventive measures. As part of this, formation of sex worker collectives is a viable option in improving the effectiveness of intervention, placing the sex workers as the primary beneficiaries of intervention.

For paid sex to be considered work, its economic aspects would need greater attention; whether it is through emphasizing on a more favourable distribution of incomes, or through better working conditions, or access to mainstream micro-finances. A sex worker's empowerment would be meaningless without an emphasis on her economic betterment.

If sex work is to be considered a journey towards economic empowerment of women, or as a source of livelihood, then the path it traverses leaves a lot to be desired. The issue of livelihood could only be addressed through a stability or sustainability of income, with a sex worker exhibiting higher control and retention of her earnings. In the current circumstances, this is more of an uphill task.

Notes

1. For the year 2000, the poverty line in India was defined as Rs 451 per month in the urban area and Rs 335.46 per month in the rural area (Ghose 2004).
2. These cases have been observed in the Red Light Area of Pune. Similar cases could also exist in other urban areas.
3. The *Nats* are an example of caste-based sex work practice that has continued from historical times.
4. Deterioration of health could increasingly be a consequence of HIV/AIDS.
5. For a detailed discussion on *devadasis* from the past to the present, refer to Rekha Pande in this volume (Editors).
6. Health concerns were instrumental in bringing about a higher amount of regulation of prostitution as a profession, culminating into legislative frameworks. For detailed analysis of colonial implications on prostitution, see Levine (1996), Peers (1998).
7. For a discussion on funding for targeted intervention, see Avni Amin (2004).
8. For an elaborate discussion on the changing discourse on sex work in India, refer to Gangoli (2001), Kempadoo and Doezema (1998).

9. We would like to acknowledge the financial assistance of Kawakami Foundation, Pune for the survey.
10. Pune is the second largest city after Mumbai, in the state of Maharashtra, India. A city with historical significance, it is an emerging industrial and services hub in the state. In the 2001 census, Pune's population was reported to be 3.76 million (<http://censusindia.gov.in/default.aspx>). For further information on Pune, refer to Diddee and Gupta (2000).
11. Aali, Bol, Galli are all synonyms for lanes.
12. HIV prevalence in the Pune's red light area has been estimated to be 54 per cent (Brahme et al., 2006). However, this estimate is contested by NGOs operating in the area. The problem arises on account of a lack of baseline survey conducted across the area to which comparison could be made. Secondly, it is observed that the sex workers are extremely reluctant to undergo even an ordinary blood test, let alone testing for HIV. These estimates are at a research level. At an informal level, the entire area by itself is perceived as an HIV zone.
13. An informal discussion with social workers from Mumbai and Sangli's Red Light Areas revealed that the determination of the basic rate there is likewise based on the time factor.
14. One dollar is approximately in the range of rupees 42–46.
15. A sex worker could have such multiple lovers, referred as *yaar*.
16. In the relationships of sex workers, like the one discussed here, the patterns of cash flows would comprise of both cash and kind. This would form a diversion from the cash transactions she would normally undertake with her clients. This diversity of relationships would substantiate on the statement that 'to each form of relationship corresponded a somewhat different set of monetary transactions' (Zelizer, 2000).

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Surfacing voices from the underground

MEENA SARASWATHI SESHU

Working with women in prostitution and sex work over the past eight years in the HIV/AIDS prevention programme has made us to address our own double standards and bias while dealing with issues related to sexuality and prostitution. This journey with sex workers has been consumed with discussions on sex, love, multiple sex partners and the discomfort with sex as just a physical activity that can be an act of pleasure, devoid of love. The push to unravel concepts of sexual morality, sexual sacredness, sexual pleasures, sexual preferences, sexual diversity, sexual health and sexual rights has gradually emerged to become an important piece of the puzzle of life.

Unfortunately, this obsession with issues of sexuality is considered frivolous and 'upper class'. More life-threatening issues of poverty, drought, environment, status of women and violence against women assume higher importance as subject matters of discussion; with sex, sexuality and sex work relegated to the lowest rungs in the ladder of human research.

As stated by Gayle Rubin in her article 'Thinking Sex: Notes for a Radical Theory of the Politics of Sexuality':

The time has come to think about sex. To some, sexuality may seem to be an unimportant topic, a frivolous diversion from the more critical problems of poverty, war, disease, racism, famine or nuclear annihilation. But it is precisely at times such as these, when we live with the possibility of unthinkable destruction, that people are likely to become dangerously crazy about sexuality.

The interesting paradox observed here is the fact that while there is a need to underrate the importance of sexuality as a serious issue, it co-exists with an

underlying need to control and conform sexual activity to very strict norms that are governed by both the state and society. We can discern two distinct worlds here; one of those who would like to control sexuality couching it in moral terms or even in terms of societal norms or 'the good of the species', and the other of the resisters who break the norm and try to live by rules unacceptable to the moralists or saviours of 'norms'. What is forgotten here is that life is dynamic, and herein lay the grey areas. Women move in and out of these spaces sometimes adhering or traversing across one world or the other. The dignity and respect with which they face life comes from a living experience that is unique to them at a particular time in their lives.

Under the guise of 'protection' of both the individual and the family, sexuality in any form that does not conform to the norm is considered a 'vice' and relegated to the underground. The moral brigade has been intolerant and has campaigned viciously against 'deviance'; be it single motherhood, pre and extra-marital relationships, multiple sex partnerships or any form of erotic sexual preference. Such behaviour comes under the hammer as 'illicit sexual conduct' and the punishments are as extreme as forced migration, or even death.

Prostitution and homosexuality have consistently been considered as areas beyond redemption, with stringent laws and swift enforcement. The linkage between trafficking, which is a criminal offence with prostitution, which is not an offence per se, and that of homosexuality with pedophilia has been repeatedly aired as a reason for the moral policing of these presumed 'offences'.

Much of the debates around prostitution have been centred on the dichotomy of prostitution either as a human rights violation—a modern form of slavery—or as the exercise of the right to work. This debate is enigmatic because of the binary understanding of prostitution either as an act of slavery or as work. This understanding also pits two human rights violations as one against the other. Slavery and victim-hood on the one hand versus choice and the right to work on the other. But the gray area is not in this obvious moral discussion. The difficult and thin space of the politics of the female body, female sexual conditioning and sexual control need to be teased out and dealt with to reach some clarity on this contentious issue.

The moral value of the 'chaste womanhood' is centred on monogamous heterosexual relationships within marriage for the sole purpose of reproduction; such reproduction being sacred in so far as the continuance of the species is concerned. Female sexual conditioning is 'pure and sacred womanhood' wherein the acceptance of female passion is also vehemently denied expression. Such passion acquires the status of 'impure desires'.

The conditioning also frowns upon the explicit use of sexual parts of the female body, an overt use of the sexual self, deeming it cheap and immoral.

But all of this is still good if the motive is love and monogamously male-centric. Any deviations to this theme would push the limits of acceptable female sexual behaviour.

The resistance to accept prostitution per se also comes from this deep-seated conditioning that is averse to accepting sexual self for any purpose other than reproductive. Women, therefore, cannot, will not and must not use the sexual organ to make money or as a site of work. Women have to be pure—in their ideals, their understanding and use of self, and their analysis of their bodies.

Our work with sex workers has evolved under these theoretical premises. Indeed, it was not merely our ideas and beliefs that had to be questioned and re-formulated but even the very use of language to describe the women had to be transformed. ‘Whore’, ‘harlot’, ‘*veshya*’ have been used as abuses for the ‘fallen woman’. We have tried to reclaim some of the terminology, and assert identities with positive meaning. Vocabulary had to be revised to weed out words, which reinforce the stigma and marginalization of women in prostitution. Hence, the importance of the use of terminology like ‘women in prostitution’ instead of the commonly used term ‘prostitute’. Women who practice prostitution use the term ‘women in business’ while referring to themselves. Now after due deliberation has emerged the more broad based term of People in Prostitution and Sex Work [PPS] to include all persons who ‘make money out of sex’.

Violence of Stigmatization

All the money we have earned cannot help us to live in peace. The outside world pushes us out and does not even accept our children who are not in the business of making money out of sex. We are unable to ensure the happiness of our children. Our health and our children suffer the most due to this stigma and discrimination.

—Bandawwa Makadwale, a member of the VAMP collective

Being in prostitution, women get cornered into a caste-class of their own. This caste-class occupies the lowest rung in the hierarchy and is structured ‘outside’ the hierarchy. Mobility therefore is almost impossible, except through deceit and/or money. In these circumstances, the need to protect family members especially children from this stigma is an everyday struggle as could be understood from Makadwale’s quote.

Stigmatization impacts the lives of women in more ways than one. Some of the rights denied due to discrimination are freedom from physical and

mental abuse, the right to education and information, health care, housing, social security and welfare services. But the most fundamental of all denials is the right to practice the 'business of making money from sex'.

It is the *randi* [whore] stigma that pushes women in prostitution outside the rights framework, effectively cutting them off from privileges and rights supposedly accorded to all citizens, irrespective of what they do for a living. It is this attitude that the VAMP collective has been mobilizing against and trying to counter. As stated by the women in prostitution and sex work from VAMP:

As people who experience violence as a part of our daily lives, we are being more and more penalized by increasing violence in a society that is trying to order and control our lifestyles. As women in prostitution, we protest against a society that forces on us the violence of a judgmental attitude.

This violence of stigmatization manifests in the increasing criminalization of the profession, not to mention its poignant impact and denial of education and crucial health-care services for women in prostitution.

The Criminal Aspect of Stigmatization

The increasing violence of negativity regarding prostitution per se as well as women in prostitution forces the women in prostitution to operate under the absolute criminalization of their work/business. 'Protection', the overt armour that prostitution is encased within becomes a must, resulting in a mandatory nexus with the brothel-owner/pimp/*malak*/police/criminal elements, which is almost impossible to avoid.

Increase in criminalization with the inevitable policing by the state and its law enforcement machinery contributes to increasing brutality in prostitution. For instance this is clearly visible in the difference that the metropolis makes to the practice of prostitution. Mumbai and its [in] famous 'cages', Calcutta and its red light glitter as compared to the relaxed atmosphere of Sangli, Kolhapur, Miraj, Barshi—the small townships, needs to be believed. Also, women in townships where the crime rate in the general population is higher like Solapur, Ichalkaranji and Karad face more brutalization and violence, though not as drastic as is seen in Mumbai or Delhi, the bigger metros. Increase in criminalization is proportional to the increase in brutality, violence, abuse, debt-bondage, deception, coercion, and slavery-like practice within prostitution.

For example, Madhuri Sawant a woman in prostitution who was trafficked to Mumbai from Miraj relates the horrifying manner in which she was

forced to accept conditions of abuse, being caged in a small room without ventilation, not being allowed to talk to her colleagues, servicing the clients that pimps brought to the room, not having the choice to deny a client etc. She felt she had relinquished her life to the trafficker and madam. After her escape she could relate the following experience:

It is because Mumbai is so big and frightening that I felt alone and helpless. I thought that the *dalal* from Mumbai would treat me like a human being but he was ruthless. So many girls are brought to Miraj but we never treat them with such disrespect as far as their wishes go. Even a woman like me who had ten years experience in prostitution and sex work, could not deal with the *goondas* in Mumbai. What must be happening to new, young girls? They must be really brutalized.

Legal repression, as a direct result of moralistic criminalization by the state, has been exercised from time immemorial, to control and regulate prostitution. Women in prostitution and sex work are made to believe that they are working in an 'illegal' business. This interpretation of the law which the police-state forces on the women allows criminal elements to use the site of prostitution and sex work to practice their illegal, criminal activities, depending on the vulnerability of the women. The result is an uneasy alliance between the State, criminals and the women.

The increasing demand for and supply of children into prostitution is also a direct result of the helplessness that is experienced by families from the mainstream and communities of women in prostitution, who are lured and exploited by this criminal nexus. Be it through abduction, kidnap, coercion or even willingness of the family to use their very young as a financial resource. That children in prostitution are abused, physically, sexually and mentally raped is evident from the stories and anecdotes that women recount of their own past lives. The sense of helplessness and anger that women in prostitution face as mothers has been recorded in numerous instances. Women react, not to 'making money from sex' per se, but to the violence they experience within the institution of prostitution.

Stigmatization and Education

As Vijay Kamble of Miraj says,

It is very painful to listen to your peers make snide remarks about your own mother. When my own teacher came to the community for sex, I ran and ran till I was breathless. I was so frightened. I never went back to school.

Or taking another instance, Renuka who had studied up to her Masters degree in commerce left her job in a local bank because the manager took to calling her in to ask questions about her mother and the other women in the community.

The initial baseline survey of the sex workers community in Sangli in 1992, done by SANGRAM showed that less than 2 per cent of the women have ever been to school of any kind and less than 50 per cent of this 2 per cent reached high school. Though most of the children are going to school, the base line shows a very high drop-out rate, especially after primary school. The reasons for this high drop-out rate could be diverse—ranging from experiencing the educational system as hostile to them as children of women in prostitution, to an inability to pass school examinations. This hostility continues to hound their interactions with the mainstream, whatever the milieu in which this interaction takes place.

Thus, while the women themselves are beyond the realms of education, even their children are not spared of the stigmatization the women are inflicted with. The above cases illustrate this poignantly.

Stigmatization and Health Care

Reproduced here is the text from a report prepared by the National Commission for Women regarding health care concerns for women in prostitution and sex work from the states of West Bengal, Orissa, Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Kerala and the Union Territories of Goa and Pondicherry:

Accessing health care is a major concern for women in prostitution and sex work. While the immoral 'whore' image makes it very difficult to get good medical treatment; illiteracy, ignorance and fear of the medical establishment renders them open to exploitation and extortion of money and resources. (NCW, 1997)

Medical and paramedical staff at government hospitals have a callous, indifferent and often humiliating attitude. Irrelevant and embarrassing questions about sexual positions etc. are often asked. Forced free sex with doctors and social workers is commonplace. Doctors often refuse treatment and admit women to hospital claiming that they are AIDS carriers. In many centres doctors make the peons and attendants conduct the physical examination and only then treat the women. Unfortunately the HIV/AIDS

epidemic has singled out people-in-prostitution and sex work as ‘carriers and vectors of spread of HIV’.

Apart from the stigma already attached to their work, society has further marginalized them as core transmitters of HIV infection. It fails to recognize that they are but links in the broad networks of heterosexual transmission of HIV. Women in prostitution and sex work constitute a community that bears and will continue to bear the greatest impact of the HIV epidemic in India, suffering high levels of infection and reinfection.

Propagating the myth that women in prostitution and sex work are core transmitters of HIV serves the purpose of ‘prostitution bashers’, imbued with the moral and judgmental attitude that reinforces the prejudice that AIDS is an ‘impure’ disease that afflicts immoral and evil persons. The net result is the further targeting of the women, increasing public and police violence against them, decreasing their ability to assert themselves, allowing customers to demand and force unsafe sex upon them, increasing the rate of HIV among women, customers and the families of the customers and denying them access to health care services.

The role of women in prostitution and sex work in preventing HIV/AIDS remains ignored, while it is accepted that they are the best educators of their male clients.

The issue of access to health care becomes further compounded when considering women who have been trafficked or coerced in to the profession. Trafficking, by definition, implies the use of coercion, deception, abuse and assault. This could mean that women in trafficked situations might suffer critical health problems, which is a threat for real. It is further aggravated by the inability to access immediate treatment service for STD’s or related problems. In situations of abuse, the women would just not be in a position to enforce condom use.

Undoubtedly, women who have been trafficked are more vulnerable than men and more likely to be in a situation where they are unable to control and protect themselves from HIV transmission. As illegal migrants engaged in the illegal trade of trafficking, they are very often subjected to sexual abuse at the hands of authorities, including immigration and police officials, whose systematic involvement in the trafficking-trade is well known and documented. Forcible detention, lack of access to redressal, police corruption, invisibility ensures that women can be violated, controlled and abused. Given the fact that HIV transmission is most likely in situations of repression and abuse, trafficked women are more vulnerable and at a greater risk of contracting HIV.

Sex Work as Freedom

One of the most valuable lessons learned during the course of our work has been to listen to the women, and respect their wisdom earned from a life of resistance. As Durga Pujari, an activist from Veshya AIDS Muqabla Parishad [VAMP] a collective of women in prostitution from Sangli puts it:

Over the years, we have become ‘commercial sex workers’ from ‘common prostitutes’, debates are held about us and we are discussed in documents, covenants and declarations. The problem however is, that when we try to reform the arguments, our stories are disbelieved and we are treated as if we cannot comprehend our own lives. Thus we are either romanticized or victimized or worse, our reality gets buried and distorted.

The narratives compiled from oral histories also depict a sense of trivialization of the entire sexual act into a matter-of-fact occurrence. As stated by Apprawa *maushi* a big *gharwali* (brothel owner):

Men come to us regularly not just for sex but to experience the freedom from rigid, moral and sacred social norms. Wives are sacred and/or refuse to be fun and girl friends may demand far greater returns.

The labour/sex work story limits prostitution as a site of work. This is at variance with the communities of women in prostitution who have, through the ages, lived the life of being prostitutes, whores, *veshyas* or *dandhewalis*. Prostitution thus cannot be simply reduced to work, since it depicts a way of life accepted by the communities in a continuum from pre-initiation to retirement. Prostitution, like marriage and family—which also control women’s sexuality—is not a monolithic institution. The degree of autonomy possible, the extent of abuse and violence and the possibility of accessing rights vary widely according to the situation. Women experience the institution of prostitution in a complex way, negotiating spaces and struggling for survival.

The patterns that emerge through the stories included a sense of economic power as the female head of the household, monetary gains, economic stability and security, a feeling of liberation from constricting social norms and anger emerging from a feeling of powerlessness against the intolerance of mainstream society and its judgmental attitude. Women, who had a chance to leave the profession, have chosen to remain, accepting prostitution as ‘a way of life’, an option that is better than the double standards that exist in mainstream society. They have chosen the option to leave when convenient and re-enter depending on the circumstances that dictated their decision.

The women in prostitution are survivors with the sharpest insights—be it on the ‘double standards of morality’ in society, the violent intricate underpinnings of trafficking networks that are brutalizing prostitution or even the hollowness of state-sponsored rights, which strengthen the violators more than the violated. And it is these insights that will best define the contours of a rights discourse that will help resist the violence in their lives, marginalized by the hypocrisies of the ‘system’. Like all survivors, they have the courage and strength to create a world that has much to offer. A world, touched not only by their pain but also their dream for a society comprising people who will affirm their ‘right’ to self worth, dignity and livelihood that no one agency can either give or deny.

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Legal aspects:
Issues and concerns

12

The legal framework of prostitution in India

MANOJ WAD AND SHARAYU JADHAV

This paper presents the legal framework that governs and controls the various aspects of sex work in India. It begins with a brief historical note tracing the evolution of the Act, and goes on to put forth the basic legal framework as it exists today.

A Historical Background: Origins of the Current Framework

Prior to the British rule in India, the rulers of provinces, or the princely states as existent then, would administer justice; in extreme circumstances, a judge appointed by the king would administer it. During the early period of the British rule, justice started to be administered by the *zamindars*. In Bengal and Madras, Mohammedan criminal law was in force, whereas in Bombay, Hindu criminal law was applied to the Hindus and the Mohammedan criminal law to the Muslims. The offences as dealt under the present article were grouped under a single chapter of 'Social Offences' and one finds just a mention of them without elucidating the background. These offences have been marginally considered and found their place in piecemeal legislations drafted post independence, as in case of The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act.

The Indian Penal Code, 1860, drafted by Lord Macaulay, lays down certain provisions, which according to the conditions prevailing, acted as a ban on prostitution or any other kind of immoral behaviour. The said activities were made offences; thereby carrying on such activities was made punishable

either by the way of fine or imprisonment. The said sections, which per se do not ban prostitution, but restrict or limits those activities connected to prostitution, are as follows:

1. **Section 268**, Chapter XIV, deals with offences affecting the public health, safety, convenience, decency and morals, relates to public nuisance. It is stated therein as to when a person who does an act or makes an omission shall be guilty of public nuisance e.g., if a person were to solicit people for sex in a public place by passing lewd remarks and exposing his/her person in order to solicit customers, the said person would be guilty of public nuisance if such acts of the person affect people in general who dwell in the vicinity. According to this provision a person shall be guilty of public nuisance when such act or omission causes any common injury, danger, annoyance to the public or the people living in the vicinity, or which must necessarily cause injury, danger or annoyance to persons who may have occasion to use any public right. According to this provision, it can be said that where a prostitute solicits customers in a public place or where a brothel is established and the same causes annoyance to the persons living in the vicinity, the same shall amount to a public nuisance.
2. **Section 269** in the same chapter, deals with a negligent act likely to spread infection of disease that is dangerous to life. Such person who unlawfully or negligently does an act which he has knowledge or reason to believe to be likely to spread infection of any disease which is dangerous to life shall be punished with imprisonment for a term of six months, or fine or both. Thus a prostitute who continues to carry on the trade on having knowledge or even negligently, of her person being infected with a dangerous disease e.g., Sexually Transmitted Diseases may be booked under this section. This section was enacted to prevent people from doing acts, which are likely to spread infectious diseases, as the government is bound to ensure the welfare of the society. A matter under this section was reported as early as 1886¹ where a prostitute who was suffering from syphilis encouraged and permitted a man, whom she had assured that she was healthy, to have sexual intercourse with her and thus communicated the disease to him. It was held that she was not guilty under this section as the complainant was himself a responsible person and himself generally an accomplice. This decision is not sound as the complainant cannot be deemed to be an accomplice as he was unaware of the disease. Communication of syphilis to a person must amount to spreading infection under this section. However, it

is doubtful whether syphilis can be called a disease dangerous to life.² In the present day circumstances, this section can be used against persons infected with AIDS, which is a disease dangerous to life, and continuing negligently to infect others.

3. **Section 270** deals with malignant act likely to spread infection of disease. This section deals with a malignant act as opposed to a negligent act on the part of a person to spread an infection, which is dangerous to life. Such person shall be punishable with imprisonment, which may extend to 2 years or with fine or both.

The offence under this section is an aggravated form of the offence punishable under the preceding section. In this section, the use of the word 'malignantly' indicates that the person spreading infection should be actuated by malice. The word denotes a deliberate intention on the part of the accused.

4. **Sections 372 and 373** dealt with under the chapter of kidnapping, abduction, slavery and forced labour of the Indian Penal Code, makes it an offence to sell and buy a minor for the purposes of prostitution. A person who sells or lets on hire or otherwise disposes any person below the age of 18 years for the purpose of prostitution or for illicit intercourse with any person or for any unlawful or immoral purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment for a period which may extend to 10 years and shall also be liable to fine. Such an offence is non-bailable and the burden of proof shall lie on such person who has been accused of the offence to prove the contrary.

On the other hand section 373 makes it punishable to buy a minor for the purpose of prostitution. It is stated therein that whoever buys, hires or otherwise obtains possession of any person below the age of 18 years with the intent to engage such person in prostitution or for illicit intercourse with any person or for an unlawful and immoral purpose shall be punishable with imprisonment which may extend to 10 years and shall also be liable to pay fine. This offence is also non-bailable and a presumption shall be drawn against a prostitute or a person managing a brothel in whose custody the minor is found, to have procured such minor for the purpose of prostitution etc. and the burden of proof shall lie upon such person to prove to the contrary.

5. **Section 377** deals with unnatural offences. It is stated therein that whoever voluntarily has carnal intercourse against the order of nature with any man, woman or animal shall constitute an unnatural offence and the same shall be punishable with imprisonment of minimum 10 years and a maximum life imprisonment. Thus, gay prostitutes,

kothi workers, *hijaras* rendering sexual services would be covered under this section. According to this section carnal intercourse shall mean penetration. However, nowhere does it state that such penetration shall necessarily mean penal penetration.

The Post-Independence Period

In the immediate post-independent period the Indian legal history of prostitution can be traced to the debates in the Constituent Assembly where the subject of prostitution was discussed at length. It was proposed to include a new entry in the Concurrent List or List III (Concurrent List includes subjects on which both the Centre and the State can legislate) of the seventh schedule of the Constitution. The entry was as regards regulation, control and maintenance of public houses, or in the alternative, regulation and control of prostitution and regulation, control and maintenance of public houses. After a lengthy debate, a motion was moved for the addition of these entries and the same was negated. The question was whether the power should rest with the State or with the Centre or should it be Concurrent as regards making provisions pertaining to prostitution. However, before this question could be answered a lot of questions arose as to whether this entry should be added in the first place, keeping in mind the aim which was to preserve high moral standards.

It is very important at this stage to have a look at the extract of the speech given by Shri Brajeshwar Prasad which is as follows:

Shri Brajeshwar Prasad: Mr President, Sir, I feel that the gravity of the situation has not been realized. As one who has had to do with books but having no practical experience of France or other countries, I am in a position to say that it is such a vital thing of national concern that the Government of India must do something in this matter if the youth of the country is to be protected from moral abandonment. My friend Shri Deshmukh spoke in the vain that probably it can be abolished or abrogated altogether. I do not agree with him on that point. Prostitution is a very old institution—as old as the hills and it cannot be abolished. The roots of this institution lies deep in our human nature. The only thing that we can do is to regulate it. The idea that there should be licences is a perfectly scientific one and if the youth of the country is to be protected, we cannot depend upon the Provincial Governments alone. I had the occasion to table a resolution similar to what Shri Deshmukh has tabled today in this House, while I was a member of the Gaya Municipality in 1938. It was ruled out-of-order by the President of the Board on the ground that the matter did not lie within the jurisdiction of the Municipality, and

that it was a matter which required specific law empowering the Municipality by the Provincial Government.

When we are placing this power in the Concurrent List, it means the Centre has power to plan, regulate and see that the Provincial Governments act accordingly and if the Provincial Governments fail, then the Centre steps in. The Provincial Governments have not done much in this direction. Therefore the Centre must take the responsibility on its shoulders.³

However, this proposition of some of the members like Shri Brajeshwar Prasad, to bring the institution of prostitution under the control of the Union government and to be regulated by the state was vehemently opposed on the ground of morality. This is clear from the following extract of the speech of Shri Govind Das (C.P. and Berar: General):

Sir, the speech delivered by Shri Brajeshwar Prasad has been to me one of the most surprising events in my life. At a time when we are directing our efforts to raise the moral standard of society and want to create a new social order based on morality, I am surprised to find that there are even now persons amongst us who want to retain the institution of prostitutes.

We, who have worked under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi for the last thirty years, have formed new ideas about the standard of morality and expected that under the new Constitution to be framed after independence, we would try to create a new moral order in which such institutions such as prostitution, bars and gambling would become extinct. But I am surprised to find that even today there are persons amongst us who favour the retention of these institutions. I would like to request Dr Ambedkar to ensure that whatever items we pass here shall be such as are rooted in morality and therefore possess survival value. He should also see to it that the new social order which we are going to create may serve as a model not only to us but to the whole of the world.

It is evident from the above extract that the issue of prostitution and regularizing and controlling of public houses by the state was vehemently opposed on the ground of morality. However, the question which may arise that if this motion had been supported, which list, out of the three lists, would it have been added to. This question was ultimately answered by Dr Ambedkar.

He stated that there was enough power given to the State under these entries to regulate those matters, namely, for dealing with public houses. Reference was made to List II, entry 1, which dealt with public order, and entry 4 which dealt with police, and the Concurrent entry which dealt with criminal law. It was evident that there was more than enough power given

to regulate those matters. Therefore, the only question that remained was whether the subject relating to the regulation of public houses should be in the Concurrent List. The criterion to decide whether the matter should be in the Concurrent List or in the State List (the entries mentioned in the State List or List II can be legislated upon only by the State) was whether those matters were of all-India concern or of purely local concern. The regulation of public houses, according to him, was a matter of local concern and it was, therefore, better to leave them to be dealt with by the States. The States could regulate prostitution and also prohibit it. However, it may be noted that both the amendments i.e., to regularize, control and maintain Public Houses and the regulation and control of prostitution were negated.

Upon a detailed reading of the Constituent Assembly Debates pertaining to the entry of control and regulation of public houses, our attention may be drawn to the Suppression of Immoral Traffic (in Women and Girls) Act which is a Central Act and was enacted pursuant to the signing of the International Treaty (Trafficking Convention) on 9 May, 1950 at New York by India. However, the Suppression of Immoral Traffic (in Women and Girls) Act was substituted by the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 in the year 1986 (w.e.f. 26/01/1987). Prostitution and all related activities like pimping are presently governed by the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956.

Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956

The present Act replaced the Suppression of Immoral Traffic (in Women and Girls) Act making certain changes in the prior Act. According to the prior Act immoral trafficking only in women and girls was attempted to be suppressed. The present Act makes the scope wider by encompassing not only women and girls but also boys, men, *hijaras*, *koti* sex workers etc.

The Act mainly makes pimpism and other activities punishable, which give a commercial aspect to prostitution that is likely to exploit the person of the prostitute. The Act does not prohibit prostitution per se. However, it does prohibit commercial activities of the flesh trade.

Drawbacks of suppression of Immoral Traffic Act (in women and girls)

This Act came into force after India ratified the International Convention on Suppression of Immoral Traffic in persons and Exploitation for Prostitution. Article 23 of the Convention prohibits any form of trafficking in

human beings and further contravention of this provision has been made punishable under the law. Thus, to implement the ratification under the domestic law, the Parliament enacted the Suppression of Immoral Traffic (in Women and Girls) Act (SITA) under the power conferred upon it under Article 35 of the Constitution of India. However, many drawbacks came to light as regards this Act and hence the same was substituted with the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 in 1986. The drawbacks of this Act have been discussed below along with its need to bring about a change.

First, this Act brought under its purview only women and girls and in the process omitted a large section being exploited under the guise of prostitution, which included male prostitutes, *hijaras* and *koti* workers. Prostitution under this Act was defined as follows—‘Prostitution means the act of a female offering her body for promiscuous sexual intercourse for hire, whether in money or in kind and whether offered immediately or otherwise and the expression prostitute will be construed accordingly’. This definition was there in spite of the goal stated for the enactment of SITA which was ‘to inhibit or abolish commercialized vice, namely the traffic in persons for the purpose of prostitution as an organized means of living’. According to this definition females were the only ones who were engaging in prostitution as an organized means of living.

Second, according to the definition and what was covered by the definition of prostitution, and in the meaning concluded by the term ‘prostitute’ was the act of a female who ‘offered’ her body for promiscuous sexual intercourse for hire. The term ‘offered her body’ symbolized the voluntary act of a female. Thus, the definition only covered the voluntary form as being prostitution and excluded the forced form from the definition of prostitution.

Third, SITA divided females only into two groups, namely, women—females above the age 21 years and girls—females below the said age of 21 years. Women—females above the age of 21 years, who were prosecuted soliciting or prostituting in a public place, according to the provisions of this Act, were, if convicted, immediately sent to a protective home, whereas girls convicted of the same offence were referred to a rehabilitation centre. On the other hand, their exploiters—of both of the women and of the girls were awarded the same punishment making no distinction between two.

Fourth, another drawback which came to light after the coming into force of this Act was that persons involved in prostitution, other than prostitutes, to be tried under the provisions of this Act, had to have ‘knowingly’ and ‘willingly’ engaged women in prostitution. For this reason pimps, brothel owners etc would pretend to be ignorant about the same and thereby escape liability.

As regards clients of the prostitutes, the police could arrest them only by applying the section of the Bombay Police Act applicable only to the State of Maharashtra, relating to indecent behaviour in public and get a much minimized punishment. He was not viewed as an offender under SITA. Other States in India have corresponding provisions in their respective laws.

Through the defects in SITA that came to light after it was implemented, a need was felt to bring about a change in the Act whereby prostitutes would not be seen as offenders. The object of enacting the SITA was of the suppression of immoral traffic in women and girls. This object was lost sight of and as a result SITA reinforced the view of a prostitute as an offender. It was probably never intended that the women or girls used for such traffic should be liable to punishment when there was nothing to show in the complaint that they were either keeping or managing or acting or assisting in the keeping or management of a brothel. This was the view in the decision of the Bombay High Court in *State vs. Gaya* (AIR 1960 Bom 289) rendered in the context of the provisions of Section 3(1) of the Suppression of Immoral Traffic (in Women and Girls) Act, 1956.

Provisions of the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act 1956

In order to improve upon the defects of SITA, the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1956 was enacted in the year 1986, thereby substituting SITA. One of the most important changes brought about by Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act is the definition of the term 'prostitution'. This term has been defined under Section 2(f) of the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act as *Prostitution means the sexual exploitation or abuse of persons for commercial purposes and the expression 'prostitute' shall be construed accordingly.*

According to this definition, prostitution is no more restricted to women and girls only and a wider term, namely 'persons' has been used instead, thereby widening the scope of the terms and getting within its purview men, boys, *hijaras*, *koti* workers etc. Thus, this was seen as a paradigm shift in the social structure wherein the existence of male prostitutes, *hijaras*, *koti* workers etc was not acknowledged and their exploitation was not taken into consideration by SITA, thereby making their condition appalling. The change shows that the law makers realize the diverse forms of prostitution existing in the society. This Act was thus more in consonance with the principles of the Convention on Trafficking signed by India in New York. With the change in the definition of 'prostitution' under Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, male prostitutes, *hijaras*, *koti* workers etc. who were

also being sexually exploited and abused for commercial purposes came to be recognized.

Another important feature is that the terms used to define 'prostitution' are 'sexual exploitation' or 'abuse' of such persons for a commercial purpose. Thus the definition itself makes prostitution illegal as any kind of exploitation or abuse of any person cannot be by any stretch of imagination be justified as legal. Also, it is necessary that such exploitation or abuse of such person must be for a commercial purpose. Restricting the definition of prostitution only to a means of sexual exploitation or abuse however creates another impediment. What would be covered under the definition as under the present Act would be the former position wherein there is forced prostitution and prostitution by choice would not be covered under the same. Evidence today shows that prostitution has been recognized as work.

Another change in the Act was that it divided prostitutes into 3 categories, namely, minors, majors and children whereas under SITA they had been divided into two categories only, namely, women being females above the age of 21 years and girls being females below the age of 21 years. However, as stated earlier the major drawback was persons who exploited both categories under SITA were awarded same punishment thereby, blurring the distinction.

Under the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, a 'child' has been defined as a person who has not completed the age of 16 years. On the other hand a 'minor' means a person who has completed the age of 16 years but has not completed the age of 18 years and a 'major' has been defined as a person who has completed the age of 18 years. The punishment prescribed for all three classes is different as may be seen on examination of section 5, which deals with procuring a person for the purpose of prostitution. It is stated therein that any person who procures or attempts to procure a person, whether with or without his consent, for the purpose of prostitution, or induces a person to go from any place, with the intent that he, may for the purpose of prostitution, become the inmate of, or frequent, a brothel, or takes or attempts to take a person, or causes a person to be taken, from one place to another with a view to his carrying on or being brought to carry on prostitution, or causes or induces a person to carry on prostitution; shall be punishable on conviction with rigorous imprisonment for a term of not less than three years and not more than seven years and also with fine which may extend to Rs 2,000, and if any offence under this sub-section is committed against the will of any person, the punishment of imprisonment for a term of seven years shall extend to imprisonment for a term of 14 years. This punishment shall be awarded to a person who procures or attempts to procure or induces or attempts to

induce the other person, so long as the person procured or induced is a major according to the definition of 'major' given under the provisions of this Act. The above punishment is applicable only to a 'major' because there is a proviso to this section which gives the quantum of punishment in case the person is a minor as being rigorous imprisonment for a term of not less than seven years and not more than 14 years, and in the case where the person is a child then the punishment shall extend to rigorous imprisonment for a term of not less than seven years but may extend to life.

Similarly, section 6 of the Act deals with detaining a person in premises where prostitution is carried on. Any person who detains any other person in any brothel, or in or upon any premises, for the purpose of prostitution, shall be liable to be punished with:

- (a) Imprisonment for not less than 7 years but up to for life; or
- (b) Imprisonment up to 10 years and also fine.

Sub-section (4) of section 6 affords protection to such a woman or girl as no suit or legal proceeding shall be brought against such women or girl. This provision is to mainly protect the identity of the female, taking into consideration our social structure which gives utmost importance to a woman with high virtue. Though in our case the woman would be a victim and yet there is likelihood of her being condemned by the society.

A very important question which may arise on the examination of the Act is whether prostitution is legal according to the provisions of the Act. This question may be answered upon perusal of the following sections of the said Act:

Section 7

It deals with prostitution in or in the vicinity of public places. It is stated therein that any person who carries out the activity of prostitution in any premises which are within the area or areas, notified or which are within a distance of two hundred metres of any place of public religious worship, educational institution, hostel, hospital, nursing home or such other public place of any kind as may be notified in this behalf by the Commissioner of Police or Magistrate shall be punishable with imprisonment up to three months. Further, it is stated that where any person who commits an offence stated above in respect of a child shall be punishable with imprisonment for not less than seven years to life imprisonment, and where the said offence is in respect of a minor, the punishment shall be imprisonment upto 10 years and also a fine. Therefore, prostitution has been prohibited by this section in public places.

Section 8

It deals with seducing, or soliciting for purpose of prostitution. It is provided therein that any woman who attempts, or attracts, or endeavours to attempt or attract the attention of, any person for the purpose of prostitution; or solicits or molests any person, or loiters or acts to cause obstruction or annoyance to persons or to offend against public decency, for the purpose of prostitution, shall be punishable with imprisonment up to six months or a fine up to Rs 500 or both, on first conviction; and imprisonment up to one year and fine up to Rs 500, in the event of a second or subsequent conviction. However, a man who commits any of the offences under this section, shall be punishable with imprisonment for not less than seven days but up to three months.

Section 20

This section deals with removal of a prostitute from any place. This section empowers the magistrate to require the person (who is a prostitute) to remove her/himself from the place and not to re-enter the same, subject to conditions specified in his order. The magistrate shall while removing the prostitute from such area shall however follow the procedure laid down therein as regards notice and hearing.

Upon perusal of the above sections we may come to the conclusion that, indirectly prostitution has been made illegal under this Act, when the above mentioned provisions are considered, but it does not affect the essential part of prostitution and the activities related to prostitution.

Notes

1. Rakma. 1886. 11 Bom 59.
2. The Indian Penal Code, Ratanlal and Dhirajlal, Reprint 2000.
3. 3, September, 1949. Constituent Assembly Debate, Volume IX.

**Case studies, commentaries
and interviews**

13

Legal interpretations of prostitution

Cases and judgements

ZARA KAUSHIK

Immoral Trafficking (Prevention) Act (ITPA) sources its powers, as mentioned from Articles 23(1) and 35 of the Constitution of India. Article 23 is a Fundamental Right—the right against exploitation. It prohibits traffic in human beings and forced labour, and, any contravention thereof is punishable by law, in view of which the ITPA came into being. Article 39, further, deals with the Directive Principles of State Policy—positive, although non-justiciable obligations that are to serve as guidelines in policy-framing and implementation. Drawing on the strength of these provisions and the headlining Act itself, the Indian Courts have seen a range of decisions being passed on prostitution and immoral trafficking related cases. They depict wide-ranging judicial opinion on the matter, and even critics of the judgments seldom concur in entirety.

Recent decisions stand testimony to a tendency of the courts to minimize sympathy when dealing with the victims under the Act. They are remanded to reform homes that are hopelessly ill-equipped to provide the kind of capability expansion (or rather, capability regeneration) that victims of immoral trafficking require. As a result, they often run away from these homes, only to return to pimps and brothels.

Earlier this year, in *Khushi Harkishan Malhotra vs. State of Maharashtra*¹ the Bombay High Court was faced with a case where a woman caught in a hotel room was, under the ITPA, remanded to a *Mahila Vastigriha* (women's reform home) and unduly detained there, without following due procedure

and examination of the details of the fact situation. She managed to escape; and it was revealed that in the preceding two years, over 140 inmates had done the same. The High Court observed,

The approach of the Courts below ought to have been very cautious considering the fact that the Court was dealing with the victim and not the accused. The Courts should have shown more sensitivity. In fact, a mechanical approach has been adopted by the Court.

Relying on a report from the remand home saying that the woman would possibly return to immoral trafficking if she were set free, she had been denied her liberty when she was really being detained illegally, since no judicial order had been passed by a Magistrate either to hold enquiry or subsequently to detain her.

In the same vein, the High Court of Allahabad seized emphatically on the possibility of abuse of the provision for Reform Homes, lamenting that

...as in the present case, while action is hardly ever taken against the keepers of brothels and the pimps and other exploiters of the women, the women languish in Protective Homes for long periods of time in oppressive conditions thirsting for freedom. It is hardly unlikely that a trafficked woman may end up in a Protective Home by the collusion of the keepers of brothels, and pimps with some corrupt authorities, as that would throw her at their mercy and she would willingly succumb to their dictates, in a bid to secure her freedom, as there are no provisions for legal aid, and occasionally she has been abandoned by her family or they are too weak economically to give her any worthwhile support.²

While the provisions of the ITPA are on paper a safeguard for the victims' rights, implementation is obviously a very different matter. The Supreme Court has laid down copious guidelines, and over the years has suggested the establishment of several kinds of institutions for the legal provisions to prove effective, but they have seldom (if ever) been paid due heed. *Vishal Jeet vs. Union of India*³ is a case in point, where, apart from laying down general guidelines of its own accord, the Court advised the setting up of various Advisory Committees in each State to make suggestions relating to eradication of 'this devastating malady'.⁴ While these well-intentioned suggestions no doubt function as tools in the light of which rules can be framed, ground reality requires that the legal action taken should not just be technically sound but also considerate to the victims' future prospects in any other field and the gradual erosion, during years of prostitution, of the skill-set with which they are now expected to rehabilitate themselves, if it were ever developed.

The National Commission for Women commissioned an enquiry in 1997 on the matter of police complicity in prostitution. There is a revealing paucity of cases coming up before the law courts and of police actually being accused and tried in this regard. Empirical studies, however, tell their own stories of police bribery in the setting up and continuance of brothel-keeping, and the kind of heinous abuse perpetrated on victims of immoral trafficking when taken into police custody during raids.

A few decisions however are worth taking note of. In *Nirmala Rani vs. the State of Tamil Nadu*⁵ the petitioner, who was a social activist and advocate in her own right, started an enquiry into immoral trafficking and tried to show that the local police were complicit in the offence and had been easily silenced by bribes. The police also registered only a very mild case with regard to the complaint of prostitution that the petitioner had made—she had received an anonymous letter asking for help stating that the author of the letter and other girls were being forced into prostitution by a brothel-owner (a woman named specifically), and that the police were complicit therein. A case was registered against the woman under the ITPA, but a false case was also registered soon after by the police against the petitioner under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, alleging that the petitioner had made degrading statements with regard to the caste and community of the brothel-owner. The Court thankfully grasped the importance of the situation and emphasizing the misuse of position by the police, mentioned that they could not have done so without the connivance or silence of both superiors and subordinates. The case against the petitioner was finally quashed, but not before extended mental hardship and threats to her from the police, and the requirement of proving their malafide intentions, as well as needlessly having to prove her own credentials and family background.

The recent charge-sheeting of several IPS and other civil officers and prominent political figures with regard to the uncovering of a prostitution racket in Jammu and Kashmir is worth keeping a close watch on, to see the manner in which the trial proceeds, if at all it does with regard to these officials. The investigation has now been transferred to the Central Bureau of Investigation by the J&K Government. What is specifically interesting about this case is that prosecution can be conducted under the ITPA, since it applies to the State of J&K as well; the relevant sections of the Ranbir Penal Code in force in the State also apply.⁶ Startlingly, the charged have unearthed a pre-independence law validating prostitution in J&K—the Public Prostitution Regulation Rules, 1921. These rules have not been repealed but have not been published in the State's statute book (*J&K Laws*); nevertheless, they have been accepted as being part of the State laws. They state that a

prostitute can legally ply her trade insofar as she has registered herself with the District Magistrate. However, there is no record of any woman having registered herself thus after 1947. The State Legislature is due to repeal these rules in the next session; but the fact remains that they are now convenient refuge for the accused in the J&K sex scandal.

Notes

1. 2006 Cri. LJ 612.
2. *Pushpa vs. State of UP and Ors.*, 2004 Cri. LJ 4540.
3. AIR 1990 SC 1412.
4. Ibid.
5. 2003 Cri. LJ. 3108.
6. The State of Jammu and Kashmir has its own Penal Code and does not follow the Indian Penal Code, 1860.

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(Mis)reading through the lines

HARSHAD BARDE

The Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act 1956, or ITPA was enacted in 1986 in order to cork the defects and shortcomings of the previous Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act (SITA) (in Women and Girls). However, a look at most reported and unreported cases depicts a picture of faulty legislation. These drawbacks have been observed, not only in the judgements passed by Indian courts previously, but also in the everyday lives of prostitutes, victimized and ostracized under the same act formulated to protect their interests. Though initially welcomed by the sex workers' community and human rights activists, judgements passed in related cases under the act have resulted in adding fuel to the fire of chaos and confusion that is the lifestyle of sex workers. Drawing its power from Article 23 of the constitution—the right against exploitation, the provisions of the act have been exploited and twisted by pimps, police officers, traffickers and others who stand to gain from the exploitation of the sex workers.

Prominent cases show the apathy of the courts and their insensitivity in implementing the provisions of the Act. This can be observed in *Sahyog Mahila Mandal & Another Versus State of Gujarat & Others*¹, where women from the Chakla Bazaar area of Surat were rounded up by the police under sections 7(1)b, 8 and 14 of the Act. The women had been working in the area for almost 400 years, but the expansion of the city had brought schools, temples, hospitals etc. into the area. In 2003 over a period of 3 months, 547 women and 37 men were arrested, by the Deputy Commissioner of Police and the Senior Inspector of Police of Chakla Bazaar Police Station and their subordinates, in a myriad of raids and sums of around Rs 1,000 to Rs 1,500 each were extorted from them by the police under the threat of imprisonment. The women arrested were not informed under what provisions

of law they were arrested and only a few were produced before Magistrate. The prostitutes were evicted from their houses under section 20 of the ITPA. The landlords—of the places where the women stayed—were warned not to allow them to enter their homes, practically rendering them homeless. The government was planning to rehabilitate the women and to send them to *Nari Suraksha Gruh* and their children to remand homes. This was not acceptable to the women as such a course would be violative of Articles 14 and 21 of the Constitution. The Assistant Government Pleader, submitted that when police officers exercise their functions under the Act by effecting arrests and in searching premises, they did not violate any fundamental rights of the petitioners, including the right to privacy. It was submitted that having regard to the object sought to be achieved by the provisions of the Act and the nature of the offences involved, it was absolutely necessary to invest the police officer with the power of arrest without warrant and search without warrant. It was submitted that the provisions of the Act contained sufficient safeguards against any abuse of powers of search and arrest. In its judgement, the court squashed the sex workers' pleas to make amendments to sections 7(1) b, 14 and 15 of the ITPA. The misery of the prostitutes was overlooked by the court in its proceedings and the actions of the police officials were upheld by it in turn allowing them to continue their abuse of power which was apparently 'restricted' by the act.

Many activists and NGOs have criticized the provisions of Section 8 of the ITPA and advocate for its removal from the act. The section deals with seducing or soliciting for purpose of prostitution. It not only applies to prostitutes but also to male pimps who actually, actively, and mostly do the soliciting and get covered well under the overall text and spirit of the law besides perfectly fitting into this particular provision. It is true that ever since the law has been passed, this provision has been much misused by the enforcement authorities to re-victimize the victims. Although the intention for its removal is genuine, the removal of Section 8 would be allowing brothel keepers and pimps to spread their business. With the removal of this section, the agents of flesh trade would get a much larger space to operate the flesh trade as there is nothing in any existing Indian laws other than ITPA Section 8 that forbids the agents of flesh trade from soliciting and seducing customers either directly or by placing the trafficked victims in public places for the same purpose other than provisions of the IPC relating to 'indecent behaviour in public places'. Prostitutes would still be prosecuted and victimized under these provisions and no relief would be brought to them.

Right to privacy is another fundamental right that is often violated by officials under Section 20 of the ITPA. In *Maharashtra vs. Madhukar Narayan Mardikar*², it was decided, that even a woman of easy virtue is entitled to

privacy and no one can invade her privacy as and when one likes. She is entitled to protect her person if there is an attempt to violate it against her wish and is equally entitled to the protection of law. It was held in the observation of the High Court that an argument where, 'the complainant being an unchaste woman, it would be extremely unsafe to allow the fortune and career of a government official to be put in jeopardy upon the uncorroborated version of such a woman who makes no secret of her illicit intimacy with another person' was not to be entertained. However, private residences of sex workers are raided by corrupt police officials everyday and money extorted from them under a variety of allegiances that the prostitutes do not comprehend and pay up merely out of fear of prosecution.

Repealing of the act or any of its provisions would only provide temporary relief to prostitutes. The core of the problem lies not in the loopholes of the Act, but in its corruption-riddled implementation. Any amendments to the Act would only bring about transient relief to prostitutes. On the other hand, an overhaul of the prevalent police procedures involved in ITPA cases and the scrutiny of their corrupt practices might bring about a more desirable effect.

The special officer appointed under Section 13 of the Act should be a high-ranking official with a clean record. The activity of these cells could perhaps be monitored by NGOs to ensure their smooth running. The duties and responsibilities of the officer must be made clear and unambiguous. This opinion was echoed in *Superintendent and Remembrancer of Legal Affairs on behalf of State of West Bengal Vs. Sardar Bahadur Singh and Others*.³ The accused arrested under Section 3 and 5 of the SITA (relating to keeping a brothel or allowing premises to be used as a brothel and procuring, inducing or taking woman or girl for the sake of prostitution) were acquitted by a magistrate under the reason that there was nothing on record to show that the offences under the Act have been dealt with by the Special Officer or under his guidance or supervision. Here it was observed by the honourable Judge Bijayesh Mukherji J. that the presence of the special police officer in the course of the search of the boarding-house was enough; his signature on all documents regarding search of the brothel was not required.

Another hurdle observed is the absence of women's cells in nearly all the states across the nation. As a result of this, the 'madam' when caught is immediately released as the law requires that no woman may be kept at a cell without a special cell and without the presence of women police officers. Absence of adequate legal aid is another matter, which should be looked upon. The courts of the country have many a times over-insisted on education of sex workers about their rights under the Act so as to decrease police harassment on false grounds.

The approach to be adopted towards prostitutes with respect to the ITPA should be sensitive and practical. Abolition of the Act is not an option and neither is the banning of prostitution. The approach adopted by courts in India is justifiable because they follow strict procedures while considering the cases. Most cases never reach even the Magistrate level and are solved by the police. Arousing public awareness and sympathy is of immense importance. In *Gaurav Jain vs. Union of India*⁴, Justice K. Ramaswamy opined that women found in the flesh trade should be viewed more as victims of adverse socio-economic circumstances rather than as offenders in our society. It was observed that:

...commercial exploitation of sex may be regarded as a crime but those trapped in custom-oriented prostitution and gender-oriented prostitution should be viewed as victims of gender-oriented vulnerability.

Notes

1. Special Civil Application No. 15195 and No. 4594 Gujarat High Court, 2003.
2. AIR 1991 SC 207.
3. AIR 1969 Cal 451.
4. AIR 1997 SC 3021.

15

Ground realities of the legal framework*

PUJA YADAV

Everyday Payments

The police constables (both men and women) from the nearby Faraskhana Police Station and the Shukrawar Peth Police Station visit the Red Light Area in Pune three times a day. In accordance with the legal authority vested in them, the police pick up 10–12 girls everyday, presumably for taking them to the police station. If a girl is seen soliciting in a public place, the police have the right to pick her up. But in reality, the girls/women are picked up by the police anytime even if they are not actually soliciting but doing minor purchases or simply hanging about at a shop or a tea-stall.

They then try and hire a three-seater (rickshaw) and try to take them away to the station. While this is going on, either the *gharwali* or the manager of the brothel comes down and then begin the negotiations to pay so that these girls are released. The police demand up to Rs 1,000 for this. But the sum could begin at Rs 300 and go up to Rs 2,000. If no settlement takes place here by the roadside, the girls are taken to the station to be locked up for the night. They are then, produced in the court in the morning where they pay a fine of Rs 50–100 per person and are then released. At the court, there seems to be a payment of Rs 100 made to a lawyer for his report preparation. If a *gharwali* rescues a girl from the police (payment without receipt at the initial road side negotiations or money paid at the court), she transfers this amount to the sex worker as a loan to be paid back eventually. Therefore, in reality, the girl/woman pays for every such incident of rescue.

The Monthly Payments

In addition to the daily payments made with respect to the individual incidents, there is a regular amount paid by every brothel to the local police station for simply letting them exist on their premises. The amount ranges from Rs 2,000 to 5,000, though the upper limit and the amount is generally determined by the affluence of the brothel. This too, is collected from the girls as a monthly payment.

The Legal Authorities

The enforcement of the law pertaining to prostitution falls within the jurisdiction of different levels of authorities. This includes the local police stations at Faraskhana and Shukravar Peth, as well as other authorities like the Commissioner's Office, the Social Security Section and the Crime Branch.

The first two are involved in the day-to-day based operations. The last three are related to 'raids' that may happen from time to time. During these raids, again the officers could take up to Rs 30, 000 to Rs 50,000 to make the case against the brothel much less serious. The main aim of the raids is to try and catch minors in the brothels. If minors are found, the *gharwalil* manager of the brothel gets a sentence of up to five months of jail. The girls are rescued and sent to remand homes (from where they run away and come back to the brothels eventually).

When produced in court, if the girls are not minor, once again money is given to rescue the girls out of a prison sentence and that too becomes a part of loan extended to the girl.

Some Additional Features

- There are 'flying' sex workers or non-brothel based street walkers, they too get caught by the everyday operations of the police, but since they are much poorer, and they do not have the backing of the brothel manager, they are victimized a little less.
- The police are known to give a large sum of money to get transferred to the police station near a Red Light Area, because the money 'made' in this area surpasses the possibility of making money in any other area of the city.

- The police try and catch good looking sex workers because the *gharwali* would like them back to make money and would pay for their rescue, so they are targeted the most.
- The everyday catching operation is more frequent at the month-ends when the police salary runs low.
- The catching operation on the roads is extremely abusive, in terms of language used by the police as well as the handling of the girls.
- The Nepali girls are targeted more since they are afraid of being caught in a country that is not their home. As also, the Nepali sex workers and their brothels are believed to have more money and they pay up more quickly for their girls.
- In the local police stations, so far there have not been any incidents of sexual abuse of the girls when in custody.

Note

* The following text is based on a live interview of Dr Puja Yadav, as conducted by Rohini Sahni on 22 May 2006. It addresses the day-to-day realities of sex workers and their struggle against interpretations of legal framework that regulate their operations as observed in the Red Light Area of Pune.

16

Contesting legal positions on prostitution from a human rights perspective

ASIM SARODE

The present Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA) is an outcome of an amendment of the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act, 1956 (SITA). This was implemented in India as a result of the United Nations International Convention for the Suppression of Traffic in Persons and the Exploitation of Women, New York, 1950, of which India was a signatory member. The SITA has been amended twice since its implementation. It was first amended in 1978 and then came ITPA in 1986, which merely extends the scope and application of SITA. Across these legal amendments, however, there has not been any fundamental re-thinking of the underlying policies, which SITA represented.

From the titles of the Act, it is evident that SITA stressed on *suppressing* prostitution, an objective, which was not effective. Now under ITPA, the stress is on *prevention*. But yet again the State has failed since the State and the society have an implicit understanding that the profession is a 'necessary evil'. The usual argument is that because of the existence of this profession, 'normal women remain safe from rape. I personally find this argument absurd because nothing can justify the day-to-day violence being faced by the women in sex work, as if to compensate for the safety of the 'normal women'. At least for those women who do not want to be in the profession, there is a need for rehabilitation. But for this to materialize, the State has to facilitate it, in the true sense of the word.

The main aim of the legislation is 'to inhibit or abolish commercialized social crime, namely the traffic in women and girls for the purpose of

prostitution as an organized means of living'. According to the provisions of the law, prostitution per se is not illegal. So a woman can carry out prostitution on her own within her own private premises and it would not be considered as a criminal act.

But any sexual activity can become illegal on some grounds or under some circumstances. The Act punishes for maintaining a brothel (Section 3), living on the earnings of the prostitution (Section 4), procuring or detaining a woman for the sake of prostitution (Sections 5 and 6). The Act also punishes any person who carries on prostitution in the vicinity of public places (Section 7), who solicits or seduces for the purpose of prostitution (Section 8). Moreover, Section 15 gives full authority to the police for conducting raids on brothels without any warrant based on the mere suspicion that an offence under the ITPA is being committed at some premises. The ambiguous nature of ITPA has created many grey areas. It has resulted in further corruption, arising from the nexus of the police and the pimps or the brothel keepers, impinging on the human rights of the women in prostitution.

The legal vagueness begins from the definition of Section 2(a) which defines 'brothel' as 'any house room, conveyance or place or any portion of any house, room, conveyance or place, which is used for the purpose of sexual exploitation or abuse for the gain for another person or for the mutual gain of two or more prostitutes'. Though a solitary instance of prostitution does not make the place a 'brothel', according to the case *Sushila vs. State of Tamilnadu* (1982 Cri.L.J.702 Mad); it was judged in another case by the Court that for a place to be called a brothel, the prostitution of the woman should take place for the gain of another person (AIR 1966 Mad 167). As a result of this verdict, it could be inferred that a brothel is a place, which is being used for the mutual benefits of two prostitutes; thereby converting voluntarily practicing sex workers into criminals and penalizing them. This clearly violates their rights to freedom of employment under Article 19 of the constitution.

According to Section 2(h) of ITPA 'Public Place' means and includes 'any place intended for use by or accessible to, the public and includes any public conveyances'. This section actually gives all the rights to the police for conducting raids and arrests of the women in sex work. According to this definition, the whole house or place of the sex worker can be termed as public place as it is accessible to the public at anytime. Besides this, the other problem is the lack of clear demarcation of their homes and public roads. Most of the areas where brothel-based sex work is located usually have narrow lanes, and more often than not, they are crowded localities.

The definitions, Section 2(aa) child, Section 2(ca) major, Section 2(cb) minor have created further confusions with regard to the definition of a minor.

In fact, the definition in Section 2(aa) according to which a child is a person below the age of 16 years is in consonance with the international law and does away with the definition of minor and major. This will help in cutting short the procedure and delay in the court as it will bring all persons under the age of 18 years within the ambit of ITPA. The Act is silent on the issue of commercial sexual exploitation of children. Neither does it tackle the issue of children being trafficked for the purpose of sexual exploitation, nor does it address children directly as a separate category. As a natural result, it does not contain any special provisions pertaining to children, and does not presume children as victims.

The implementing process of this law is prone to a lot of discrimination. Section 3 of ITPA talks about the punishment for keeping a brothel or allowing premises to be used as a brothel. But there are rarely any cases registered against the persons who have given their premises on lease to the pimps who are running the business. There are, also, not many pimps who are arrested. Actually, the owner and the pimps are persons who are also living on the earnings of the prostitution and guilty according to Section 4 of the Act. If there is equality before law and equal protection of law to everyone according to the constitution, why is there such discrimination of law at the implementation level? This is the key question in which various human rights issues are involved.

According to many human right activists, including myself, Section 8 of the Act should be deleted urgently as it fails on the grounds of human rights. Section 8 makes outward manifestation of women in sex work such as 'soliciting and seducing for the purpose of prostitution' illegal. As already mentioned, the majority of arrests are of women soliciting for customers. Traffickers or pimps are seldom identified and prosecuted. And since the livelihood of sex workers depends on the pimps and brothel owners they are always unwilling to speak out against these persons, making prosecutions impossible. So the need of the hour is to introduce amendments in the legal framework that would protect the rights and interests of the women in sex work rather than criminalizing them.

According to the Section 13 of the Act, there should be special police officer not below the rank of Inspector of Police and a unit, which shall deal with the ITPA cases. But now, in accordance with the newly-introduced amendment, it has been lowered to the rank of sub-inspector of Police. Police harassment and illegal detentions could be the significant consequences of this amendment for the sex workers. The ITPA does not talk about the issues of arbitrary raids-arrests, seizure of valuables and money, physical assault and

abuse, rapes, violation of rights of children of prostitutes etc. This ultimately results in greater abuse of powers by the police machinery.

To make this law more effective, adequate legal aid and representation should be provided to the women in prostitution and trafficked persons. Time limit for speedy record of evidence should be introduced. While ensuring the speedy access to justice, safeguards should be followed which shall ensure proper procedural action and see that human rights are not violated.

Health: issues and rights

Female sex workers and the HIV/AIDS epidemic in India

VIKRANT SAHASRABUDDHE AND SANJAY MEHENDALE

Introduction

Commercial sex work is rarely a preferred option for women but often it is a consequence of their social, cultural and economic vulnerabilities. The health of sex workers is affected by a wide range of social and personal factors including poverty, illiteracy, ignorance, substance-abuse, stigma, discrimination and forced servitude. Further, the nature of the profession requires avoiding unnecessary public contact and this denies access to adequate healthcare and social support thereby making them vulnerable to many sexually transmitted diseases (UNAIDS 2002). These cumulatively lead to their inability to prevent diseases, due to lack of any control over self decision-making resulting in continued acceptance of the sex trade (Chattopadhyay and McKaig 2004).

Acquired Immune-Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) is a chronic infectious disease caused by the Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) (UNAIDS 2006). Of the 40 million people estimated to be infected with HIV worldwide, almost half are women in their reproductive age group. (UNAIDS 2006, NACO 2006). In India alone, 5.2 million people are estimated to be living with HIV, with nearly 40 per cent of them being women (NACO 2006; Godbole and Mehendale 2005). The predominant mode of HIV transmission in India is heterosexual contact.

Female commercial sex workers (FSW) constituted one of the earliest risk groups infected by HIV. FSW are often branded as 'reservoirs' of the disease because their behaviour is often 'obvious', there is social stigma surrounding

sex work and there is scientific evidence about the high-rates of HIV infection in this vulnerable segment of the population. However, it is generally not appreciated that the health risks to FSW result from exposure to a broad range of bacterial and viral sexually transmitted infections (STIs), including HIV, that are originally harboured by their diverse and innumerable male clients (Basu et al. 2004). The occupational risk of acquiring and then transmitting HIV infection is accentuated because there is minimal societal support and far less advocacy for the problems faced by women in sex trade. While substantial health promotion and disease prevention activities have been undertaken targeting FSW (Jana and Basu 1995; UNAIDS 2000; Dandona et al. 2005b; Misra et al. 2000; Asthana and Oostvogels 1996), much less is accomplished in substantially reducing the burden of various diseases in this vulnerable sub-population (Shahmanesh and Wayal 2004; Chandrasekaran et al. 2006)

In this chapter, we intend to review the public health implications of the high HIV burden among female sex workers in India. We will review the socio-demographic, biological and behavioural factors that predispose FSW to the risk of HIV/AIDS, and discuss examples of various interventions and risk reduction programmes.

The Practice of Sex Work

Commercial sex work in India has existed from ancient times and female sex workers in India can be categorized in distinct groups with different practices and behaviour-patterns (Chattopadhyay and McKaig 2004). Each of these is associated with specific risks and vulnerabilities to HIV/AIDS. The most common form of prostitution occurs in brothels, where FSW are dependent on brothel keepers and other middlemen for soliciting clients and for protection. In large urban areas, restaurants, 'bars' and clubhouses provide venues for the 'singing and dancing girls' who practice sex work under the veil of providing entertainment, and often have middle-men with whom they share their income. Street-prostitution, primarily involving survival sex-work by soliciting clients on streets, is either through organized but informal networks or through direct solicitation. 'Call girls' are mostly urban adult women who may have other jobs but also undertake sex work for improving their finances and expanding their social network, and less often, as primary means of survival. They are probably least dependent upon middle men and their income from sex work is often higher than other FSW due to the higher paying capacity of their clients. The ever-expanding internal

trade routes provide avenues for wayside prostitutes to operate on highways, truck stops and roadside hotels for serving long-distance truck drivers, migrant labourers and tourists. They generally reside in the neighbouring rural and urban areas. A unique category of 'religious prostitutes' described as *Devdasi*, *Jogini*, and so on prevalent in India are women who are initiated into sex work at an early age following religious ceremonies and are quite often supported by temple and devotee resources (Chattopadhyay and McKaig 2004). Transvestite and transsexual individuals, known as *Hijaras* serve homosexual male clients, and their risks, problems and vulnerabilities are similar to those of female sex workers. Reaching any of these groups for HIV prevention-intervention activities has its own unique challenges.

Estimating the absolute numbers of FSW is extremely difficult. Although the National AIDS Control Organization (NACO) has conducted 'mapping' (counting) exercises throughout the country in order to develop better estimates for informing policy makers, these numbers have been a source of controversy, especially due to the limitations in the methods used (Potterat 2006; Gisselquist and Correa 2006). The range of estimates of number of FSW in India is between 1.5 to 3.5 million, although a recent review has questioned these estimates and reported a substantially lower estimate (3,00,000–7,00,000) extrapolated from the available NACO data (Gisselquist and Correa 2006). A quarter of FSW are presumed to be minors and UNICEF estimates that a third of all child prostitutes are in the six large cities of Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Chennai, Hyderabad and Bengaluru (Venkataramana and Sarada 2001). The numbers of male clients visiting FSW are estimated to be between 9 and 13 per cent of the adult (15–64 years) male population, nearly 30–40 million men per year. The total number of visits (averaging about 36–50 per client per year) and the frequency of average number of sexual contacts with clients (ranging between 390–790 per year) are other important indicators that have been estimated, based on many assumptions, indirect evidence and modelling (Gisselquist and Correa 2006; Venkataramana and Sarada 2001; Jain et al. 1994; Chin 1994; Nagelkerke et al. 2001; Nagelkerke et al. 2002). Although there is lack of hard-data regarding these estimates, social science and ethnographic research has often substantiated the overall validity of these findings.

Implications of the HIV/AIDS Epidemic

The public health of any country can be judged by the health status of common people, vulnerable populations and minority groups. While most of the

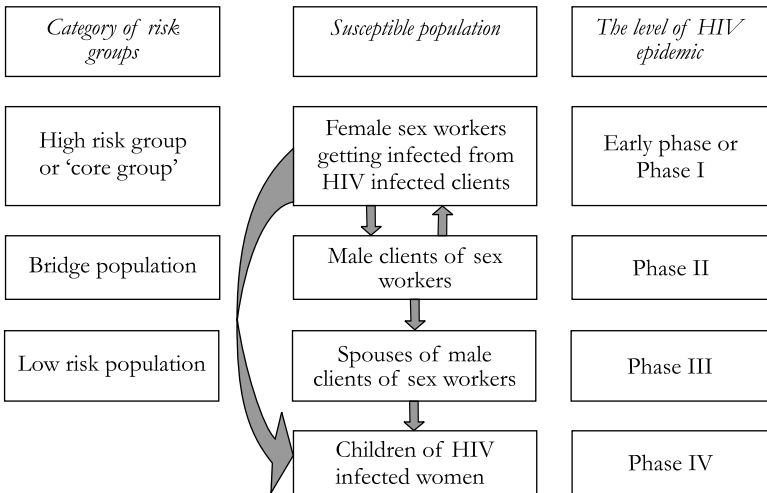
industrialized countries have been able to carry individual health promotion and disease prevention activities down to the doorstep of such vulnerable and minority sub-populations, there remains a huge need to improve the health of these sub-groups in the context of the rapid socio-economic development in countries like India (Sternberg 2005; Jha et al. 2001). HIV/AIDS poses a major public health threat to Indian society and FSW constitute one of the highest risk groups in the context of the heterosexually-dominated HIV epidemic in India (Chandrasekaran et al. 2006; Gordon 2002; Brahme et al. 2006; Dandona et al. 2005a; O'Neil et al. 2004).

Like most settings in the developing world, sex work in India is neither legalized nor socially viewed as an acceptable vocation (Misra et al. 2000; Blanchard et al. 2005). This tends to push the trade and FSW underground, thereby exposing them to several health related and social vulnerabilities (O'Neil et al. 2004). The public health and social implications of these vulnerabilities have multiple dimensions. First, FSW get deprived of their right to have a steady married and/or family life and thus secure some health and economic stability for themselves or their children. (O'Neil et al. 2004, Sarkar et al. 2006). Second, their risk for acquiring STIs, including HIV, increases manifold. This risk is perpetuated to their male clients, starting off a vicious circle and a network of sexual transmission that usually propagates beyond the high-risk groups (Brahme et al. 2006; Mehendale et al., 1995; Solomon et al., 1998; Sarkar et al. 2005; Pal et al. 1994). Third, the risks of other chronic diseases including cervical cancer and complications of pelvic inflammatory diseases including infertility are very high and may result in a large burden of morbidity and mortality in this population (Sternberg 2005; Pal et al. 1994). Another significant issue from the public health perspective is that the governmental health programmes and services are predominantly directed at the general population and organized sectors and FSW do not qualify to be classified in either (ILO 2006). In fact, due to the clandestine nature of the profession, in the absence of special, targeted programmes, most FSW often do not visit any health-care provider until they are unfit to an extent of not being able to work and earn, i.e., until they are seriously ill with the complications of STI/HIV/AIDS or other chronic diseases. Thus they continue to transmit infections for a long time and are seen in health care facilities only at a late stage of the disease, when palliative or supportive treatment is often the only available option. Clearly the societal impact due to health conditions of FSW is significant not only for the individual sex workers but also to public health at large.

The Dynamics and Burden of the HIV/AIDS amongst FSW

The dynamics of the predominantly heterosexually transmitted HIV/AIDS epidemic in India has been described in Figure 17.1. This pattern has also been observed in many developing countries in Asia and Africa that have faced similar HIV epidemics (UNAIDS 2006; Halperin and Epstein 2004; Shelton et al. 2004).

Figure 17.1
Patterns of HIV transmission in India and the risk groups involved



With heterosexual transmission as the most predominant mode of HIV transmission in India, it was an epidemiologic expectation to observe the accumulation of HIV infection among 'high-risk' groups like sex workers (NACO 2006; Godbole and Mehendale 2005). The initial reports of HIV infection in India were among sex workers in Chennai and Mumbai (Jayaraman 1986; Bose et al. 1988; Simoes et al. 1987; Bhawe et al. 1995). In the late 1980s and early 1990s, HIV was widely perceived as a threat that would primarily affect 'high-risk' groups like FSW, men having sex with men, and injection drug users. Implementation of appropriate prevention strategies at an early stage of the epidemic might have restricted the spread of HIV in India. The HIV epidemic continued to spread in high-risk groups. Currently, the HIV epidemic has attained generalized proportion in

six Indian states, namely, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, Manipur and Nagaland with greater than 5 per cent HIV sero-prevalence in high-risk groups coupled with greater than 1 per cent prevalence in the 'low-risk' groups of the general population (NACO 2006). Not surprisingly, FSW remain one of the most affected high-risk sub-groups in the predominantly heterosexually driven Indian HIV epidemic, as is evident from persistently high sero-prevalence rates (Godbole and Mehendale 2005; Venkataramana and Sarada 2001; Brahme et al. 2006; Dandona et al. 2005a; Singh et al. 2005; Sharma and Khandpur 2004; Das et al. 1998).

The prevalence of HIV among FSW in major cities as well as semi-urban areas has been reported to be high, with estimates ranging between 20 and 60 per cent as reported in various cross-sectional surveys and as reflected through sentinel surveillance surveys (NACO 2006; Godbole and Mehendale 2005). Increasing HIV prevalence in FSW has been documented in major cities like Mumbai (1986–95: 0.5–69 per cent) (Bhave et al. 1995; Das et al. 1998; Divekar et al. 2000), Pune (1993–02: 34–50 per cent) (Brahme et al. 2006; Gangakhedkar et al. 1997; Rodrigues et al. 1995; Mehendale et al. 1996), and Chennai (1.8–28.6 per cent) (Simoes et al. 1987; Simoes et al. 1993). The reported prevalence of HIV among FSW has been lower in the North, East and Central parts of India than in the South and West; for example, less than 1 per cent in Delhi (Singh et al. 1990), 5 per cent in Raipur, Chhattisgarh (Nigam and Shrivastava 2005), 9.6 per cent in Kolkata city (Mandal et al. 2000), 13.2 per cent in Sonagachi and surrounding red light areas in Kolkata (Pal et al. 1994). This observation could also be considered as reflective and consistent with regional HIV prevalence (Kumar et al. 2006). FSW remain one of the highly-affected risk groups in settings where the transmission is predominantly heterosexual.

Estimates of between 2,80,000–10,00,000 FSW being HIV-infected are disputed due to lack of solid and complete data (Potterat 2006; Gisselquist and Correa 2006). Patterns and nature of sex work (brothel-based, street-based, non-brothel based or trade-route linked), concurrent sexual relationships and partnerships, type of sexual practice adopted (vaginal, oral or anal) may explain the differences and determinants of the geographic variation of the HIV epidemic in India (Dandona et al. 2006; Mandal et al. 2000; Agarwal et al. 1999). Even in settings where injection drug use related transmission is still the predominant mode of HIV transmission, the HIV prevalence among sex workers is high (for example 12 per cent in Manipur) and evidence suggests that drug-use and sex work are often dual-risk factors for FSW in this region (Agarwal et al. 1999; Singh et al. 2005).

Determinants of HIV Spread

Unprotected sex with an infected partner has been thought to be the most important risk factor for acquiring HIV (Aral et al. 2006). The risk of acquiring HIV depends upon individual behaviours and the probability of the partner being infected, which in turn is a function of the prevalence and distribution of infection in the population. Epidemiologically, there are at least three distinct biological and behavioural components of transmission dynamics of HIV at a population level (Aral 2000; Manhart and Holmes 2005):

- Likelihood of sexual exposure between infected and uninfected individuals.
- Transmissibility of infection upon exposure between an infected and an uninfected person.
- Duration of infection among those infected.

These three components have been extensively studied in the context of heterosexual HIV transmission in India. Ethnographic and social science research has demonstrated the role of many factors in HIV transmission in India. They include gender and power differences between men and women, taboo on sexuality, non-existent or limited pre-marital relationships, a largely male migrant workforce, cultural norms promoting utilization of sex work by men, as well as existence of human trafficking activities creating optimal conditions for the profession of sex work to exist and thrive (Venkataramana and Sarada 2001; Blanchard et al. 2005; Madhivanan et al. 2005). Multiple unprotected sexual contacts thus constitute a major occupational hazard for FSW and predispose them to a significantly higher risk of acquiring HIV infection and STIs from their numerous male clients.

The likelihood of HIV transmission upon exposure has both biological and behavioural determinants. Some of the foremost studies investigating HIV-transmission in Africa and the US reported that the biological probability of transmission from an infected man to a susceptible woman is higher than from an infected woman to a susceptible man. This is in part due to the larger mucosal surface area of the female genital tract that facilitates HIV-acquisition (Donovan 2004; Halperin et al. 2004). Although more men are living with HIV than women in India (prevalence), the increasing incidence (rate of new infections) among women with the maturation of HIV epidemic (NACO 2006; Brahme et al. 2006; Rodrigues et al. 1995; Mehendale et al. 1996) is resulting in a steady increase in the number of women infected and

gradual equalization of male to female ratio among the HIV-infected. Other biological co-factors implicated in HIV transmission include the young age of FSW (Sarkar et al. 2006; Kumar et al. 2006), older age of male clients (Kumar et al. 2006; Brahme et al. 2005) and presence of genito-ulcerative and genital-discharge STIs (Brahme et al. 2006; Rodrigues et al. 1995; Mehendale et al. 1996; Reynolds et al. 2006; Reynolds et al. 2003) that have been shown to significantly increase the risk of HIV acquisition and transmission.

Behavioural factors such as the number of sex partners over the individual's lifetime and over a short-term frequency or the number of sexual encounters and correct and consistent condom use (Godbole and Mehendale 2005; Brahme et al. 2006; Mehendale et al. 1995; Solomon et al. 1998; Sarkar et al. 2005; Rodrigues et al. 1995) have been documented to be associated with HIV acquisition in India. The behaviour-patterns that can reduce the average duration of infectiousness include timely and appropriate health-care seeking, effective participation in risk assessment and compliance with treatment recommendations on the part of those infected and prevention recommendations for those at risk (Dandona et al. 2005a; Blanchard et al. 2005).

It has been reported that the prevalence of genital-ulcer disease among various STI has decreased over time whereas that of observed genital-discharge disease has remained stable (Brahme et al. 2006). Long-term follow-up has indicated that the proportion of FSW who refused sexual contact without condoms and the self-reported consistent condom use has increased over time. These data collectively suggest that safe-sex interventions have had a positive impact on FSW in India. However, the real challenge is to translate the successes of such focal interventions used in a project mode to a programme mode across the country. Long-term multiple concurrent sexual partnerships are behaviour patterns that have fuelled the African HIV/AIDS epidemic but do not seem to be largely prevalent in India (Halperin et al. 2004; Shelton et al. 2004; Potts and Walsh 2003).

In India, the driving force for HIV spread amongst FSW is the high-risk to low-risk transmission though the 'bridge' populations of mobile or displaced working men (Godbole and Mehendale 2005; Kumar et al. 2006). Certainly, individual behaviour patterns such as knowledge of and attitudes towards condom use and the recently emphasized male-to-male sexual partnerships are also important determinants of HIV acquisition and transmission (NACO 2006; Chandrasekaran et al. 2006; Gupta et al. 2006). Other factors such as relative inadequacy of STI/HIV health services and health care—seeking behaviour patterns of FSW and their male clients might contribute to higher likelihood of FSW acquiring STIs, including HIV (Blanchard et al. 2005).

The successful dissemination of correct HIV-prevention information and non-stigmatization of HIV-prevention interventions for FSW is also critical (Venkataramana and Sarada 2001; Sivaram et al. 2005).

With the maturation of the HIV epidemic, increasing focus is being placed on providing quality care and treatment to individuals living with HIV/AIDS. The recent roll-out of anti-retroviral drug treatment programme through public and private channels has been reaching FSW through community-based organizations including groups or networks of HIV-positive people (Chandrasekaran et al. 2006). Additionally research studies on preventing and treating opportunistic infections like tuberculosis (Williams et al. 2005; Chatterjee 2004) and malignancies such as cervical cancer (Chatterjee et al. 2001; Joshi et al. 2005a) are being undertaken. The scientific way for assessing safety, efficacy and acceptability of HIV-prevention interventions is subjecting such interventions to randomized and controlled clinical trials (Auerbach and Coates 2000). Many clinical trials have been undertaken in the field of prevention of mother to child transmission and have shown effectiveness of prophylactic anti-retroviral medications (Thorne and Newell 2004; Rutenberg and Baek 2005). Newer HIV-prevention modalities like microbicides and female condoms are being currently evaluated in early phase clinical trials in India, primarily in healthy women and women with low risk behaviour (Joshi et al. 2005b; Joshi et al. 2005c; Smita et al. 2005). For phase III efficacy trials, the population of FSW would be the logical target population because of their high-risk behaviour and immediate post-trial applicability. Findings of the Sonagachi Project Kolkata (RHO 2006) stated that approximately 6,000 sex workers serve more than half a million male clients a year in Sonagachi, a red light district in central Kolkata. In 1992, the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health launched a programme to reduce the transmission of HIV/AIDS in Sonagachi. The project began with two key interventions: a health clinic and outreach by peer educators. It has since triggered a broader self-empowerment movement by sex workers in the state of West Bengal. Peer educators are current and former sex workers from the local community who are paid to work four hours a day, during clinic hours, although they volunteer far more time than that. They receive extensive training in:

- Transmission and treatment of STIs, including HIV/AIDS;
- Negotiation skills needed to persuade clients to use condoms; reproductive health;
- Treatment and prevention of common communicable diseases; laboratory-training to carry out general medical tests; and

- Local laws and the legal system in the context of sex trade and women's rights.

Over the years, due to sustained interest and empowerment amongst FSW, while the project has branched out from its original health objectives, it has made a major health impact. Its many achievements include:

- Condom use by sex workers in Sonagachi increased from 3 per cent in 1992, to 70 per cent in 1994, to 90 per cent in 1998. In 14 catchment areas outside of Sonagachi condom use rose from 30 per cent in 1996 to 52 per cent in 1998.
- HIV prevalence among sex workers in Sonagachi has not increased as dramatically as in other similar set-ups in India.
- STI rates have dropped: the proportion of sex workers with recent syphilis and genital ulcers fell from 28 per cent and 7 per cent, respectively, in 1993 to 11 per cent and 2 per cent in 1998.

Health Care Seeking and Access to Health Care

Societal attitudes towards sex work have not been positive or supportive in general in India as is the situation in most parts of the world. Societal neglect, isolation and discrimination lead to poverty and destitution among FSW. Such attitudes and lack of societal support towards issues and developmental activities targeting FSW, often pose barriers in implementation of programmes directed at prevention and control of HIV/STI among FSW. The fact that FSW are among women having the highest risk for HIV/STI acquisition should underscore the importance of provision of appropriate prevention and care from the angle of human rights and justice. However, individuals and organizations face difficulties in initiating or sustaining healthcare activities for FSW due to value-laden and moralistic attitudes of individuals in the public or private sector. In addition, the misinterpretation and misrepresentation of human trafficking laws by the police and lack of legal status to the profession of sex trade have made it even more difficult to institute health promotion and disease prevention activities in this high-risk population in an organized manner.

Health-care seeking behaviour among FSW depend on their perceived seriousness of symptoms, the availability and accessibility of local health care, their perceptions about the quality of care, costs of treatment, and beliefs

about the appropriate provider to consult (Hawkes and Santhya 2002). The proportion of FSW seeking care is highly variable, and delays in seeking treatment are often substantial (Hawkes and Santhya 2002; Brabin et al. 1998). Patterns of behaviour and approaches of health-care providers that ensure timely and accurate diagnosis, appropriate treatment, and non-judgemental attitudes toward those infected are critical in improving health-care seeking behaviour of FSW. However, establishing effective, accessible, affordable, and decentralized services for FSW has proven to be difficult (Mead et al. 2005; The World Bank 2006). The major barriers identified include inadequate basic training and inefficient deployment of health workers, inappropriate attitudes and prejudiced behaviour of health workers towards patients, high patient loads at health centres, inadequate referral systems, inadequate laboratory support for the diagnosis of HIV/STIs, chronic shortages of supplies and drugs and inadequate health records management (UNAIDS 2006; Williams et al. 2006; Steen et al. 2006). Health care costs can be a significant additional barrier.

Health-care access also depends on the type and nature of sex work that FSW are engaged in. Typically, non-brothel based and street-based FSW find seeking health-care a major challenge due to the underground nature of their sex trade and fear of retribution by the police machinery (Dandona et al. 2005a; Dandona et al. 2005b). This also hampers intervention programmes since reaching out to such FSW becomes difficult, if not impossible. Recent efforts through the 'Avahan' ('Call to action') initiative of the Bill and Melinda Gates foundation have focused on this vulnerable population in the four high-prevalence states of India (Williams et al. 2006; Steen et al. 2006; Gates Foundation 2006; Raghu 2005). There is considerable difficulty in simply enumerating the women at risk considering both the clandestine and migratory nature of their work.

Prevention Interventions and Delivery of Health Care for FSW

The HIV/AIDS epidemic has highlighted the need for responding on three levels: addressing fundamental conditions that contribute to entry of women into sex work, protection and health promotion for those involved in sex work, and assistance in exiting from sex work. Each of these can, in turn, be addressed on three levels: individual, community and policy-making (Table 17.1).

Table 17.1
Multi-level approaches and goals for the prevention of HIV-transmission among sex workers

<i>Level</i>	<i>Goal 1: Efforts to stop entry of women in sex work</i>	<i>Goal 2: Protection and health-promotion for those involved in sex work</i>	<i>Goal 3: Efforts to assist FSW to exit from sex work</i>
Individual level	<p><i>Approach:</i> Individual empowerment through appropriate education, access to healthcare and socio-economic development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Information education and communication (IEC) activities • Provision of accessible legal recourse 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peer IEC approaches • STI and HIV prevention and care services • Mitigation of associated problems like alcoholism and substance abuse • Education and health promotion for male clients and regular partners 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development of personal skill sets • Access to social, economic development and health services • Access to self-help groups and social networks • Provision of accessible legal recourse
Community level	<p><i>Approach:</i> Broaden interventions in a community-development framework</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Culture-specific interventions to prevent entry into sex work due to traditions, norms, or beliefs • Promotion of broader gender-equality interventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Safer sex education activities through sex worker groups • Implementation of outreach programmes for hard-to-reach sex worker groups • Providing care for FSW living with HIV/AIDS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • IEC Interventions to mitigate stigma and discrimination • Seamless integration of former sex workers in society
Policy level	<p><i>Approach:</i> Developing and sustaining policy frameworks that support individual and community-based interventions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong, enforceable anti-human trafficking and anti-sexual exploitation laws • Laws and policies for poverty alleviation, socio-economic development and gender equality 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Establish clear policy framework for sex work, including options for legalization and/or licensing of sex work • Strict laws against violence and exploitation of women • Reorientation of health and social support services 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provision of development opportunities by affirmative action • Making HIV/AIDS and health-care provision for marginalized communities a significant agenda for policy makers and legislators

At all response levels, it is necessary to have clear policy stand points and to establish programmes with multiple components. Individual-level approaches focus on culture-specific information, education and communication (IEC) activities, establishing and expanding peer education approaches within various levels of the sex work system and making STI and HIV prevention and care services accessible to FSW (Singh and Malaviya 1994; Ngugi et al. 1999). Accessibility, affordability, acceptability and quality are the key determinants of the individual-level intervention activities, and many success stories using novel, innovative yet replicable approaches do exist. The peer-educator approach has found widespread recognition and is noted as an example of a more successful intervention. These peer educators come from the community, typically older FSW. Peer educators can play an important role for improving the acceptability and use of condoms for HIV prevention, by emphasizing the health benefits of the condom as well as by improving condom-negotiating skills and sensualizing condom use that leads to better acceptance of condoms by male clients. Creating 'drop-in centres' where street-based FSW can visit to take rest and also receive STI treatment and free condoms, can play a significant role in HIV prevention besides receiving tailored prevention messages (Raghu 2005). An example of an innovative intervention to improve participation of FSW in prevention-intervention programmes has been described in Box 17.1.

The role of prevention activities for the male clients is a critical part of comprehensive HIV prevention programmes for FSW. Too often, the high risks to uninfected women in sex work are a direct result of infected male clients. The critical role of condom-promotion and safer-sex messages thus underscores not only targeting FSW but also their male clients (Singh and Malaviya 1994; Brahme et al. 2006). Additionally other mitigating factors like alcohol use that increase high-risk behaviour need careful consideration while planning HIV prevention interventions for sex workers (Madhivanan et al. 2005).

Community level approaches involve groups of sex workers in condom-promotion and safer-sex education activities, implementation of outreach programmes for hard-to-reach sex worker groups and providing care for FSW living with HIV/AIDS, in addition to conducting broader interventions within a community development framework (Ngugi et al. 1999). These community-level approaches can play a role in changing prevailing norms about sex work and changing the organizational structures of sex work profession making it less hazardous. These activities translate into reducing individual level vulnerability to HIV for FSW, their uninfected clients and through them the broader susceptible population. The power and resistance

Box 17.1
**The gates foundation and funding for health and development
of FSW in India (Raghu, 2005)**

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation is the world's largest grant-making philanthropic foundation, and the largest grant making area is Global Health. The India AIS Initiative 'Avahan', with a total commitment of US\$ 200 million, represents the largest commitment from the foundation to any single country. The major focus of the initiative is to reduce the HIV prevalence in high-risk groups and stabilize it in the general population by 2008. The foundation has identified two core strategic initiatives as part of its focused prevention programme in the country. The 'District Focus State Impact' initiative will support HIV prevention programmes in the six highest-incidence states for female and male sex workers, their clients, injecting drug-users, and other high-risk population. The 'National Highways' initiative will be implemented along 7,000 kilometres of the major highways in India, covering inter-state truckers/helpers and highway-based commercial sex workers and their partners.

Several innovative programs targeting HIV prevention interventions among FSWs are currently underway. In an innovative program in Mysore, 500 FSWs now own chip-embedded smart cards, which when presented during transactions help them get discounts at select shops and hotels and earn loyalty points for discounts on later purchases. However, the card also contains the medical record of the sex worker, who has to compulsorily get her health check up at a clinic once in three months. The card becomes inactive if the holder fails to do this. The sex workers will be checked for sexually transmitted diseases (STI) and treatment provided if necessary. The vendors and the health specialists are provided with 'Simputer', the home-grown hand-held device developed by scientists at the Indian Institute of Science (IISc), to bridge the digital divide. The data is stored in real time at a central server to maintain confidentiality. The encrypted card bars access of health records by traders, while doctors cannot find out the business transaction details. Sex workers have come to view the smart card as a symbol of self-esteem since it creates a sense of inclusion for them in the society. The smart card initiative came from discussions with FSWs, who identified an incentive of discounts with a health card to be a better alternative than a pure health card.

of brothel owners often makes it difficult to intervene directly with FSW, hence a community-based approach involving the brothel owners, local politicians, 'pimps', and other stakeholders is essential for the success of individual-level approaches.

At a policy level, it is necessary to establish clear policy framework and guidelines carefully synchronizing legal and programmatic elements (UNAIDS 2006, Ngugi et al. 1999). The current response to HIV/AIDS in sex work has been to focus exclusively on addressing sexual and reproductive system issues through distribution of condoms and STI services. Addressing the sex workers' psychological and emotional needs, while simultaneously striving to influence the socio-cultural and economic context in which they work, should be emphasized in the intervention programmes.

Summary and Directions for the Future

According to UNAIDS, experiences in the field indicate that sex workers are among those most likely to respond positively to HIV-prevention programmes. Some settings have succeeded in reducing HIV prevalence among sex workers, primarily due to policies supporting condom use with clients and initiatives directly involving sex workers in condom promotion. It is evident from experiences across various settings in the country as well as abroad that responses must essentially be driven by local realities rather than a 'one-size-fit-all' approach, especially considering the differences in the type of sex-work activities, profile of FSW and societal differences across the country. FSW can be reached by sensitive programming and can become willing partners in HIV prevention and control, if efficient and non-stigmatizing services are available. Harm reduction, condom promotion and promotion of health-seeking behaviour must be contextualized within the broader framework of socio-economic development and rights for FSW.

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In the interest of business and health

Women sex workers' efforts to protect themselves from HIV

MEENA SHIVDAS

Women in the sex industry have witnessed the HIV/AIDS pandemic since its advent and continue to suffer high levels of HIV infection. However, health interventions tend to stigmatize them by targeting them in isolation and often labelling them as the source of infection. There are a number of reasons for this, some of which are based on biased social perceptions of sex and sex workers and others are about societal notions of disease and social exclusion. A World Bank (1998) report suggests that health interventions with sex workers are often not effective because sex workers' vulnerability to HIV is seen without reference to their vulnerability to violence, discrimination and other human rights violations. Generally speaking, empowerment exercises undertaken with sex workers tend to emphasize development of peer educators with the aim of achieving 100 per cent condom usage. Women sex workers' self-esteem issues or their problems, other than those stemming from sexual and reproductive health, remain largely ignored. Structures of power and domination including institutions and actors such as madams, pimps and police are often not addressed as interventions tend to focus mainly on distribution of condoms and welfare issues such as provision of childcare services and food.

The identification of sex workers as active agents in the prevention of HIV/AIDS has added another dimension to the complexities surrounding sex

work and consequently to the social meaning of gender and sex (Kempadoo and Doezema 1998). As with other diseases in the past, the concern for public-health places and women sex workers have been under intense scrutiny for HIV interventions as well (Overs et al. 2002). These have implications in the way the interventions perceive women sex workers and thus, plan and implement their programmes accordingly.

This case study examines the efforts of SANGRAM (Sampada Grameen Mahila Sanstha) and VAMP (Veshya Anyay Muqabla Parishad) and asks if the strategies employed to build awareness about women sex workers' rights to health and steps taken towards the mobilization of relatively powerless women are effective, given the gender discrimination and injustices that blight the everyday lives of sex workers.

SANGRAM's Efforts

The SANGRAM recognized women sex workers' agency and placed them at the centre of their interventions. Rural south Maharashtra, where SANGRAM began its initial work on women and HIV/AIDS, is a region steeped in patriarchal norms and social rules that generally place women in subordinate positions. In such a socio-cultural environment, women sex workers' voices are rarely heard and their health rights are seldom recognized. Although the public health system offers free health services, women sex workers have problems accessing these services because the public health system in many rural areas is less than adequate and they inevitably face discrimination from medical personnel and staff at municipal hospitals and clinics. Many women sex workers whom SANGRAM encountered had entered sex work because of *majboori* or difficult circumstances, mainly poverty, that might have led them to look upon sex work as a way of survival (Point of View n.d.).

It is within such a socio-economic context that SANGRAM decided, in 1992, to approach women sex workers in the Gokulnagar community of Sangli and speak to them about HIV and condoms. It was not easy. The women sex workers were wary of health interventions as most initiatives implicitly held the women responsible for spreading HIV infection and urged them to take steps to protect *others* (Point of View n.d.). SANGRAM's approach was different as their message was about women sex workers protecting *themselves* from HIV infection. Thus began the early days of SANGRAM's peer-educator programme—16 women from the sex worker community, with the tacit support of some of the madams who ran the brothels, went about telling their neighbours about HIV and distributed condoms.

The programme has since come a long way with the birth of the VAMP women sex workers' collective in 1996. SANGRAM continues to work closely with VAMP.

VAMP(s) Have Rights Too

The VAMP was set up with the aims of forging and consolidating a common identity among women sex workers, empowering them to assert their rights and protect themselves from HIV infection. In an intentional reference to the social stigma they face and in an attempt to reclaim the term *veshya* ('whore' in local parlance), by imputing meaning to it. The VAMP women's efforts to mobilize themselves in order to speak out about HIV/AIDS and protect themselves from infection, bring them in direct confrontation with ambiguous laws and policies, and state agents who generally subscribe to societal perceptions of women as either 'madonnas' or 'whores'.

By functioning as a loose collective, VAMP is able to attract members in the sex worker community. Membership is not formalized; any woman sex worker who utilizes VAMP's services or gets involved in the activities becomes a member. The board members of VAMP are peer educators who are in direct contact with the community. These women are community leaders who are effective in their condom distribution work and provide care and support to colleagues. These peer educators are called *tais* (sisters in the local language, Marathi). Other categories of VAMP members are community workers and field workers. Community workers assess condom requirements and monitor condom supply. They also help women with accessing medical services and offer informal counselling. Field workers are the point people who collect condoms and arrange for condom distribution to community workers. They also attend VAMP's weekly meetings and report back to their colleagues who pass on the information to their constituents. Significantly, VAMP's board members are the peer educators, women sex workers who know the pulse of the community. Each board member carries an identity card, which often comes in useful when dealing with police harassment.

The VAMP emphasizes that a peer-educator's portfolio spans the entire continuum of HIV—before, during and after infection. Their preventive work on HIV/AIDS is mainly through peer education, condom distribution and assisting the sex worker colleagues who have sexually transmitted infections and other health problems to access medical help. VAMP women have to play a supportive role when community members become HIV infected. Often peer educators become the *de facto* families and care givers

of ill colleagues. Not only do they ferry these women back and forth from hospitals but they also organize food for them, look after the women's children or even lovers who could be sick as well and offer unconditional support. When a colleague succumbs to AIDS-related health complications, they have to grapple with funeral arrangements and also deal with questions about their own vulnerability to HIV infection. Although relatives may sometimes come forward to perform the last rites according to traditional customs, in one particular district, when the men in the community refused to be the pall bearers, the women decided to carry their colleague on her last journey to the funeral site. Taking on the hitherto, male-prescribed roles (according to Hindu custom, *only* men can be pall bearers) has made the women conscious of deep-seated discriminations and they realize that as women and as sex workers they have had to make compromises in their lives.

While HIV/AIDS forms a large part of the focus in VAMP women's initiatives to help themselves, considerable attention is also given to the socio-economic impact of women sex workers' health and well-being. The organization plays a crucial role in promoting the interests of its constituents, the women sex workers, by mediating community disputes, lobbying with the police, helping colleagues' access government systems and services and facilitating leadership potential among its members. Women sex workers face police harassment regularly, not only are they routinely abused and beaten, they are also randomly picked up on charges of soliciting, which is deemed criminal under India's prostitution law. Brothel-keeping and soliciting are criminalized under the law, and more often than not, sex workers are implicated more than brothel keepers and pimps (Gangoli 1999; D'Cunha 1992).

Before the VAMP collective was formed, women sex workers could not do much about routine police harassment. Now, they are treated with more respect when they approach police officers for help. In some cases, VAMP has successfully negotiated an end to police hostility and brothel raids. However, this does not mean that all VAMP members are able to confront and challenge police harassment. What has happened is that more women have become aware of their rights and recognize that they have the capacity to negotiate with others, including those in authority, to diffuse threatening situations. No longer are they in a position to be only told by others about how to act, they are now empowered to know what they want to do about problems and decided for themselves about conflict resolution. Besides the peer-educator programme and advocacy initiatives that form the basis of its identity formation, and leadership development and mobilization efforts, VAMP has expanded its work focus to include specific clientele and members' children.

In 2000, an integrated project on STD and HIV/AIDS intervention among truckers was undertaken. Truckers who ply India's highways between Maharashtra and Karnataka are extremely mobile and have multiple sex partners. As they are also regular clients of VAMP members and form a large pool of the clientele, it was decided that the VAMP collective's experience with the peer educator intervention could be used as a model approach for the intervention with truckers. VAMP's emphasis on safe and responsible sex formed the core of the intervention which was then combined with the women's knowledge of their clients' habits and behaviour patterns. The project succeeded in raising awareness about the need for protection during sexual encounters mainly because the truckers saw the VAMP women as their friends and lovers and not as interventionists.

A VAMP initiative, which is directed towards women sex workers' children is designed to help the children cope with the stigma of their mothers' engagement with sex work. Having a mother who is also a sex worker brings with it more than its share of stigma and feeling of marginalization. VAMP members felt that their and their colleague's children needed a safe space to explore and strengthen their ability to deal with the mainstream attitude towards them. Thus began the 'Supplementary Education for Kids' intervention. VAMP uses tuition classes for the children as an entry point to teach them core life-skills. The children examine their identity and explore ways to reclaim spaces for respect, given the type of work and lives that are led by their mothers.

VAMP members' work and lives have also seen challenges and barriers to their HIV prevention and mobilization efforts. While VAMP promotes the concept of 'responsible sex' rather than 'safe sex' to emphasize that women sex workers owe it to themselves to ensure that a condom is used every time when they have penetrative sex, the collective is still grappling with how to impress this message further because women sex workers tend not to insist on condom use for certain sexual encounters. During sex with pimps, male brothel-owners, and the police, women sex workers often find it difficult to demand that condoms be used as these men have the power to refuse condoms. They are also not paying clients, so the women cannot simply turn down the business by refusing the money offered. At another level, *malaks* or lovers play important roles in the women's lives, they could have fathered their children, seen them through trying times and are usually emotional supports and good friends. As many women sex workers feel the need to differentiate between a client and lover, the presence or absence of a condom helps to denote that difference. This is a complex issue and the women will continue to work at it to devise viable solutions.

The members of VAMP have started meeting other collectives of sex workers outside their home states and also at national and international meetings—for example, VAMP women actively participated at the World Social Forum in Mumbai in January 2004 and at the IV International HIV/AIDS Conference in Bangkok in July 2004. As they network and share their experiences with other sex-worker activists, they will bring in new perspectives to their mobilization and advocacy efforts to prevent HIV/AIDS. VAMP is beginning to be an important player in lobbying efforts at the district, and state levels. Their voices are being heard at national and international levels too and they have emerged as persons in their own right.

Conclusion

Through their actions to prevent HIV/AIDS infection and help colleagues living with HIV/AIDS cope with their health and social problems, the VAMP women have questioned common perceptions of women sex workers. Particularly, the notion that women sex workers are vectors of infection and therefore to be treated as significant threats to the social fabric. They have also drawn attention to the idea of risky behaviour in HIV/AIDS infection as opposed to high-risk groups and focused on responsibility in sexual relations. In so doing, they have shattered the culture of silence that surrounds sexual relations and HIV/AIDS in public discourses.

The experiences of VAMP and SANGRAM have key lessons for policy and practice. The following observations can be seen as a basis for further analysis and consideration:

- Any HIV/AIDS intervention with women sex workers that is initiated in collaboration with the sex worker community is more likely to succeed, as women in the 'business' know more than anyone else about what works and what does not.
- Any intervention that is based on needs assessment that captures women sex workers' perceptions, responses and interpretations of their lives and well-being is more likely to succeed because it does not address HIV/AIDS in isolation.
- Identity formation, mobilization efforts and empowerment from within are key factors for successful HIV/AIDS-prevention strategies among women sex workers.
- Facilitating the realization of rights entails giving marginalized women sex workers a 'voice' and the 'space' to realize their potential as change agents in transforming unequal social situations.

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19

There is more to health than AIDS

*NITIN BORA IN AN INTERVIEW WITH
ROHINI SAHNI AND V. KALYAN SHANKAR*

Dr Nitin Bora has been working in association with Kayakalp, an NGO in the Red Light Area of Pune. He is a Special Executive Officer appointed by the Government of Maharashtra. In his authority as an HIV/AIDS counsellor, he has a longstanding experience of working with women in prostitution.

1. On an Average, How Many Patients Do You See in the Area Per Day?

About 30–50 patients. Generally, this is the average of any private practitioner in the Red Light Area. We are an NGO, handling similar number of patients. The Red Light Area here in Pune includes all kinds of health-care set-ups, including Government clinics; the NGO has initiated health-care centres, private practitioners, and quacks among others. Not all may be handling similar numbers. The number of patients also depends on the season, and it is particularly high during the monsoons.

2. What are their Most Common Complaints?

The usual complaints are pertaining to pain in, either the knees, or the lower back, or the abdomen, or the joints. It is this pain that brings her to the clinic.

If someone's liver grows to double the normal size, the person would not come to the clinic. The person would come to the doctor only if it starts paining. The same is the case here.

If a woman starts getting white discharge, she wouldn't come to the clinic. Only when it starts stinking, or hurting her, or would have a burning sensation while urinating, she comes to the clinic. I work here, I practice in slums, and I work in an up-market area of the city as well, and pain is a common factor that makes people come to the doctor across all these places.

But in the red light area, the pain could be attributed to the sedentary lifestyle of the sex workers with little physical activity. Women are mostly confined to their rooms, either sitting at the window or standing waiting for long hours. A housewife for example, would have to go about running errands like buying vegetables, or fetching the children, or cooking. The sex workers do not have any of these activities. They either sleep, or sit or stand and wait. If you observe any of the women outside this clinic, she would be sitting or standing for hours. The constant standing or sitting leads to pain of ankles, knees and lower back. These stationary or sedentary lifestyles also gradually lead to obesity. They eat a lot of rice and tend to gain weight over the years.

The food habits are also not very healthy. Their perception of good food is spicy, non-vegetarian. What they perceive as good or tasty food, has to be either spicy, or pungent. They consider non-vegetarian food as a luxury. This leads to regular acidity. Combine this with their habits of chewing tobacco or drinking, and with the irregularity of food intake, they often have stomach or upper abdominal problems.

Customers are also to be blamed for her lower abdominal pain. Majority of the customers who come to the red light area are under the influence of alcohol or some other intoxication (*ganja, bhang* are common). The ensuing sexual act with the sex worker may be abusive, where she is handled roughly. Lower abdominal pains are particularly frequent among all sex workers.

Headache is another usual complaint that remains unaddressed. We often suggest that the woman should wear spectacles, but this advice remains unheeded ('Glasses do not look good on their make-up' is the regular answer). Naturally, then the power of eyesight starts aggravating slowly, and headaches become a common ailment.

These are complaints we often receive. Pathologically, the most common ailment is white discharge, which could be of different types. The one caused by *Candida*, leading to fungal infections is the most common. The reason for this is the lack of hygiene. STDs could also be the cause.

Anemia is another very common ailment. If you would check the haemoglobin levels of the sex workers, you would find it to be abnormally low.

If one were to look at slightly aging prostitutes, senile arthritis is a common problem.

Among the Sexually Transmitted Infections, gonorrhoea is relatively more widespread in comparison to syphilis. It has been observed that the situation in South India is just the opposite, with syphilis being more common.

Another infection observed rampantly, is Bacterial Vaginosis. The vagina has a flora, the upper layer of which gets eroded by the use of condoms. Condoms have an outer layer of chemicals, which are spermicidal and anti-viral. And condoms, of course are rubber, which cause friction with the vagina. This leaves the vagina vulnerable to bacterial or fungal infections.

3. How Many of them have to Go Further to Some Other Doctor or Specialists?

Most of the sex workers do not have problems, which really need to be referred to specialist doctors. Any General Practitioner should be able to handle the patients. In particularly rare cases, we do refer them to some specialist doctors if we suspect cancerous symptoms, or some heart or serious gynaecological problems.

4. When they Go to Public Hospitals/Clinics or even Private Clinics do they Receive Adequate Attention?

NGO's don't have specialist doctors working. So we have to refer them if at all, to government clinics or some private doctors.

Earlier, the sex workers would get an inferior treatment by the government clinic staff. In government clinics, we do find the situation improved over the years. Possibly because of pressure from government health authorities, and after increasing campaigning by NGOs, there is a definite improvement in the way they deal with women in prostitution. To say that there has not been any improvement would be to undermine government efforts.

But a discriminative attitude still persists very much, and sex workers do not receive adequate attention. This fear of discrimination reflects in the attitude of the sex workers also, who are apprehensive of approaching the government medical set-ups. There is still a long way to go before sex workers shed their inhibitions or perceptions of government clinics.

In comparison, a lot of sex workers if asked, prefer going to private clinics. The costs here could be relatively high, but the discrimination could be lower. But the problem here is of a different kind. The doctor would view her as just another patient without any prejudice or stigma. But the discrimination still persists while she is in the waiting room, and her presence might not be tolerable for other patients. The doctors too could find this a problem. A part of this blame could be attributed to the sex worker as well, since her behaviour might be objectionable.

A lot of Nepali girls go to private practitioners, may be because they earn more money and can afford to take care of their medical expenses. And their brothel-owners too take them there. Also, I must mention that our set-up was a little congested earlier. The Nepali sex workers would prefer not to come to that kind of an ambience. Now we have shifted to this accommodation, which is much more sophisticated. So we have started attracting Nepali girls as well. Their medical problems are a little different. Because the Nepali girls' diet is, perhaps, better. The addiction rate may also be lower. The Nepali girls seem a little better-off than the other girls that come here from Andhra or Karnataka.

5. Who Pays for their Medical Expenditure? If they Themselves Pay for it then What are the Figures in Expenditures that We are Looking At?

During the last five years or so, I can say that those who go to clinics run by NGOs do not pay for doctors or medicines at all. There are four NGO-run clinics here, in Pune's Red Light Area. There are two municipal dispensaries. Beyond this, if anyone would go to a private practitioner, they will have to pay their own expenses. Her medical expenditure is not borne by anyone else. She has to pay for herself and her children. In case she has to take a loan for such expenditure, she would have to pay back with a huge amount of interest. If she would go for an MTP (Medical Termination of Pregnancy), it costs around Rs 2,000 at a private clinic.

We distribute medicines free of cost. But if the same medicines were to be purchased from outside, her expenditure would be at least Rs 20–30 every day. Here at the NGO clinic, we don't give any prescriptions so that she does not have to spend any money. In government clinics, the problem arises with the stocking of medicines, and greater administrative hassles in maintaining

accountability of all the medicines. YMCA on the other hand, finances this NGO clinic and they give me a free hand in my practice.

6. How Sick is a Common Woman in Prostitution? That is, What is the Health Index for Women in Prostitution?

I would say she is sick almost every day. Her legs would be paining every day. She must be facing problems of acidity regularly. Women of a more mature age tend to be sick a lot more than the younger ones. I can say that from the age of 30–35, they begin to face problems, otherwise common to old age. She may be an active sex worker, but she ages fast and starts getting sick sooner. Sexually she may not look older, she may apply make-up and look young, but she may be suffering from illnesses of old age.

7. What is the Frequency of Abortion? Who Pays for It?

Now, the rate of abortion has come down drastically, I would say. The use of condom has increased, resulting in the rate of pregnancies coming down. They are more careful about having a child or an abortion, than they were earlier. However, they have to pay for all medical expenditure including abortions. Earlier we would tell them to use condoms to protect from HIV. But often I found that a woman would ask, how long I would live if I was infected, and if I would say 8–10 years, to which she would say, that's not so bad. I die here every day. I feel at times she does not have much of a desire to survive or live.

But I have observed that their children are dear to them. They are their only assets (other than the little box of make-up that they possess). We have tried to grapple with this situation, and we have started this initiative of a child-care centre as part of this clinic. In the last few years, the children of many sex workers have grown up and have started going to schools. Now, when these children dress up in their uniforms, and read poems in convent style, some hope has been kindled in them.

Gradually, we are seeing an improved health-seeking behaviour from the sex workers. We do see a certain hope awakened in them for the future. Now an average sex worker is much more careful about her health. Her health-seeking behaviour vis-à-vis her children has also improved.

In case of pregnancies, she has medical care available as well. All the births here now take place in hospitals. I remember one incidence, when a sex worker's new-born died because a hospital did not admit her. Such cases are rare now.

8. How Common are Quacks? Pseudo-Doctors? Mantriks and Such Self Proclaimed Doctors?

There are many such self-proclaimed doctors and quacks here. They target the customers as well. The women, I would say, don't depend upon them that much. Or let me put it this way. The women go to them. They pray to gods and goddesses, but also come to a doctor. Some years ago, I remember they brought a little baby of three days old with a swollen eye. They had applied black suit of burnt garlic to the baby's eye as was the custom among them. Such cases are rare now.

9. How Bad is the HIV Situation?

By personal experience, I could say that the HIV situation has worsened over the years. But the extent of proliferation is very difficult to determine. There never was any quantification of the number of HIV infected people in the past. So we do not have an HIV presence baseline data to compare with. So it is really difficult to say.

There is an effort to find out the rate, and I have heard that the rate of infection has been coming down. I have heard that they state that 45 per cent of the women here are positive. There are about 5,000 workers here. According to me, 45 per cent of infection appears far too high. I think that is an exaggerated figure. Now let us say that there are about 20 per cent women sex workers here that are above the age of 35. If HIV infection had been so high, they would not have been alive.

10. What is the Level of Awareness?

They are fully aware. And the customers are also aware. The use of condoms has gone up. But the main problem is that if the customer is drunk/intoxicated, then even if he is aware of the danger, he may not actually use one. Second, she may sleep with her *jaar* or boyfriend without using a condom.

More importantly, I have observed many a times that if a woman is infected with HIV, she may not care any more for her health or even her customer's health. Unless these instances are taken into consideration, HIV prevention may be difficult.

11. How Expensive is the Curing/Looking after the HIV Person?

HIV-monitoring is done through a CD4 count test, which costs about Rs 500. In normal people, this count is normally in the range of 12,000–18,000. This number starts coming down gradually in case of HIV-positive persons. When it comes down to as low as 200, the symptoms of AIDS begin to show. It takes a period of 8–10 years for this CD4 count to go down.

The treatment of a patient with a CD4 count of below 200 is expensive. Till then, it is as little as Rs 2 a day. It also depends on which infections he or she may contract.

After CD4 count reaches below 200, the patient has to be kept on Anti-Retroviral Treatment (ART), which costs around Rs 1,200–1,500 per month.

12. Who Manages Affairs in Case of a Prostitute's Death?

Nobody. The Municipal Corporation has to take care of it.

13. How do the Other Sex Workers Look at their Friend's Death? Don't they Get Scared?

Frankly speaking, they are not affected at all. They are deeply aware of who they are, and what could happen to them. They have a much deeper understanding of their reality than what we presume.

14. What is the Role that is Played by Addictions?

Addiction is a serious problem that is difficult to tackle. Alcoholism is the only major problem though, with other forms of addiction like drugs not very common. It is a difficult area of intervention.

15. In What Way Does the Bad Sanitation and Water and Drinking Water Problem Affect their Health?

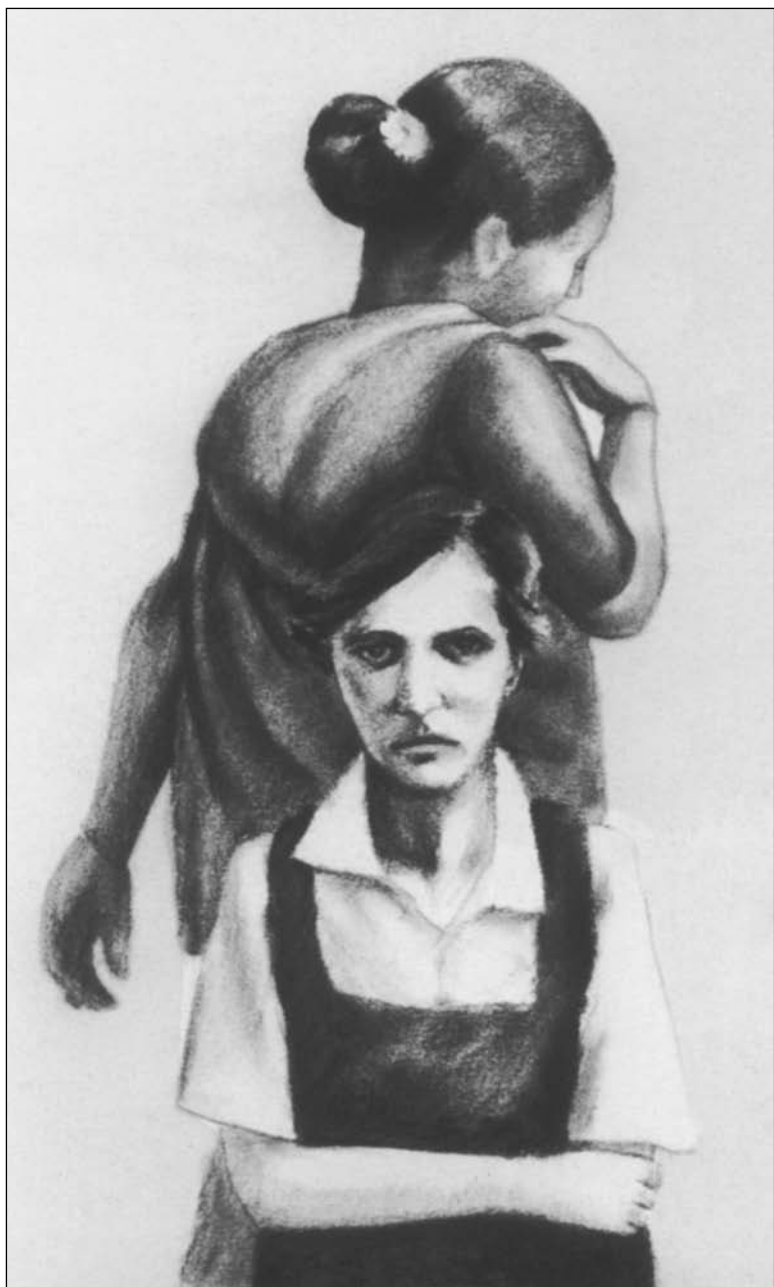
These are the conditions, which in fact are responsible for most of the problems here. If a regular flat system is introduced here, with proper ventilation and water, a lot of health problems would come down.

But from personal experience, I think these cannot be tackled at all. The houses where the sex workers live and work are of private ownership. Hence the Municipal Corporation cannot intervene in it. The private owners are in the least, bothered. I had put forth a proposal for a complex of public toilets, which was the least that could be done. But scarcity of space led to scrapping of the idea.

Water does not reach here. The pipelines have to be replaced, but that would take years, if at all it is to be done. The garbage pickers would be a lot less interested or bothered in cleaning up these lanes, than what they would be elsewhere. Naturally, the living conditions are not hygienic, contributing to the hazardous conditions they live in.

IV
**Looking in the Mirror
of Culture**
**Representations of
prostitution**

Edited by
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V. Kalyan Shankar



20

The veshyā, the ganika and the tawaif

*Representations of prostitutes and
courtesans in Indian language, literature
and cinema*

GAYATRI CHATTERJEE

The circumstances of the contemporary prostitute might be distinct from those in the past; but literary and cinematic representations continue to be steeped in traditional perception, verbalization and visualization, all well established and sanctioned by the society. Today, she might be a citizen of the Indian state, part of the democracy, with the right to vote and liable to be judged in a civil court; but this makes little difference to her social status.¹ Additionally, the representation-narration around the prostitute continues to tell old tales, seldom revealing the tremendously varied and complex histories behind women now held under one blanket term *prostitute*.

First and foremost, the paper bases itself upon the premise that there is no one group of women involved here. Going further, it seeks to highlight the fact that behind the formation and existence of these groups of women lies vast and varied social, economic, cultural and political circumstances. And the retrieval of those lost histories (even if partial or incomplete) requires an investigation into terms coined to mark 'such women' and the history of their linguistic coinage. Interestingly, the retrieval of this history also requires rigorous survey into the history of literary representation. There has been a long tradition of seeing *language* and *representation* as tools for the perpetuation of social inequalities. Though that is true, we now also realize

that the production of material history is closely linked with the production of language, literature and arts—that the investigation of one leads to the other. The histories of linguistic *coinage* and the changing course of words and their meanings are important to know what practices are *in currency* at what time. What the paper ultimately establishes is that the history of the ‘prostitute’ forms an important chapter in the history of *work and woman*.

The study shows that to begin with, all these women forming various groups were indicated by different word-coinage. They were professional women or were often treated as such. The more they lost their right to work, the more they had to resort to ‘prostitution’. They are *patita* or fallen women—what they have fallen from is actually their professional status. Early facts and realities are all obliterated now, replaced by a ghettoization of ‘all such women’ into being only sex workers and the rise of social and moral discourse around them.

Three words *veshyā*, *ganika* and *tawaiif* are chosen in this article, which begins with an inquiry into the etymologies behind each term, followed by a survey of representation-narration of the women belonging to these groups—today all seen as ‘prostitute’.² Coming from Sanskrit, the word *veshyā* stands for a prostitute in most Indian languages (there surely are other local terms; this is mostly used for formal or literary purposes). The other two words *ganika* and *tawaiif* are not in use any more, as that particular social situations in which they existed are no more.³ Nevertheless, they remain important because of their continuous representation in films of all regions and languages.

It is through the continuous use of language and reproduction of representation that societies maintain their *status quo*, which in this case is an aggregate of opinions and facts: there is *one kind of women* who sell sexual favours; they live—this they must—outside the purview of the society; they are morally inferior to *all* members of the mainstream society—which *is* the reason why they are ‘outside’. Though they are of *one kind*, they do not actually make up any caste, class or community—they are women who might or might not stay together (mostly they do). They might have some of their own rules of cluster formation. More commonly, these women belong to *a house* ruled by *a matriarchal* figure and so are socially and economically governed by each house-rule; in all other ways they are outside the patriarchal society.⁴ The only transaction they have with the mainstream society is when men visit them (for a short span of time) for sexual purposes; the women of the mainstream society have nothing to do with them.

The Words

The Sanskrit term *veshyā* comes from the root word *vesh* (or *vish*) carrying the following meanings: a settler; small farmer, tenant, vassal, neighbour, dependent, a house, dwelling, and also the house of women of ill-repute.⁵ *Veshya* (masculine) is a neighbourhood, dependence, vassalage or a house of ill-fame. *Veshyā* (feminine)—a prostitute, harlot and courtesan. It is interesting that only the feminine coinage has survived and expanded in use, while the masculine derivation of *vesh* dropped off due to little usage.

As is so often the case in Sanskrit and other classical languages, a root word is a source spring for several words, meanings and actions; the derivative words might travel away from the root but is seldom completely de-linked. Adopting a mathematical analogy, we can say the root *vesh* has many sub-sets of meanings connected to many acts and activities of mankind: settlement and movement of people; city formation, trade and warfare; matters of private ownership of property and people—all part of civilization activities of mankind. Naturally, they also point to certain de-ontological features of human civilization, for example—the fact of some people owning and controlling the lives of some others.

It goes without saying that the *current* meaning, that they are ‘women of ill-repute’, has been valid for long and continues to remain so. There are ample literary evidences to the fact that for thousands of years men have been able to buy *sex* from women in exchange for *money*. But this means *veshyā* is someone with whom men form economic rather than social relationships. This is about sex, but a very particular situation in which a woman and a man form a temporary relationship based on money (could also be shelter, food and other goods). It is a curious phenomenon: money replacing social considerations, and this happening uniquely for sex. Vatsyayana is not too much in favour of it but says:⁶

Courtesans find sexual pleasure and a natural way of making a living in their sexual relations with men. Doing it for sexual pleasure is natural, and for gain is artificial. But she makes the artificial, too, appear natural; because men trust women who are driven by desire (*Kamasutra* 6: 1.1–2; Doninger & Kakkar 2002).

The effort is to realize that something with a material history is seen uniquely in moral terms. In order to drop that mental straightjacket, it is required to visit the words and their deeper *source meanings*. So, the word *veshyā* hides civilization processes within it and points to a woman who is a new settler, a tenant, partly free and partly enslaved, displaced and owned—she can also

have ‘ill-reputation’ attached to her. We will later see, how this involves the history of women becoming part of a vassal family as a worker in the household. Even if she is owned and the master conducts the sexual act with her, the factors of labour, profession or wage do not get erased.

The two histories, one of women working and making their living, and the other of those earning money out of the sexual act date back to the antiquity. In this chapter, I suggest that the first might have, in many cases, preceded the second history. Just as in a case, when a woman loses her way of earning for herself, she is required to take up prostitution; there is lurking here an entire history of working women, artisan and professional women, which is erased as this other history (that of prostitution) is constructed.

Mainstream history is concerned with the fate of men; women’s history is still to be written. And when it comes to old texts (The *Vedas*, *Upanishads*, the Epics, the *Puranas* and so on), there has been very little attempt to study the common lot of women. Much work has been and still being conducted on her victimization in the hands of men. But unfortunately, we do not know much as yet about the fascinating history of women’s work and profession. We know little of her state of authority and independence within patriarchy. And about the changes in the lives of the women and of her gradual disempowerment, we know even less.

The word *ganika* too is connected with money and profession, people and settlement. It is derived from *gaṇa*—groups of people in general or small republics and settlements in particular. The other meaning involved here is that of counting (hence *gaṇanā* or counting). Distinctly different from the common whore as seen in some texts, *ganikas* were part of the state and remunerated for her services to the King. She is a clearly recognizable professional identity amidst the working class (Bhattacharya 1987). Her place could be lower than the doorkeeper—*dwarika* or *darvan* or she could be one of the most moneyed and powerful persons in the state or the city.

The *Arthashastra* of Kautilya (250–300 BC) throws much light on the economic and legal systems around the figure of the *ganika*. She received, on an average, a yearly income of one thousand *pana*; if her services were complicated or arduous, she could employ an assistant. Her property went to her female relatives after her death (*Arthashastra* 2.27).⁷ The *ganikas* were divided into three categories: *uttama*, *madhyama* and *kanishtha*. The remunerations were determined according to a woman’s physical attributes and working skills. There are numerous evidences of educated *ganikas* endowed with artistic talents and conversational skills. Some were trained in dancing *nitta* or *nritya* (technically executed classical form of dance and the same along with expression and acting). Some were trained in singing,

playing of musical instruments or painting. The girls were selected early in life to be trained in the art or work she would be allotted later in life. Some were taught psychology and the divination of other peoples' character and tendencies. Kautilya provides the figures of remunerations of teachers who came to teach these women.

The fact that the etymology of the words, *veshyā* and *ganika* commonly indicates the same civilizational activities could seem as a happy coincidence. But truly amazing is the fact that it is the same for the third term *tawa'if* too, belonging to the Arabic language (Arbi) and also to Persian (Fārsi). The root word in Arabic *ṭawf* means all of these—to move around, travel, run around, wander, and even circumambulation. The singular derivative word *tawa'ufa* formed from this root is—people, sect, number, band of people or nomads, and even, party or faction. In the plural, it is *tawa'if*: In Arabic, it means a band of dancing girls, and also a special kind of dancing girl.⁸ With the rise of court culture, she would come to mean a courtesan, who excels in dancing, etiquette, and poetry (*Tawaif* thus becomes a generic term for dancing girls and hence the collapse of the plural form to mean a single person). The Arabic courtesan *came to* India over centuries—bringing her songs and poetry, her formal refined ways, her fierce loyalty to people of her choice as well as other intrigue, reaching out for more power, money and material goods. In Persian, one of the dictionary meanings of the word *tawaif* is prostitute, a meaning found in India as well. Salim Kidwai writes in his introduction to his translation of the autobiography of the legendary singer Mallika Pukhraj:

The choice of the term singing ladies, *ganewali*, is a considered one. This is because the term *tawaif* accumulated over time moralistic, value-loaded connotations, which forced these golden-throated, articulate and often sharp-tongued ladies into silence. When they did speak, they had to reinvent themselves through polite myths to reinforce their self-esteem, which had consistently been battered by references to them as fallen and dangerous women. They had to constantly camouflage their personas, a process crucial for making them into the legends that they were (Kidwai 2003).

According to Malek Chebel, there were two main groups of the courtesan in the medieval Islamic countries. One was the governess, in charge of royal and elite children. Coming from the family of slaves, they were attached to a particular family—often extremely loyal and devoted to the upbringing of children. They would become very influential within the household and were active actors in the drama of succession and inheritance. We see them in India as well and in the use of the term *dhai-ma*. The other group of courtesans

according to Chebel was the singer, denoted uniformly by the term *kayna* or *quaina* (Chebel 1999). Interestingly, he does not mention *tawaif*, neither in his book on the history of Arabic refinement, nor in his *Encyclopaedia of Love*. A better investigation into the history of the *tawaif* in the Persian and Arabic cultures would throw more light into her history in India.

Culling History Out of Literature: Fiction and Non-Fiction

We could begin by enquiring into the settings in which women worked or were employed, and from where they were they procured. Through literary evidences, I will try to delineate a few ways this happened. For example, in the epic the *Ramayana*, when *Ramchandra* of Ayodhya gets married, the bride *Sita*'s father King *Janaka* provides many gifts at the time of her departure with the groom. 'Then that king *Janaka* of Mithila, the one from *Videha* lineage, gave innumerable patrimonial riches. He has also given umpteen number of cows, millions of excellent shawls and silk dresses, and elephants, horses, chariots, foot soldiers, besides hundreds of highly decorated girls, divine in their mien, as unexcelled chambermaids and handmaidens to the brides (1-74-3, 4, 5a).⁹ Surely the count 'hundreds of' is euphemistic and connotative of plenty, and certainly a large number is meant. What happened to these women? They are put to various chores according to their physical and intellectual attributes and abilities to perform tasks (as per their early training).

In the seventh century novel *Kadambari* by Banabhatta (Kale, 1967a) the king's palace is filled with the *rajvilasinis*—they are present in every narrative space—the court, the bathing, eating and resting chambers of the king and the queen. The opening of the novel follows the king's daily activity and we find the *rajvilasinis* performing various chores—some fan the king with the *chaamar* or fan made out of the Yak-tail; some crush the *amlaki* (a citrus berry) on the king's scalp before his bath; some bring to him a smoking object meant to be inhaled after food and cleanse the breath. Later in the book, we see them performing similar tasks for the queens. Standing behind the king, the group of the *rajvilasinis* is an ornamental decorative element of the court, forming a *body* of physical beauty and material wealth and providing a background of plentitude to the king. Additionally, they form a protective ring around him—her importance lies in the fact that, given the continuous activity of de-throning one king and bringing in another, a king could only trust a few *rajvilasinis* for his very existence.

Young and old women came into a palace as spoils of wars. One day, accompanied by a woman of astonishingly striking beauty and personality, the old chamberlain of the palace approaches the Prince Chandrapida. Her name is Chitrakleha and the chamberlain has brought her up as his daughter, after she came into the palace following the defeat of her father at the hands of the King. The old man tells the young prince—‘Now I send her to you, thinking she is now fit to be your betel-box bearer. The long-living one should not see her as an ordinary servant (Kale 1967a: 164–165)’. Chitrakleha likes the prince immediately and ‘becomes his shadow’; she is playful and open with him and she advises him appropriately whenever needed. Perhaps this is the sole instance in Sanskrit literature of such friendship between a man and a woman. Perhaps, the relationship is not one of a modern equity between the sexes (which too, is seldom perfect and ideal); but the place of Chitrakleha in *Kadambari* surely equals those of other women characters of noble status.

Women across periods, both ancient and medieval, would get displaced, traded and sold, offered in gift or looted as part of the spoils of war. Displacement could mean migration to a distant location or within a small periphery of land and neighbourhood. These unaccompanied women would be admitted into other households and put to various tasks. It would not be quite right to think they were sent in order to satisfy only the sexual desires of the male members of the family. And besides, pleasure does not only mean sexual pleasure.

Banabhatta calls the women *rajvilāsini* and not *ganikā* and he is speaking only of the palace. Perhaps the latter word for him has a clear connotation of a prostitute. But Kautilya speaks of all women workers in the palace as *ganika*—for him the two words are completely interchangeable.

According to her physical capabilities, a woman would carry drinking vessels, the king’s umbrella, fan, tent or seat. Some rode with him in his chariot. The bodyguard-women were taught to fight with swords and bamboo-rods. Many of these women were trained to spy for the King. The King would at times send her to other kingdoms to please a friend or ally or to spy upon a potential enemy. Some women were put to administrative as well as financial work involving palace management.¹⁰ Even those who did not maintain accounts were asked to be meticulous about personal accounts; they were fined if they did. When past her prime, the dancer or the horse-women could be retired to work in the kitchen or the coffer (accounts department). Though in Banabhatta’s *Kadambari* and Kalidasa’s play *Abhijnana Shakuntalam* (Kale 1967) we see some men visiting or attending the King in the inner chambers, those premises by and large were barred from the entry of men (only a few were allowed even into the outer chambers).

The term *avaruddha* signifies that palace-women belonged to the inner chambers, where, according to Kautilya, no man apart from the king was allowed. According to Daud Ali, all palace women were *avaruddha*, not allowed to venture out (Ali, 2006). But examples could be quoted from literature to counter this argument. In *Harshacharita*, there is a portrayal of a lady riding a horse in order to deliver a love-letter. Banabhatta (7th century AD), who has created the most exceptional women characters in Sanskrit literature, shows Mahashweta in Kadambari freely roaming around everywhere.

Working women had certain freedom of movement that the royal ladies did not. Even if certain workers were allowed out to the outer chambers and the court, the queens and princesses remained confined in the inner precincts. Those who excelled in some craft could go out to make purchases; she could occasionally sell her wares independently. The royal ladies had little opportunities to be all on their own—the literary representation of women venturing out to a palace garden all alone could very well be the representation of rare happenings or the products of the imagination.

Thus, these women learnt to use the power structure within the palace—and at times even outside. This could be a superb example of how women are used to create stronger systems of patriarchy. But this is also instructive of how the same system survives on creating multiple situations within it and how some women benefited from it. And thus some of these women enjoyed great physical freedom, which she would use with fierce loyalty for the master she served or with equally fierce desire to serve her own self-interest.

Some tasks were labour-intensive, as well as requiring skill and patience—the preparation of perfumes and oils and the art and technique of massage, taking out cotton from cottonseed, the preparation of thread from the coot, weaving and dying. A woman might teach her set of skills to her daughter—the daughter, who unlike the mother, would have more freedom to sell her ware.

Not only is she a professional woman, but also a tax-paying citizen—she is the *citoyenne*. One difference between the *rajvilasini* and the *ganika* is that the latter could be found outside the palace too. The list of her benefits and punishable acts according to Kautilya runs long. Many *ganikas* lived outside the palace; some were chosen or rose to special positions of prominence. They were so beautiful, skilled and intelligent, that they were chosen to be available to the city in various capacities—people of certain prominence and excellence gathered in her house. She is addressed in Sanskrit and Pali as—*janapada-kalyāni* doing good to the settlement, or *nagar-shobhini* increasing the lustre of the city. Or she is the *nagar-vadhu* or the town/city-wife. Important is the

term settlement and city (*nagar*) attached to these appellations. Most took this position seriously and hence they donated money for the betterment of the city—the laying of roads, digging of wells or paving of the steps leading down to the local water-body, ponds and rivers.

There are numerous evidences in the form of copper plate inscriptions of the *ganika* as owning private property or enjoying state-owned ones. For example, the tenth century inscription on the Kandhar copperplate found in Marathwada, Maharashtra (*Epigraphica India* 105, 114) says that a temple belonging to a Satavahana king (939–967 AD) was situated at the gate leading to the houses of important courtesans attached to the Court.¹¹ Accounts of the *ganika* donating money generously to Hindu temples or Buddhist and Jain Viharas are not negligible. The Mathura copperplates mention eight *ganikas* donating money to Jain *viharas* or monasteries (*Jaina shila-lekha samgraha, Epigraphica Indica*, Vol. 2). Important for this article is the fact they are enlisted along with men identified by their artisanship or profession (and not caste).

The *ganika* is also a key figure at the time of political turmoil, and in religious discourses. One historical *ganika*, *Amrapali*, has been very popular and her stories retold down the centuries. Amrapali belonged to the prosperous city of Vaishali and Varanasi as well. Ashvaghosha (1 C.E) recounts in his *Buddhacharita* (or the life of Buddha) that a few days before his death, Buddha was travelling and met Amrapali, who invited him for a meal in her house. A little later, a Brahman, also met him and similarly invited Buddha; but the seer refused because of having already accepted Amrapali's invitation. This, for sure, infuriated the elite; but established some equity for the marginal. Later Amrapali became a monk and entered the monastery.¹²

Carnality and asceticism is the theme of some of the Jataka stories too (Bhagavat 1992). Men and women, both are capable of doing good and bad deeds; both proceed towards enlightenment (even if that means taking many births)—of course, there are more stories of the *Boddhisatva* doing good deeds and attaining wisdom than there are of women who became monks. The stories exhibit the impermanence of the material world—and who better possesses all that but a king, a businessman (*shreshthi* or *setti*) or a *ganika*. And so the heroes and heroines mostly belong to these classes (the stories are also written for them). Some of these stories are remarkable in that the *ganika* strides the two poles—extreme physical beauty, artistic skill and/or sharp intellect, creature comforts and political power, and then renouncing all that for the pursuit of spiritual riches.

What emerges from this is: (1) There were those whose sole occupation was to perform sexual acts with men; (2) there were those who were employed

for various kinds of work (who may or may not be involved in the sexual act); (3) and there were those who were in possession of artistic and intellectual skills along with great physical beauty. So, there were the common prostitutes and the famed courtesans; there were those who held important social and political positions and enjoyed wealth, and there were those who didn't. To understand this it is useful to visit historical sites like the ruins of the Vijayanagar Empire (1336–1565 AD) in South India. The Suli (or *shuri*) *bazaar* near the impressive Pampati temple in Hampi bears testimony to the great number of prostitutes who served the huge population of merchants and others living there or visiting the city. These *common* prostitutes lived and worked from the rows of one-room tenements—just as we see today.¹³ On the other hand, Paes and Nuez, contemporary Portuguese travellers to the Vijayanagar Empire have chronicled the status of the *raj-ganikas* in the court—the only ones with the power to sit by the King and chew *paan* and betel-nut (Sewell 1962).

A most enduring verbal expression for prostitution has been to mark it as the world's 'most ancient profession'. This is truly laughable. The saying makes this profession *sui generis*; as if there was a profession when there were none others. Profession it certainly was in many ways and degrees and they were placed along with others of the artisan and similar classes—and many of these artisans and working classes were women of certain independent means. It would be denying that prior to coming to this 'oldest profession', women were working in other professions.¹⁴ The history we are trying to recuperate is a history of the erasure of working women and the emergence of the prostitute as the only category of women who work for money. Once the task of the erasure of the working women is complete, the binary is created between the prostitute and the wife—a *woman who does not work* (sic).

A special medieval feature

There is something in the literature in local (vernacular) languages absent in the early court literature in Sanskrit—the presence of working women. Though there is much representation of the common folks in the *Prakrit* or old Tamil literature, there is no representation of women workers: the concept of women—young and old as lovers, wives, would-be-wives and other people's wives is what we see.¹⁵ But in the medieval period, we see the gardener-woman—provider of flowers and flower ornaments, who works *outside* and then comes *in*. There is the washerwoman and the dyer, striding the outer world and the world of the courts and palaces. We have not earlier mentioned various other chores women are engaged in—cooking

(pounding, making pastes, husking, serving and the like), painting on walls and floors, perfume making, oils and unguent making, gardening and making flower garlands, weaving and rope making, making pickles and sweetmeat and telling stories.

One reason behind such narrative choice of introducing recognizable working woman characters, giving such a character narrative prominence in the medieval period, is because: a) with the rise of the Bhakti mode of worship the artisan classes (the *shudras* or even untouchables) enjoyed greater visibility; even if their life was not vastly improved, they were more prominently and more often represented; b) the lower class working women played important roles in the pursuit of *obscure religious cults* (Dasgupta 1962).¹⁶ Heterosexual love was an allegory as well as a *modus operandi* or means of realizing God-love—in Tantra and connected or derivative cults.

Many stories of poets, devotees and ascetics are coupled with women—and often from lower castes—and these women are supposed to have led them to their chosen path. These legendary women are seen in relation to the work they did; and they are heroines in the narratives. For example, the washerwoman Rami is important to the legend of the Bhakti poet Chandidas.¹⁷

A large number of religious women, at times only assisting men in their religious pursuits, at times conducting autonomous lives, roamed across the subcontinent. It is known that many medieval sects (related directly or indirectly to *Tantra* and *Tantric* practices) advised religious-sexual practices; some women would be mere sexual partners during worship and ritual—and some not. Working on the history of *Tantra* and religious (mother) cults in the region between Nepal to Bangladesh, Shaman Hartley informs (in a conversation) that, the texts he is studying clearly state which women are meant to be sexual partners—‘those who are *not* called *bhagini* (sister) or *dooti* (messenger).’ Even in the sphere of religion, women might be divided along their status as sexual beings; but then again, they are *svadhinas*, free women. These working and religious women in these narrations are often free agents; they roam freely in the city, so could be an efficient messenger. These women practicing religion were bound by religious dogma and practice; but they enjoyed freedom from societal rulings—and thus enjoyed freedom of movement.

The messenger woman (*dooti*), traversing two spaces—inner and outer—are important agents in narratives in the pre-colonial period, too—for example the gardener woman in *Vidya Sundar* (1752) by Bharatchandra of Bengal.¹⁸ Vidya and Sundar fall in love on seeing each other’s portraits. Sundar from Kanchipuram in Tamil Nadu, arrives *incognito* in Bengal and

is given shelter in the house of a *malini* or gardener. The gardener helps Sunder to visit his lady-love in her bedchambers. If the union of a woman and a man is important and ultimately portending God-love, then the messenger is carrying out an important task.

But gradually, down the colonial period, these free women travelling about, pursuing spirituality, serving people in many ways, during her travels would gradually lose their status; and finally in independent India her fall would be near total. Her figure would become scarce in the public sphere as well as in literature. Many of these women had no recourse but to take to prostitution.¹⁹

The colonial period

The most important for this paper is the erasure of the *tawaif* in the hands of the British.²⁰ The British administrators, trying to cure their soldiers of venereal diseases, came down heavily upon all courtesans (Talwar-Oldenburg, 1990). And since the British period, the reputation of a common prostitute dogs the heels of the *tawaif*. The governmental oppression increased when it was realised that these women enjoyed great wealth and prestige and the officials totally failed to understand that these women were capable of great music. And thus came to an end a great tradition (ibid). Talwar-Oldenburg chronicles the lives of some *tawaifs* in the city of Lucknow a couple of decades ago, but today the *tawaif* is almost disappeared from the public imagination and so from cinema, and in reality she is thought of as a prostitute.

Eighteenth and 19th centuries are the time to look for the ways *veshya* is fully established as morally and socially inferior (Chatterjee 1993). She is an object of horror for people crowding in the cities and bewildered by its many vices—actual and imagined, rumoured and narrated—through a mass of ever-growing body of literature, possible now because of the printing press. She is the site where all the anxieties of the people are projected. A look at Calcutta shows a hectic printing activity around the ‘bodies’ of the singing and dancing girls and the prostitutes. There is excitement as well as dismay about that literature known as *Bat-tala*, an area where most printing presses are situated (Sripantha 1997). This history is best studied by taking note of the acutely bi-polar sentiments the prostitute raises in contemporary hearts and minds; anxiety, horror or disgust on one hand, excitement, curiosity or macho bravado on the other (Banerjee 1993). For the retrieval of this history, we need to look at individual cities, regions and languages.

Cinematic Representations

Cinema has often portrayed the fate of these once refined powerful women associated with the various periods; it will be interesting to note that notwithstanding all the differences, the two major examples, *Umrao Jaan* directed by Muzaffar Ali (1982) and *Pakeezah* directed by Kamal Amrohi (1976) are both based on the decline of the *tawaif*-condition during the British period.

Those who have seen *Pakeezah* tend to say that it is the story of a courtesan named Pakeezah (Meena Kumari). Salim (Raj Kumaar) sees her sleeping in a rail compartment—more precisely her feet—and leaves a note for her. She falls in love with this stranger on reading this note; they accidentally meet and are about to marry; but her reputation follows her and she cannot go through with the wedding. Finally Salim's family accepts her but only after she has danced at his wedding till her feet are bleeding (she lets fall the chandeliers during her mad whirls and continues to dance on broken glass) and her identity revealed to the assembly by her mother's sister (who had brought her up).

However, the film actually begins with the mother Nargis (also Meena Kumari) dancing in a darkened hall, where there might be her clients sitting (in the edges of the frame), but they are hardly visible. Nargis has flaming red hair, indicative of her passions and the foreign blood in her veins—in turn, indicative of a rich and varied background history. A voice over narration (by the director Kamal Amrohi) informs that Nargis harbours a desire for a man with whom she would live, leaving behind the life of a *tawaif*. The camera and *mise en scene* as well as the voice over narration all work together to create a woman character invested with rare subjectivity. Sharing the point of view of the heroine, the audience sees Sahabuddin coming in.²¹ Sahabuddin's father declares 'no prostitute can become a daughter-in-law in my home' and Nargis runs out into the lonely streets in the night. She begins to live alone in a cemetery, where she gives birth to her daughter and dies. Her sister (Beena) rescues the baby girl, names her Saheb-jaan and trains her in the art and life of the *tawaif*.

The first time we see Saheb-jaan, she is dancing on an open terrace. There are no clients-spectators near her and the streets are deserted. That she is an object of audience pleasure becomes clear, when turning to face the camera she sings. 'These people have taken away my veil (meaning: disrobed and shamed me)'. If earlier, the camera gaze had created a subjective position for the mother; now the daughter is identified as the object of gaze, desire and pleasure—through the creation of the scene and the lyrics of the song. Even though, she normally dances in the interior spaces of the house complex

(as we see in all subsequent songs and dance picturizations), here she is dancing on an open portico facing the lanes (living quarters of others like her and the shops that go with this particular kind of buying and selling). But there is no one on the roads—a little into the song, we realise the audience is being addressed as ‘these people’.

Though the mother and the daughter, both are shown as victims of the overriding middle class desire to marry a man (and put an end to the profession), they differ in that, befitting a successful *tawa'if*, the mother possessed the power of volition, strength of character and the desire to act; the aunt and another woman *Goharjan* (Nadira) who too will take Saheb-jaan under her wing are no different.²² But the daughter is portrayed as a typical ‘waiting woman’, and even when Salim takes her away to marry her, she is so queasy about people talking about her past life that she runs away, leaving him distraught. The film, after many melodramatic moments, ends with Saheb-jaan safely ensconced in a household as a housewife.

A notable example of a film about the itinerant street-performer is *Street Singer* of New Theatres (*Phani Majumdar* 1939). When they were children, Manju and Bhulua grew up in the same city and knew each other. Poor orphans, they decided to take the life of the street singers. When they were young, they found themselves in the bustling city of Calcutta. Manju (Kanan Devi) was spotted by a theatre producer and became a star. Bhulua (K.L. Saigal) was employed to help the company with music, but was, otherwise marginalized by the producer who wanted to make Manju his mistress. Though these two young people were living, roaming, working together, they were shown as innocent, engrossed only in their world; they had not become lovers. Manju came to realize how corrupt the film people were and how much she loved Bhulua, when her boss tries to seduce and then coerce her into becoming his mistress. The film ended with Manju joining Bhulua, who had taken to the roads, and they, then becoming street singers again. Films like these are nostalgic about a pre-modern life and indicate a morality that was better than the present one under capitalism and consumerism.

Many films base their representation on the formula—a prostitute might be irresistible, but she causes a man to fall from his moral standards. And so, if a hero visits a prostitute, the purpose often is to signify his downfall. *Devdas* (Barua 1935) is the quintessential film to begin this trend. Devdas (K.L. Saigal) goes to Chandramukhi (Raj Kumari), because of sado-masochist reasons and hence is full of self-contempt (Nandy 2001). And as his own self-esteem dips further he takes to alcohol. In one sequence, he voiced his contempt towards himself as well as her. He refused to have sexual contact or any deeper emotional attachment with her—in fact he declared that he hated

her and smashed a photograph (instead of hitting the person, he broke the image). What this hero then said would resonate in many later films: ‘What I appear to be, I am not; and what I am not, that I am.’²³ If as per idealist beliefs, loving another person is the way of self-realisation, the inability to love is a loss of all sense of the self.

Braving all odds, Parvati (Jamuna Barua) went to Devdas to tell him they should get married; Devdas would only listen to his father and so went away, after writing to her that he had never loved her.²⁴ The story of Devdas is the story of the man who cannot love—neither the beloved who would be wife, nor the prostitute who must not be.²⁵ This abject condition of the selfhood of the hero is offset, in this film, by the depiction of the two women characters split into a binary: wife and whore—both in possession of unshaken strength of character and the power to love with steadfastness. Because of her love for him, Chandramukhi gave up her profession and along with it her money, house and security. A friend asked her the reason for going away to live in a village. She replied that she has pawned off all her ornaments and that would yield an interest of twenty rupees per annum. The amount was insufficient for her subsistence in the city of Calcutta but enough for a quiet life in the village. But again, when Chandramukhi got to know that Devdas was ill, she was able to return quietly to the city and take up her profession once again.

Parvati, on the other hand goes from a simple life of the daughter of a poor Brahmin to being the wife of a rich zamindar. She is relieved in one way when her husband forfeits his *sexual rights* over her (realizing he has committed a ‘mistake’ by marrying a girl as young as his daughter). Free of such a painful situation, Parvati can move on to loving him, his family, his household and the village beyond. Since her step-daughter was unhappy about her father’s marriage, Parvati gave away all her gold to the girl and won her over. She managed the household accounts (there is more than one scene in this film of her discussing financial matters with her stepson, a servant, and a staff in her husband’s office). And at the same time, through all this she continued to love Devdas. She was free enough to suggest to him, when he fell ill that he should come and stay in her house so she could take care of him. Barua took the traditional bi-polar pairing wife-whore and unites them in a show of woman’s power to make a statement about the disempowerment of men in colonial India. Recently, Sanjay Leela Bhansali would push this further to create a representational mutation: that of the wife-whore, Parvati-Chandramukhi dancing together in his version of *Devdas* (2002).

The three terms *veshyā*, *ganika* and *tawaif* in the title of this paper are indicative of the multiplicity of their history. A filmmaker, knowing the

three are separate, might make a film especially about a *ganika*, like *Amrapali* (Tandon, 1967), or about a *tawaif*, like *Pakeezah* (Amrohi, 1976) or about a *veshya*, like *Chameli* (Bhandarkar, 2000). There does exist some awareness amongst some people that a *courtesan* is different from a *common prostitute*; but what that difference is might not be clear. In some films the outer iconography of the courtesan (the costume, the dialogue, the modes of singing and dancing, etc) could be different but their narrative fate is the same—for example, in *Mukaddar Ka Sikandar* (1978), an important female protagonist of the film Zohra (Rekha) could be a *tawaif*—a professional singing-dancing woman—or she could be a prostitute. There is a lack of clarity in the representation, which could be the result of ignorance or the result of a tradition of representation.²⁶

There are many films in which the blurring is part of the elements of *masala* that Indian popular or mainstream cinema is allegedly famous and popular for. In *Amar Prem* (Shakti Samanta 1971), Pushpa (Sharmila Tagore) sang as if she were a *tawaif*, but in some other respects, the narration treated her as if she were a common prostitute (with comfortable material existence). In the original Bengali version, *Nishi-padma* (Aravinda Mukerjee 1970) however, Pushpa is clearly a prostitute. In both versions of this text, the heroine was someone's wife; when her husband had married a second time, she was required to come (tricked into coming) to the city and become a prostitute. In *Amar Prem*, according to the Bombay film formula, the protagonist was required to sing like a courtesan; what is ignored is the fact that an early training is required to be able to sing properly according to the tradition of whichever school or house of courtesans or *tawaif* she belonged to or had been admitted into. In *Amar Prem*, songs she sang, like *raina beet jaaye* are meant to be evocative of the image of the *tawaif*. This image is then added on to the saga of the pathetic life of a wronged housewife reduced to being a common prostitute—and later further reduced to penury and washing vessels in houses.

Interestingly in the case of both these film characters Zohra and Pushpa, what makes them 'pathetic' is their middle-class romantic desires and aspirations—to love and marry a man. Indian films since its inception and till a couple of decades ago served up the middle-class discourses; a favoured topic was the monochromatic woman—loving and living, singing and dancing with the sole desire to fall in love and marry. The prostitute provided the polar opposite of the housewife. In the case of the above two films, Zohra, the prostitute wants to be a wife to Sikandar, but must drink poison and die in his arms; Pushpa the housewife must become a prostitute, then be a sort

of wife to Anand babu and then finally admitted and adopted back into the middle-class society as a mother.

Bereft of social complexities, films have created two polar representations of women—the wife and the prostitute. The prostitute is impure, and the wife pure; but the latter is in perpetual sorrow, for her husband regularly visits an impure woman. He does not become impure with the contact of an impure being; and remains a God for the wife; he has merely fallen for a fallen woman and deserves to be saved from that situation. This is shown *adequately* and with certain sarcasm in the Bengali novel (1952) by Bimal Mitra adapted to films twice: *Sahib, Bibi, Golam* (Kartik Chattopadhyay, Bangla 1957) and *Sahib Bibi aur Ghulam* (*Master, Mistress and Knave*, Guru Dutt Hindi 1962).

Carrying a cup filled with some water Bhutnath (the Knave) comes to his master (the Sahib) who is watching a dancing-girl perform; the sahib must dip his toes in the water so his wife would drink this water-made-sacred before breaking her day-long fast in the evening. This is about the downfall of the feudal class; their habits of keeping dancing women, kite-flying, getting cats married with pomp and all this accompanied by visible show of money being spent, are markers for the decadence of that class (and the rise in the social prominence of the merchant class in Bengal).²⁷ The two separate actions—watching a dancing girl dance, hearing a singer sing or listening to a *tawaif* reciting refined verses is equated with going to the prostitute.²⁸

In *Sahib, Bibi aur Ghulam*, the dancing girl is an expensive singing-dancing woman with her own band of musical accompanists and subordinate dancers. She is seductive, her exterior beauty has an immediate exchange value and she is sexually proactive. But there is no representation of her as a refined person; the vacuity of her inner being is signified through an absence of representation. We will never know if she is a woman of heart and mind, whether she is emotionally and loyally attached to the master.

The Chhoti-bahu in the film (Meena Kumari) is extremely beautiful; her name Pateshwari means a goddess painted on a *pat* (paper or canvass). She is beautiful inside, too—intelligent and humourous, bold and stubborn. Her tragedy is, as she has not produced heir, her husband is not interested in her physical beauty and sexual needs and the rest of the household is unconcerned about her virtues. Chhoti-bahu wants to be seductive to keep her man at home—for which she is rebuked for trying to act as a ‘woman of the market’.

Given the prostitute’s position outside the ethical, social and geographic domain of mainstream society, there has also been an enduring penchant for telling her stories and creating her image. There are sub-categories within the

stereotype of the figure of the prostitute; and one of them is ridiculously called the 'golden-hearted whore'. The implication is that she is 'normally' not a nice person; but, the 'golden-hearted prostitute' lives for the hero sacrificing her earlier life and happiness in order to give the man back to the wife or just sacrificing her own and saving the hero's life. Though the audience might feel good about shedding some tears for the unfortunate woman, they are also relieved that the social order is re-inscribed.

There is an unwritten law that a boy must visit a prostitute and lose his virginity in his early youth so he can be a 'full man'; a man must do so before he gets married so he should have some skill and be able to perform on his wedding night; a man must do so because that is his only way of emotional release—there being no other means of healthy diversion and places to go to in a city. *Mera Naam Joker* shows the young hero visiting one, but being repulsed and scared; this may be a partial view but this is a rare representation of a social reality.

Raj Kapoor and Guru Dutt have given some unusual representations of the common prostitute. They have used differently the usual need to show the prostitute as uncouth and graceless, quarrelsome and ruthlessly selfish. Poor health and living conditions might make a woman look drawn or ill and some films demonstrate that—for example *Aag* and *Pyasa*. It is heart-rending to see these films today and to know that the extras acting in those roles in fact suffered from malnutrition; the filmmakers used that fact to portray an under-nourished and over-worked sex worker. In *Aag*, while auditioning the hero Kewal, a theatre director, must select an actress amongst such women; and he does find one (Nargis). Seeing her almost abnormal state, he assumes she should be able to adequately portray the social ills he wants to highlight through his plays, but is disappointed when, once established as the leading lady of a theatre company, she is less interested in theatre and more in having a romantic, sexual relationship with the director.

In *Pyasa*, Vijay is a poor struggling poet and so, marginalized by society. In the beginning of the film, he rejects a prostitute Gulab and blames the national leaders who should be relieving the society of such misery. But at the end of the film, the marginalized hero walks out of the society holding the hands of the socially marginalized prostitute. Incidentally, even in this film, there is a hint of Gulab's antecedents lying in the rich former history of the *tawaif*; she, in fact, is the only person in the narrative who appreciates poetry for itself and not for some other reasons.

The changing situations of the *ganikas* and the *tawaifs*, the shrinking of the population of professional women, the rise of prostitution as an alternative before a woman in distress—form a part of the colonial history and

the creation a *different* subjectivity. The above films point to a pre-colonial psyche through their evocations of the heterosexual couple in the pre-colonial era. These portrayals might be idealized, romanticized and flawed. But they do point at a collective memory, as if it were, of a time when women had an active role in the socio-cultural fabric of the land. If most men and women feel fierce antagonism towards the prostitute, if men exercise immense hypocrisy while entering into sexual-monetary relationship with some women, but otherwise refuse to acknowledge her existence, then such spirit of antagonism, hate and hypocrisy must be seen as part of the modern psyche.

Notes

1. Not all enjoy this privilege: for some it has come easily, some have fought and earned the right to vote; and for some this is yet to come (*The Indian Express* 23 January 2007).
2. I need to record here that: the investigation into literary sources is far from satisfactory; that medieval literature of all languages (all major languages) at least, needs to be looked into in depth, which is sadly lacking. I have looked only a few ancient/medieval Sanskrit texts and some Bengali medieval ones. This is deemed sufficient for the main purpose of this article here.
3. Sanskrit and other Indian languages have over hundreds of years coined numerous terms to denote the prostitute. These words are reflective of attitudes, situations, biases, world-views and social conditions prevalent at several points of time in history. Please refer to Apte, Sahni in this volume for this discussion.
4. Interestingly they are cremated not outside as are untouchables, but in *mainstream* crematoria—and so that would make them as *touchable* and not *untouchable*. I am grateful to Probal Dasgupta for pointing this out.
5. Another word that has evolved out of this root is *vaishya* or the merchant, who have well-determined *varna* or *kula*. Another word *vishaya* means property.
6. The sage Vatsyayana, who wrote the sex manual *Kama Sutra*, was not much in favour of the citizens (the *nagaras*) visiting the *veshyā*. He does not advise his readers or audiences to take up with one, but does 'instruct men how to be suitable sex clients by observing certain proprieties within the relationship'.
7. I have consulted a recent abridged translation in Bangla by Sukumar Sikdar (2004).
8. I am grateful to Ayesha Irani for her help with the reading of Urdu and Persian dictionaries.
9. This translation is available in South Asian study resources compiled by Frances Pritchett, Columbia University.
10. In *Kadambari* we see some selected men coming into the outer chambers of the palace, where the King spent resting hours of the day.

11. The inscription explains the temple to be at the *pradhān rājvilāsini phātak*. I am grateful to Shobhana Gokhale for providing me this information.
12. Several films have been made on Amrapali and the most lavishly made *Amrapali* (Lekh Tandon 1978) typically concentrates on the body and soul, carnality and renunciation dualism. Amrapali is shown as a proud courtesan, having a passionate love affair with Ajatashatru, the King of Magadha (1 C.E.), and later embracing renunciation. The film does not do justice to her economic and spiritual capabilities, as it borrows from Acharya Chaturseña's novel *Vaishali Ki Nagarbadhu* that is so symptomatic of the 20th century novels' engagement with questions of morality and dichotomies like the body and soul, desire and renunciation. Films like *Amrapali* are a mix of early tales and modern novels and a similar example is *Chitrakleha* (Kidar Sharma 1964), based on the novel of the same name by Bhagavati Charan Varma. This is Kidar Sharma's remake of his own *Chitrakleha* made in 1941; regrettably that earlier film is lost.
13. Perhaps, it is euphemism to call those rows of small eight by eight feet area marked by four pillars a 'room'. Curtains made up the walls.
14. Perhaps, what is hidden here, is also the history of women inventing and founding agriculture, pottery and textile and then becoming a secondary actor in those professions. This paper cannot go into the discussion of those histories.
15. Perhaps there are some exceptions to this we must comb the entire literature and find.
16. Another example of the early tradition of describing working women in literature is found in the works of the *Riti-kaal* poets in Hindi, like Rahim and Behari, who wrote verses describing women from different parts of the land that is India today (supposedly all living in the city the poets belonged to); they also created verses about women of various professions: barber, oil-presser, washer-woman, gardener.
17. There are four poets with the same name Chandidas and belonging to different centuries. Scholars are not fully clear about each identity. The Chandidas of the film belonged to the 14th century Bengal. The film is made in two languages Bengali and Hindi—both of which are available today. In the famous New Theatres film *Chandidas* (Nitin Bose 1934), the hero (Durgadas Bandopadhyay) teaches in a school, propagates Vaishnavism, *the new* religion of love and writes verses about the love of Radha and Krishna. He has a friend and admirer in the washerwoman Rami (Uma Shashi).
18. The text is the regional adaptation of the *Chaurpanchashika* or the *Lover Thief* by Billhan written in the 11th century.
19. The British banned many of these sects (Briggs 1924). The figure of the *Bhairavi* belonging to *Tantra*, for example, can still be seen in places like Ujjain (M.P.) or Kamakkhya (Assam). But she has dropped out of mainstream imagination—and hence her disappearance from literature and cinema.
20. For the murky and heartbreaking history behind the disappearance of the *tawaiif* see Vidya Rao and Salim Kidwai's introduction to Mallika Pukhraj's autobiography. The change occurred mainly after the coming of the British, who cracked down heavily on these women, stripping them of property and power for reasons of morality. Firstly, the British, of course could not understand how

these houses could be source of good music. Secondly, like a French salon, the intellectuals gathered in the house of the courtesan; soon these became hubs of anti-British activities. Another source of change was the Privy Council by which the heads of small principalities lost their property after independence and the *tawaif* lost her patrons. The rise of nationalism was another reason for the fall of the tradition. The nationalist leaders (inheriting their morality from the British) barred many from continuing their singing in the modern India. This came to a peak when it was impossible for them to continue singing as a profession. The modern means were barred; they would not, for example, sing on All India Radio. In this period, because of continuous urban migration, the cities became more and more prosperous and small towns and former cities impoverished. In large numbers dancing and singing women took to prostitution. Films came and the *tawaifs* were under pressure to sing film music. The story of the decline of this section of women came to a final close.

21. This goes against the feminist observation that mainstream cinema mostly initiates the male-gaze—or the man/hero is the bearer of the look. There are many Indian films in which the woman is the one to initiate the act of looking or gazing.
22. In *Umrao Jaan*, too, we see the mother of the house where Umrao (Rekha) grows up, to be a *tawaif* shown as a very strong dignified matriarch (Shaukat Azmi).
23. *Jo main hun, woh main nabi hun; aur jo main nabi hun, woh main hun!*
24. This is clearly stated in the letter in the *Bangla* version of the film.
25. Even ancient texts like the play *Mricchakatika* or the *Clay Cart* by Shudraka show the dichotomous attitude and the pitting the image of wife against that of the *ganika*.
26. Zohra is often addressed as a *prostitute* whenever the film is discussed (Rajadhyaksha 1999).
27. Based on this work, a television sequel was also made recently; and as I write this, plans for another film version has been launched.
28. The singing mode, voice, style of these women had filled early film music, for example in the voice of Kanan Devi, Shamsad Begam, Suraiya, etc. Gradually, the singing voice of women in films, fifties onwards would be required to be virginal, innocent, submissive; the logic of binary creation (of good-woman/bad-woman) will create the other kind of songs: the song of the vamp. This is exhibited in the way from the late fifties (of the 20th century) onwards Lata Mangeshkar and Asha Bhonsle began to occupy these two polarity, monopolized the singing world of Hindi film music and fixed them (the binary mode) in the hearts and minds of listeners.

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21

What does a language have to say?

Words for prostitution in Marathi vocabulary

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Cultural traits are mirrored through language. The vocabulary of a language develops through coinage, borrowing from other languages and cultures as well as preservation from different cultural and historical contexts. Words that emerge as a result reflect the subtler nuances of these contexts in which they have emerged.

Marathi, a language with a history that dates back to over 700 years, and which is currently the language spoken in Maharashtra, has accumulated over 200 words that are synonymous to a 'fallen' woman, or a *veshya* (prostitute). The objective of this study was to identify words that signified heterosexual relations beyond the marital framework, to identify and categorize these words synonymous with a fallen woman. The aim of the research includes the study of the etymology of some of the words and their linguistic acculturation, as also to find the changing connotations that the words acquired over time.

Kodava, a language spoken in southern India (Rajyashree, 2001), does not have a single word for a fallen woman or a prostitute. Such an institution does not exist among the people speaking that language. Marathi, on the other hand, has accumulated a wealth of words, indicative of the fact that there were many overt and covert ways to express sexual relations outside the institution of marriage. In a traditional patriarchal society, the moral code of conduct was strict, particularly in case of women. The slightest deviation

or even mere suspicion was considered sufficient to label a woman as a *vyabhichaarinee* (a fallen woman), the meaning of which is given as a *veshya* (a prostitute). From this has emerged a plethora of words, which in addition to their intrinsic meanings have also acquired the additional meaning of a fallen woman, or a prostitute.

Why so many words for a prostitute or a *vyabhichaarinee* (a fallen woman)? Beyond the singular monolith of marriage existed a finer differentiation of heterosexual relationships, all of which were different from each other and words needed to be created to express this differentiation. The contexts in which many of such words emerged have now become oblivious, but the words continued to exist with the meanings that they acquired.

Methodology

As part of an earlier research project on Pune's sex workers (Apte, 2002), the authors came across some 20 words in Marathi that meant either a prostitute or a loose woman. Looking at those words it was realized that each word expressed a slightly different shade of meaning. It was also found that the words were used interchangeably and were under a broad category indicating a prostitute or *veshya*. This led the authors to a more comprehensive exploration with the help of an eight-volume lexicography written in the first half of the 20th century (Date et al., 1934). This exploration resulted in an even larger number of synonymous words (more than 200). It was felt that the dictionary was a part of a heritage that documented the wealth of words, and words that may not be use today but still did exist in the dictionary.

In order to understand the meanings of these words it was felt necessary to look into the history of prostitution in India and also at some of the ways in which women could be classified as 'fallen'. This study does not really follow the classical research design, because it entails searching through secondary data and a descriptive documentation of evidences found in the literature. The analysis presented here is based on deductive logic.

Categories of Words Denoting a 'Fallen' Woman

Exploring the words, and their meanings, some commonalities could be identified across clusters of words. In some cases these were words to distinctly denote the 'other' as different from the 'wedded', as in case of the mistresses

and keeps. This cluster of words is perhaps the only one that directly suggests sexual relationships, as in all women addressed by these words would have necessarily engaged in sexual relationships.

Other clusters of words are not so overt in their expression. Take for instance, the host of words for performing artists, where the women had an identity of profession. Or the words related to servants, where again it cannot be sweepingly ascertained whether all women under this attribute would be fallen women. Such clusters are indicative of professions, where sexual liberties were implied, and thus became avenues for leading a woman into prostitution.

The present study deals with the different categories of words that indicate various dimensions of multi-partner man-woman relationships. The categorization done as part of this study is as follows:

1. Kept Women/Mistresses
2. Performing Artists
3. Servants
4. Religious Prostitutes
5. Prostitutes from Heaven
6. Words Related to the Body
7. Words Related to *Saubhaagya*
8. Words for a 'Public' Woman
9. Market-Related Words
10. Words Meaning Deviation from Norms

These clusters of words may not be mutually exclusive. A performing artist could also be a mistress. A religious prostitute like a *devadasi* could also be a performing artist, as well as a keep. The categorization of the words is done on the rationale that the clusters of words have a commonality binding them together.

After looking at the diversity in the meaning of words that directly or indirectly mean a prostitute, it appears that the society (at a time when the dictionary was compiled: 1930–40s) perceived any heterosexual relationship other than the one within marriage as 'prostitution'. Those not in compliance with the prevalent ideals of femininity or chastity were chastized or stigmatized as 'fallen', and were addressed by words suggestive of immoral status.

Discussing the words

In the dictionary, three words namely, *veshya*, *swairinee* and *vyabhichaarinee* are words that are used commonly, and interchangeably, to refer to the entire

range of words across all the categories denoted. The word *swairinee* is given to mean a woman without restraint (*unaad stree*), deviated from common rule, an adulteress (*vyabhichaari stree*), prostitute (*veshyaa*) or a self-willed person, bent upon the gratification of desires of her own heart (*swachhandee stree*). In contrast, the same words *swachhandee* or *unaad* when used in the case of a man refer to freedom but do not necessarily with any sexual connotation. But when used in the case of women, these words specifically denote sexual freedom/liberty.

Apte's Sanskrit English dictionary (1965) defines *vyabhichaar* as 'to go astray, deviate from, to transgress against, be faithless to'. *Veshya*, a word that is commonly used for a prostitute in the historical past as well as today has the following meanings (Molesworth, 1994): a woman who sells her body to anyone for earning money; a widow or a *raand* (always used with contemptuous implication), a female slave, a courtesan, any woman of easy virtue; a dancing girl or a *kasbeen*; *kalaavanteen*—also a dancing girl, *naayakeen*—a mistress of any establishment, a dancing girl or *nartakee*—again referring to a dancing girl.

Here it is important to note that two seemingly synonymous concepts emerge from the meanings. One is the deviation from norm and the other is prostitution. It may also be noted that for a woman to be without any restraint or being self-willed was also considered to be something beyond prescription. Women who did not follow the code of conduct prevalent in the society were called *swairinee*, which according to Molesworth (1994) means women that walk according to their own will; loose or unchaste women or an adulteress.

Kept women or mistresses

Keeps/mistresses are not prostitutes, as we understand today but the dictionary has given the meaning as prostitute. They are women who may be committed to a particular man, and engage in singular relationships. They are akin to a wife in all respects except without the formal sanction of marriage. From this has emerged a set of words indicative of the varied status of mistresses, suggestive of inter-personal relations of the man with her, or of social and cultural backgrounds in which they existed.

Mistresses, being dear to their masters, came to be addressed in affectionate terms. Such words were perhaps used with wives as well as mistresses. The list of such words includes *priyaa* (a beloved woman), *pyaar* (loved, beloved and dear), *priyaatamaa* (most beloved or dearest), *velhaalee* (beloved woman), *vallabhaa* (a beloved woman), etc. An *avaruddhaa* was a mistress who resided

in the house of the master while a *bhujishya* was a mistress who did not stay in the house of her master (Kane, 1967).

Words like *rakshaa*, *raakh*, *rakhel*, *rakhelee* and *rakhaau*, which are used even today, arise out of the Sanskrit verb *raksha* meaning to protect. Hence a woman who is to be kept would need to be protected, as described by the words mentioned here.

The words *stree*, *patni*, *baayko* mean a wife. The prefix *upa* literally means vicinity, nearness, inferiority, likeness or resemblance. From this has emerged words to denote a mistress, who is identical to a wife, only lower in status in comparison. Words such as *upastree*, *upapatnee*, *angaakhaalchee baayko*, *baail* have such a meaning. The word *paatra* means an assumed character. Hence the words *paatraa*, *paatra*, *prem-paatra* covertly mean the one who has assumed the role of a wife.

A *naatakshaalaa* was a woman who was kept by a man attracted to her by her beauty and artistic achievements. A *khaandaaraanee* was a woman kept by a warrior.

The words *haram* and *maashuk* are borrowed from Arabic and mean a beloved woman or a mistress while *dhagadee* is borrowed from Gujarathi language and *aawaa* and *awaa* are borrowed from Kannada. The word *zangdoo* borrowed from Marathi language spoken in the region of Kolhapur in Western Maharashtra seems to have originated from the word *zangat*, which means a clandestine love affair.

Words like *angavastra*, *upastree* and *upapatnee* were used for a mistress of people belonging to the higher social and economic strata whereas the words *rakhel*, *thevlelee baai*, *angaakhaalchi baayko* are not used respectfully. The word *dhagadee* is used abusively.

Performing artists

Performing arts, including singing, dancing and acting, were not considered occupations desirable for women of honour. Women who performed and entertained such as *kalaavantee* (artist), *nartakee* (dancer), *natee* (an actress) rarely married. They may be sometimes available for sexual pleasures and hence the words acquired an additional meaning to their occupation, that of prostitution.

Words for singer and dancer, synonymous to a prostitute are *kalavanteen*, *kanchanee*, *kasbeen* who could sing and dance. Maharashtra Shabdakosh points out the difference between the words *kalavanteen* and *kasbeen*. A *kalavanteen* is one who sings while dancing or standing, whereas the *kasbeen* is one who sits while singing. The *kalaavanteen* earns her livelihood through

her art, but the *kasbeen* is one who sells her body for her livelihood. There are many words that are colloquial versions/corrupt forms of the word *kalavanteen*. The words are as follows, *kalavanti*, *kalaavati*, *kalvantin*, *kalateen*, *kalaapaatra* and *kalavantee*.

The word *gayikaa* (singer) and *sajindee* (woman who plays a musical instrument) also acquired the meaning similar to a prostitute though the words merely state a woman's profession.

Words like *naachan*, *naachanghugaree* and *naachantiparee* also indicate dancing girls though probably of lower class. The words *chhataaki* or *chhatel* mean a coquettish woman who may sing or dance for men. Both these words have a colloquial character.

Servants

Maharashtra in the past has had a custom of keeping female slaves. 'A prominent feature of the slavery of later *Peshwa* period was the predominance of female slaves' (Rege, 1995). *Khaasechakareeteel striyaa* has been a common phrase one finds for female servants in the service of noblemen during the *Peshwa* regime.

From this background has emerged the use of words like *dasi*, *batik* or *kunbeen*, referring to a female maidservant. The practice of keeping female servants was not restricted to kings, noblemen, rich and the elite, but generally speaking, any family that could afford to keep a slave had one. *Daasees* and *kunbeenees* have been the words used to refer to female servants across all strata. The word *daashiru/daasri/daasru/daasee* seem to be different versions of the same word and all of them mean a female slave or a keep. A woman working as maidservant in the inner chambers of a palace or royal house was referred as *garbhadaasee*. *Sejwaala* (*sej* meaning bed) is a word referring to women servants who were employed for cleaning and preparing the beds of masters.

Batakee and *kunbeenee* were servants who in many instances were not paid any salary (Shirgaokar, 2001). The word *kunbeen* and *naatakshaalaa* have been used synonymously, but in reality a *naatakshaalaa* was a mistress, while a *kunbeen* was a housemaid who in some cases became a *naatakshaalaa*.

The meaning of the word *bateek* is given as *daaseel/molkareen* (a maid servant), but the word *bateekpuraa* means a 'red light area'. The very existence of a word *bateekpuraa* was indicative of the fact that there was a place (a red light area) where the *batakees* would end up as common prostitutes if they lost their employment/patronage. The dictionary further states that a *bateek* was a woman who originally came from a good family (*garat*) but became

vyabhichaarinee (one deviating from sexual norms) at some point. The word *bateek*, has also been used synonymously with *raandbhaand* and *raandavdaa*, which are abusive in nature.

The words *bandhakee*, *baandee* also means a *daasee* or *vyabhichaarinee*. Occasionally, the meaning of the word *randee* is given as a *daasee*.

The words *lavandee/laundee/laundhee* (from Persian language—*lavand*) also mean a *bateek/daasee/veshyaal/rakhelee*. The word *urdaabeganee* means a *daasee/bateek* (During the regime of Aurangzeb the chief of the women's army was called *Urdubegi*. The word *urdaabeganee* seems to have originated from this word). The dictionary has another word *sabelee*, meaning a *daasee/sakhee*.

The word *saamaanyaa*, meaning 'a woman owned commonly' also has the meaning of *bateek*. The words *jagzhodee*, *adhaswee* and *khaangee* are equivalent to a *daasee*, i.e., a keep.

Across all the words for maidservants, they have been used interchangeably with words that mean a keep and a prostitute. This suggests that a *daasee* (maidservant) might be changing her roles from a servant to a keep to even end up as a common prostitute.

Religious prostitutes

Scholars have dated the origin of religious prostitution between the 3rd century (Kathare, 2000) and 6th century (Jogan Shankar, 1994). *Devadaasis*, literally meaning 'female servants of God' is a common word used to refer to such female dancers and singers attached to temples. Many variations of such temple dedications have resulted in a whole spectrum of words. Their dedications to temple service were considered as constituting a marriage with the deity, and therefore were not allowed to marry any mortal. These 'temple marriages' were considered lucky for a girl since she would never become a widow.

Molesworth's (1994) gives the meaning of the word *devadaasi* as a female dancer or a courtesan. It is argued that prostitution was forced upon the girls in the form of a *devadaasi* at a time when the society was going through structural changes and upheavals caused by external aggression (Chawla 2002).

The devotees of *yogeshwari* (*yallammaal/renukaa*), essentially performing functions similar to that of the *devadaasis*, are called *jogteen*. *Muralees* and *bhakteen* are girls devoted to Khandoba and Bhairoba, the incarnation of Shiva. The word *aaradheen* means the priestess of *Khandoba*, while *jaanee* is a girl offered to Lord *Khandoba*.

Some other words for temple women are *bhaaveen*, *devlee*, *naaikeen*, *bhakteen*, *jogteen*, *muralee*, *aaraadheen*, *sulee*, *basavee* and *jaanee*, borrowed from other

languages like Kannada, Hindi and Goanese. A *bhaaveen* was not allowed to dance or sing in public, while the *devlees* blew horns/trumpets in the temple (Ethnographic Survey of Bombay: 1909: 60). The word *sulee* in the Marathi language spoken in Tanjore means a *devadaasi*, *kalavanteen* or *naikkeen* according to Maharashtra Shabdakosh. The word *basavee*, borrowed from Kannada, means a woman who sits in the bazaar; a reputable woman who indulges in immodest behaviour; a dancer or a singer belonging to the *jangam* sect.

Prostitutes from heaven

Devaanganaa is a generic word in Marathi, referring to women of divinity (*dev* implying God; *angana* implying woman). The other words synonymous with *devaanganaa* are *suraanganaa*, *devastree* and *apsaraa*. These words may not be in actual usage, but may have come from literature and mythology.

The Maharashtra Shabdakosh does not equate these words as directly being synonymous to a *devadasi*. However, evidence from mythology suggests that *devadasis* are the incarnation of *urvashee*, a celestial nymph or *apsaraa* (The word *apsara* means courtesans of heaven). The word *apsaraa*, today, means a beautiful woman. The word *rambhaa* according to the dictionary means a prostitute, though she too like *urvashee* is another celestial nymph. However, the word *rambhaa* is sometimes used sarcastically for an untidy girl.

Words related to the body

There is a small set of words that mean a prostitute and these words have a mention of body parts or genitals of a man or a woman.

The word *angabeena* is a compound of *anga* and *heena*. The word *anga* means a woman's genitals and *heena* means of a low or inferior quality, and has been used to denote a prostitute. The word *gaandaal* varyingly means a woman who has large buttocks or posteriors; an adulteress (*jaarinee*); as well as a loose/libertine/dissolute woman (*vyabhichaaree stree*). It could be inferred that physical attributes were not spared to stigmatize a woman; hence this derogatory equation of a woman with large buttocks with an adulteress or a loose woman.

Some of the words in this category are related to aspects of presentation rather than a particular body part. For example, the word *zhiparee* is commonly used for a woman whose hair is unkempt. According to societal norms a respectable woman must have her hair done up when she presents herself

to anyone and hence a woman whose hair is unkempt, is equated as 'fallen'. The meaning of the word *zhiparee* in the dictionary is one who is worthless or one who has licentious tricks. The word *ajaagal* means disorderly (*gabaalee*) or of a pretty, well-formed face but deviated from norm (*gobaree parantoo vyabhicharee stree*). The word *shepaaloo* means either a woman who commits whoredom (*chhinaal*) or the one who is a sensualist, voluptuary, epicurean (*vishayee*) or a lewd/amorous woman, a wanton (*kamuki*). It is derived from the Sanskrit word *shep* which means a penis.

Words related to *saubhagya*

A woman who is married is termed as *saubhaagyavati* (a woman blessed with the joy of wedlock). A prostitute, on the other hand, is referred to as *akshai savaasheen akhanda-saubhaagyavati*, and *janma savaasheen*, the words *akshay akhanda* and *janma* mean lifelong. Looking at the words synonymous to a prostitute one finds that the words either mean one who is exempted from widowhood or the one who is blessed with unbroken joy of wedlock. Since in the Indian society sex is institutionalized through marriage alone, these words also mean indirectly that such a woman has the fortune of always being sexually gratified.

In a patriarchal society, marital status determines a woman's honour within her family and the society. It stipulates specific norms limiting a woman's sexual behaviour to monogamy. The marital status also determines a woman's lifestyle. Any deviation from the accepted norms means dishonour and punitive measures taken against the woman, whether a married woman or a widow (Chakravarty, 1996). The words in this category use the institution of marriage as a point of reference while describing a prostitute or a loose woman.

The word *raand* which is commonly used in an insulting sense for a loose woman primarily means a widow. The word, however, is also sometimes used to mean a woman or a wife. There are many words referring to a prostitute that have stemmed from this particular word, like *randakee*, *raandkhaand*, *raandbhand*, *raandavadaa*, *phatraand*. All of these words originally meant a widow, but have acquired a derogatory connotation to indicate a woman with a loose character. There was a fear that a widow may go astray and therefore she was regarded 'potentially' immoral. It is also possible that a young widow may lose the support of her husband's family as well as her parents and may turn to prostitution for want of a livelihood. Thus, her sexual availability, real or imagined, could have given the word such an acquired meaning. The laws of Manu (Manusmriti V 156–160) state that 'The sex in a widow is so

great that she will cohabit with any man she meets, irrespective of his age or appearance' (Buhler, 1990).

Words for a 'public' woman

A marriage gave a man exclusive conjugal rights and in a patriarchal society, a wife was considered the private property of her husband. Women who had sex with many men obviously were the ones on whom nobody could/did claim exclusive rights. From this concept of non-exclusiveness of conjugal rights arose this category of words that indicate a public woman (a prostitute). These women were then called *nagarvadhu* which literally means the wife of the town. While *nagarvadhu* is an ancient word, there have been many linguistic variations in the local context which imply a similar meaning. These words, however, are derogatory in nature. This sub-group of words meaning the 'woman of the town/village' includes words such as *gaav-bhavaanee* or a *nagar bhavaanee* (a woman roaming about in the village/town), *gaav-gaai* (a cow that roams about across the village), *gaav-mavshee* ('aunt' of the village), *gaav-mehunee* ('sister in law' of the village) and the word *mehuni* means the wife's sister.

Anthropologically, a flirting relationship with one's sister-in-law was in practice. Hence, the word *gaav-mehunee* means one with whom the entire town could have such a relationship (which presumes sexual liberty). A similar word, *sarvaanchee mehunee* meaning a 'commonly owned or shared' sister-in-law is also found in Marathi.

The use of derogatory terminology extends further through words such as *ushtee stree* or *uphtee patraaval*. The words *ushia* means left-over or rejected food, or foul, used and left. A *patraaval* means a leaf plate, which is used once and disposed. These two words clearly show the derogatory sense in addressing prostitutes.

The word *vaar* means a group or a collective. So all words that begin with *vaar* followed by words meaning a woman mean a woman available to more than one man. The following words were found to be in usage in Marathi language—*varaanganaa*, *varayoshitaa*, *varavilasinee*, *varavanitaa*, *vaaryuvatee*, *vaarnaaree*, *vaarvadhu* and *varastree*. The word *vaarayoshita* literally means one who serves (offers sexual services) many people. The word *sabha* in Sanskrit means 'a multitude', 'large number' and the word *saamaanya* means 'common or general', identical to the word *vaar* or *vara*. Hence the word *sabhaanganaa* means a woman of the assembly. The word *bahuvas* (*bahu* meaning many) means one who stays with many while the word *sarva-vallabhaa* means someone who is dear to all.

Market related words

The concept of a market, with its attributes of buying and selling of goods and price are reflected in the words classified under this category. These words point to the sheer commodification of women through sexual relations.

The word *panyaanganaa* means a woman exposed for sale or who may be bought, a courtesan. *Hatavilaasinee* is another word, which also traces its root to a market place (*Hata* meaning market). The word *haat* is a corrupt version of the word *hatta* in Sanskrit. The word *vilas* means pleasure seeking, voluptuary, and coquetry, prudery or flirting. *Vilaasinee* is a woman who seeks pleasure, indulges in flirting and coquetry. The meaning of the word *hatavilaasinee* is 'A woman exhibiting herself and sporting in public places'. The word *vaanasee* is also a compound word *vanik* + *stree* (tradable + woman). All the three words have Sanskrit origins.

During the period of Muslim rule in India, Urdu and Farsi (Persian) languages were in use. The word *maaljaadee* (*maal* means an item on sale and the word *jaadi* means a girl) has its roots in these languages.

The word *baazaareen* means a woman of the market or one on sale. The word *bajar* is a corrupt version of the word Bazaar. The word *baajaarbasanee* means one who sits in the Bazaar. The word *baajaarbasavee* is commonly used even today. Yet another phrase, which is far more explicit and derogatory, is *baajaarchee khaat*. A *khaat* means a bed, the phrase literally meaning the bed of the market.

These words connote the saleability of a woman in an open market. Variations of words with a *baajar* root exist, like for example *baajaarbunagee* and *baajaarbundgee*. It could be corroborated that such words emerging as compounds along with the word *bajar* may have originated during the Mughal period.

Words meaning deviated from norms

A *vyaabhichari* is a person who is understood to be wanton (having sex with other man or woman). If a woman engaged herself in sexual relations with a person other than her husband, she was labelled as *vyabhicharini*.

Words like *pardwaargaamee*, *pararata*, *paradwaree*, *parapoorvastree* mean a woman who has sex with a person 'other' than the husband while the word *pativanchakaa* means the one who has cheated on the husband. *Apativrataa* and *asatee* mean a woman who is not faithful to her husband. The words *chhinaal*, *shindal*, *sinal* and *sinalee* mean a fallen woman.

The words *badakhyaalee* and *badafailee* are taken from Persian language, which mean the one who indulges in unchaste behaviour or thought.

The word *battaa* means blemish, stigma or stain. Thus the meaning of the word *battebaaz* means the one who is fallen. In a society where women did not have much freedom of thought, expression or behaviour, someone who transgressed these codes of conduct was called a *swairinee*, a woman of her own will. Another word equivalent to a *swairinee* is *pumschali*, which means a prostitute. One may include the word *kbelavane* in the category of deviation from norm, because she is a woman who ensnares/entices a man with her charms.

The word *veshya* which is the word equivalent to a prostitute has many corrupt forms like *vesanaa*, *vesavaa*, *vesvaa*. The words *jaarinee*, *jaareen* or *jaarkarmi* denote a woman who has deviated from norm and is understood in English as an adulteress. *Jaar* means a lover who is not a husband.

A few other words for deviated women are *kulataa*, *sutaaroo*, *zodge*, *bisane*, *chumbhalee*, *shobhane*, *phetaal*, *baahiree*, *vaavtal*, *laagore* and *chyavan*. Words such as *lalanaa*, *lalitaa* or *lankaa*, which only mean a woman in today's context, also meant a fallen woman. The word *chyavan* comes from the verb *chyuta* that means to be fallen.

This category has the largest number of words. The range of words included here are diverse, with meanings ranging from those who have cheated on their husbands to a prostitute to a go-between. It includes women who are of easy virtue and those who do not follow the societal norms. They necessarily are not the ones who indulge in commercial sex work as we understand today.

Findings and Conclusions

Over 200 words were found in the Maharashtra Shabdakosh, perhaps the largest lexicon of Marathi language published between 1930's and 1940's, spreading over eight volumes. The words have meanings ranging from keeps, religious prostitutes, common strumpets, artists/performers, women who have deviated from the sexual norms and the ones indicating various attributes of the profession of prostitution. The time during which the dictionary was compiled was a period of social awakening and social reforms, particularly those concerning the uplift of women. The common understanding of some of the concepts was also changing, but the changing norms were still not as well defined as they are today.

For example, a *gayikaa* (a singer) was not considered as low as a prostitute, but also did not command the same respect as married women from respectable households. A *natee* (a film actress) probably was understood to have a status lower than the one who sang classical music. And all these women

were thought to be moral deviants. Words like *jalanaa*, *jalitaa*, *apsaraa* which were earlier understood as 'fallen' women now meant only beautiful women. The rich and aristocrats still had maidservants and keeps. But in the society at large, maidservants were not expected to provide sexual services. The dictionary has documented the meaning of the words prevalent in the older times, as also prevalent in the times when they were written. As a result, the meanings of many words are interchangeable and are given as synonyms in the dictionary. For example, the various meanings of the word *naikeen* are given as a dancer, an artist, an unmarried singer, prostitute, a fallen woman and a keep. This shows that the status, roles/functions and moral hierarchy of women in various occupations were not clearly defined and were hence in a state of flux.

This study does not classify prostitutes per se. The classification is essentially of words synonymous to a prostitute in Marathi language. It is based on the avenues of entry into the profession or based on the different attributes of prostitution. This classification shows that certain occupations, if pursued by a woman, could lead her into prostitution or stigmatize her as a fallen woman. Like for example, the categories of words for women in performing arts, or religious/temple service, maidservants, or mistresses, all of whom could end up becoming prostitutes.

Many of the words are not in use today, neither in literature nor in commonly spoken terms. The contexts that led to the coinage of these words are no longer existent, leading to some of these gradually being phased out. For example, words like *khandarane* or *urdabegane* cannot be found in a dictionary today.

Changing societal norms and outlooks have further changed the meanings of words that formerly referred to women of loose character. Some words, even though in common usage, have shed their alternative meaning of a fallen woman. Examples of such words include *nati* (an actress), *maanus* (a person), *gayikaa* (singer), *priyaa* (a loved one), *apsaraa* (a beautiful woman), *zhipree* (a girl with untidy hair), *parichaarikaa* (a nurse) and *daasee* (a servant).

A large number of words out of these words have gone out of usage over time. Presently, about 53 words are in use. Out of these 53 words, only 29 have retained their original meaning (for example, *swairinee*, *thevalalee*, *vyabhicharinee*, *veshyaa*), while 24 are used without the connotation of prostitution (for example *sajindee*, *ntrityaanganaa*, *nartakee*, *kalaavantee*). Out of the 29 words that have retained their meaning, eight of them indicate women with loose morals (e.g., *badafailee*, *chhinaal*, *kultaa*, *jaarinee*, etc.). Five mean a mistress (*thevalalee*, *rakhelee*, *rakhel*, etc.) and the remaining 16 still mean a prostitute or a sex worker (*veshyaa*, *randee*, *raand*, *naikeen*, *baajaarbasavee*, etc.).

In the process of acculturation it is not surprising to find that words were borrowed from other languages. Dialectic variations of Marathi spoken across a wide geographical expanse have also contributed to a host of words. One finds words being borrowed from Arabic (*vaka*, *marshuk*), Persian (*lavandee*, *khangee*, *maljadee*), Urdu (*badakhyaaalee*, *badafaailee*, *urdaabeganee*). Because of the geographical proximity to states like Goa and Karnataka, there are words borrowed from the languages of Konkani (*bhaveen*, *naikkeen*) and Kannada (*basavee*, *sule*, *avaa*). Some of the Sanskrit scholars, who had migrated from Maharashtra to Tanjore, spoke a dialect referred as Tanjore Marathi. The word *suli* referring to a prostitute has come from this dialect, probably on account of Southern influence on it. The word *zodge* is from *rajapuri* Marathi, a part of the coastal region of Konkan. Originating from Sanskrit, Marathi has been greatly influenced by the parent language in the coinage of the words as also in direct borrowing (*swairinee*, *vaaraanganaa*, *vaaryoshitaa*, *paradwaargamee*, *pararat*).

Through the words, a strong case of gender discrimination can be discerned. For example, the word *raand* (a widow), which means a prostitute and is commonly used in an insulting manner, does not have a parallel word for a widower with any derogatory sense. Also, there is no word for a male prostitute either. It is also noticed that some parallel words—one applying to masculine beings, the other to the feminine beings—are not parallel in their range of use and connotation. For example, the words *buva* and *bai* are in all probability simple male and female equivalents, analogous to bull, cow, cock, hen, and the like. However, these two words have acquired new divergent meanings. In the course of time they almost lost their primary meaning and are often used for their connotative meanings. The word *buva* generally means a man but the added meanings are a top class singer, a respectful address for an elderly person. But the meaning of the word *bai* refers to a kept woman or a prostitute or a maid servant.

There are quite a few offensive phrases that mean a prostitute. For example, the word *taangal* means a cow that is in the habit of kicking, synonymous with a prostitute. The word *basavee* means a cow that roams freely all over the town and is equated to a footloose woman. As explained earlier, the phrase *ushtee patrnaaval* denoting a prostitute literally means a disposable leaf plate used by someone else. The word *kadbaa naayakin* means an old prostitute as cheap as hay/dry grass or the expression *vaavaachi maashi* meaning a useless fly, also used to refer to a prostitute.

The examples cited in this paper are illustrative and by no means exhaustive. But these overt linguistic expressions could be tools for gaining an insight into the covert social psychology of the Marathi speaking people.

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22

Modern theatre as epitome of middle class civilized culture

Scripting of stage actresses as 'prostitutes' and 'fallen' women

LATA SINGH

Re-definition of the female was a crucial feature of the hegemony that brought the middle class into power and superiority. A 'new' and 'ideal' woman was being constructed in the middle-class discourse, which was subjected to a new patriarchy. The 'new' woman was contrasted, not only with those of modern Western society, it was explicitly distinguished from the patriarchy of indigenous tradition. The new patriarchy was sharply distinguished from the immediate social and cultural condition in which the majority of the people lived, for the 'new' woman was quite the reverse of the 'other' woman, the common woman. The construction of the 'ideal' woman is linked up with the construction of 'other' women, representing common women, considered to be coarse, vulgar, loud, morally degraded and sexually promiscuous. Having greater access to the public sphere, these women were relatively independent. Through discursive formations that marked them as aberrations from the 'ideal', these women were sought to be marginalized, excluded and rendered invisible. (Chatterjee 1989: 244–45; Sangari and Vaid 1989, 1–26). One important section that got excluded from the middle-class hegemonic discourse was performing women. Female performers were stigmatized as 'prostitutes'. The middle class erased and negated the creative aspect of performing women in its quest for a respectable nation. Women performers were kept out of the frame of the nation in the making.

Throughout India, as elsewhere, theatre actresses have long been the very definition of a bad woman, a public woman. Susan Seizer in her study of Tamilnadu has highlighted how many of the Tamil terms for actress are also common terms for denoting a 'whore' or a 'prostitute'. *Kutti, taci*, and *tevatiyal* all have the dual meaning of 'dancing girl or prostitute', 'dancing girl—devoted to temple service, commonly a prostitute, a harlot, a whore'. The two concepts—that of the female dancer or performer, whether ostensibly employed in sacred service or not, and prostitute—were so linked in 19th century colonial India that one missionary simply wrote, 'a dancing girl is invariably a harlot'. There is an inevitable slippage, throughout the colonial legal and Anglo-Indian judiciary discourses of the 19th century, between the terms 'temple dancing girl' and 'dancing girl' any and all of who get lumped together by the colonial courts and criminalized as prostitutes by the early 20th century. The selling of sexual favours is not essential to the definition of a stage actress as a prostitute. The combined effect of such stigmatizing terms and the discourses that fuel their existence was to keep most 'good' women from daring or desiring to be actresses at all (Seizer 2005: 3–7).

The female performer is perhaps the most unsettling of figures, precisely in her unsettledness—her seemingly excessive mobility in the public sphere, which disrupted foundational moral distinction between the home and the world. One of the dimensions of the stigma that accrues to actresses is their publicity and mobility as they move about conducting their business. The form of this mobility—the very public nature of the actress's line of work—threatens to expose the fragility of the culturally naturalized division of gendered sphere into home and world, as actresses move onto public stages to enact what are meant to be the most private of relations. Middle-class reforms undertaken on behalf of women were tied up with the self-definition of the class embedded in the new division of the private from the public sphere, that is, home/world dichotomy. Gender-based social roles corresponded with this separation of the social space into home and world, home being a sacred site for women. An enclosure is conceived as necessary to preserve a woman's chastity and by extension, her men folk's honour. Since the social construction of gender places 'good women' in seclusion, women who appear in public spaces (such as on stage) are defined as 'bad', that is prostitutes. Unlike the chaste loyalty of the good wife who reveals herself to only one man, the actress' profession requires that she willingly expose herself to the gaze of many unfamiliar men (Seizer 2005: 3–7; Sangari and Vaid 1989: 1–26).

There are some other inter-connected dimensions to the stigma of mobility accruing to actresses. One is the problem with acting itself; the fact of

mimetic fluidity—that acting involves illusion and not reality, and offers false selves, making mobile things that ought to be fixed. Besides it involves the overly fluid off-stage behaviour of actors in employing fictive kin-networks, rather than maintaining normal, orderly, sanctioned kin-relations. Actors use kin-terms across caste, class, religious, and ethnic boundaries creating socially expedient relations between them, where in reality no blood or marriage relations exist. Such identity shifts on-stage (mimetic) and off (in kin-relations)—both of which concern normative relations between men and women—taint the reputation of the acting community as a whole, and stigmatize it as excessively mobile and uncontainable. Thus, this blatant step into the limelight of such mobile relations is largely what brands actresses as bad. Social purity has to be secured through checks on women's mobility and social mixing (Seizer 2005: 334–63).

An attempt is made in this paper to look at some of these issues in the context of the formative phase of Modern Theatre during colonial period in Bengal and Maharashtra.

Modern Theatre and Middle Class Quest for Respectability

The origin of modern theatre in India mirrors the formation of the new classes in India. It accomplishes the task of social reproduction of middle class through its specific representational forms, by its intimate connection to the overall social relations, and ideological development of the society of the time. Culture is one of the key sites where struggle for hegemony takes place. Theatre practices of the middle class of 19th century were part and parcel of their assumption of hegemony in the production of culture and politics. (Thompson 1968; Crehan 2002: 98–123; Bannerji 1998: 159–60). Modern theatre in the formative period consisted of re-working the English theatre form, both in the structure of the play and its presentational devices, in order to suit new social and aesthetic needs. It adopted from the British physical representational devices and forms, the dramatic structure, and the specific genres prevalent in British theatres. Simultaneously, one also sees the struggle for the identity amongst the emerging middle class. Internalization of British representational forms is accompanied with a strong emphasis on a new, national identity as well. The middle class's own need for a creative subjectivity and a historical continuity moved them to produce theatre in their own language (Deshpande 2000: IX–X).

Modern theatre was linked with the quest for respectability. In fact, there had always been anti-theatrical prejudice amongst the dominant sections of society. However this prejudice was strengthened in the colonial period which looked upon 'indigenous' entertainment as an uncivilized activity. European tradition was appreciated as a civilized, sophisticated and cultivated activity that would lead to the moral improvement of Indian society. It generated hierarchies that relegated indigenous theatre forms to a 'low' status as opposed to the 'high' and privileged status accorded to European High Drama. (Bhatia 2004: 15–17). The hierarchical stratification was further reinforced by indigenous social-reform organization which resulted in producing strong contempt for indigenous theatre. (Borthwick 1984: 117; Jones 1976: 95, 99). Against this the middle class was struggling to carve the modern theatre as respectable cultural space. In Maharashtra Vishnudas Bhave sought to perform in front of the intelligentsia to gain respectability (Ramaswamy 2003: 359). In Bengal, Amarendranath invited the highest gentry of judges, magistrates, lawyers to the classic theatre to improve the credibility of the stage. Importance of a body of sound classical dramas to regulate the national taste was increasingly being highlighted. There were advertisements in papers as to how theatre would provide moral education and uphold larger cause (Chatterjee 2003: 50, 59).

The theatre's search for respectability reflects the respectability of an entire middle class. However, the question of respectability assumed its sharpest form when the issues concerned women. Representation of women was an important site of the emergent middle-class discourse. If the struggle to represent ideal female behaviour accompanies the struggle of an emergent middle class, then change in the representation of women would be expected to accompany more extensive historical changes. The representation of woman as public entertainer and focus of male desire would not serve the interests of the English-educated elite, which put in her place the Indian equivalent of the Victorian domestic angel, the *sugrihini* or good housewife (Borthwick 1984: 194–97).

As the middle class consolidated their position, they exerted increasing pressure on their womenfolk to conform to what the colonizer set out as standards of ideal womanly conduct. A new kind of segregation was imposed on women, whose identity was now to be defined in opposition to women from lower economic strata. The middle class emphasized the need to eradicate what they were trained to believe were the pernicious influences of certain prevailing literary and cultural forms on women, particularly on women belonging to their own homes. These forms, which was sought to

be erased, emerged primarily from the lower economic social groups and represented a popular culture that ran parallel to what could be called the 'official culture' propagated by the middle class. In fact, popular culture had a wide female audience, ranging from the lower caste and lower class self-employed women of the market places, to the wives and daughters of the middle class in the sheltered *andarmahal* or *zenana*. The middle class considered women's popular songs with their robust sense of humour and frank sensuality threatening to the new ideal of domestic order and heavily restricted the association of elite women with female performers. The elite increasingly associated popular forms with the 'licentious' and 'voluptuous' tastes of the 'vulgar' populace, from whom they were at pains to differentiate themselves, marking the 'othering' of popular culture and pushing it to the margins of respectability (Banerjee 1989; Rege 2002). Popular cultural forms have been represented as marginal precisely because of the participation of women in them. The subordinate social status of women and their associations with the body and sexuality have been used to define these forms as 'other' and establish the dominant group's superiority in relation to them.

The socio-religious reform movements like Brahma Samaj and Arya Samaj epitomized the trend toward Puritanism. They uncompromisingly condemned gambling, going to prostitutes, smoking, drinking and the theatre (Borthwick 1984: 18, 268–69; Jones 1976: 95, 99). Amrit Srinivasan's work has brought out how female performers came under attack in the well known Anti-Nautch campaign that culminated in 1947 in the outlawing of temple dancing and the prohibition on dedicating women as *devadasis* in South India (Srinivasan 1985). *Nautanki* owes its absence from the annals of literary history to the association with a prohibited category of womanhood. Kathryn Hansen's work highlights how North Indian imagination unfailingly links *Nautanki* with the alluring gestures of dancer actress (Hansen 1992: 256).

The emergent respectable elite theatre marked its distinction from the folk via a process of de-sexualization, so that only men could perform on the stage. In the commercial theatre the paying public consumes the images on stage. The consumption had to be of male actors, because women from the middle class were respectable; exhibiting them in front of a paying public would have undermined the very basis on which respectability was being carried. In fact by asserting that a man impersonating a woman could perform better than a woman, it led to the displacement of agency from the represented figure of the woman, and perpetuated the patriarchal control of not only the material female body but its visual manifestations too.

'Reinventing' Masculinity: Advent of Actresses

The female impersonation of the respectable middle-class cultural project was riddled with uneasy tensions and anxiety. Society had seen and appreciated male enactment of female roles but at the same time, with exposure to western literature and western thoughts, the shortcomings of the male enactment were noticed sharply. It was the period when more realism was coming into techniques of production, which required a different norm of representation. Female impersonation from still being quite acceptable when it was practiced by the gentry in the period of amateur-theatricals, was only gradually found to be 'unreal' and incompatible with the ticketed staging of 'theatre' and the expectations of a larger, more heterogeneous viewing public. There was a growing dissatisfaction in society towards the male enactment of female roles and towards the obscenity, vulgarity and artificiality which followed in the script, in the acting, as well in the production in general. The earlier glorified examples of male actors were at this stage replaced by living examples of their ridiculous appearance and acting. There was also an undercurrent of uneasiness about boys dressing up as girls/women for a new project such as the theatre. This had to do as much with gender as with caste: many of the boy-actresses came from the lower castes. To these, more or less direct recommendations for same sex impersonation, there were many innuendos that were made about cross-dressing (Adarkar: 1991; Bhattacharya 2003: 217–24; Rangabhoomi 1913, 1915, 1916).

This was also the period when the whole issue of masculinity and effeminacy came into the nationalist discourse. Govind Tembe, a very well-known theatre personality of Maharashtra, mentioned that young men in our society were beginning to imitate popular actors enacting female roles. He maintained that at a time when the nation required strong men, this tendency to look effeminate was to be discouraged. Female impersonators appear to threaten the construction of masculinity (Adarkar 1991). Bringing it into the limelight seems to reinvigorate stereotypes of weakness and inferiority among the male population, a bitter legacy of colonial domination. Many like those of Sinha and Chakravarti have shown that late 19th century Indian reformists responded to British disdain for Indian civilization and morality and the concomitant characterization of Indian men as effeminate, both by recasting womanhood in the image of Vedic purity and by reinventing a belligerent style of masculinity (Sinha 1995; Chakravarti 1989).

As the pressure, for women to play female parts, was building up and since respectable women could not be taken, so women from the backstreets of the city, what their biographers discreetly refer to as the anonymous, condemned and forbidden quarters, were taken. Thus the cultural project of respectable domain could be fulfilled with such 'loose' women. Actresses who were not part of middle-class cultural enterprise became instrumental in making theatre possible. It was the Bengal theatre which first took women actresses. Women began to be paid to perform roles as actresses for the first time with the staging of Michael Madhusudan Dutt's 'Sharmishtha' in 1873 by the National Theatre in Bengal. The first four actresses to be recruited by a public theatre, the Bengal theatre, were Gopalsundari, Elokeshi, Jagattarini and Shyamsundari. The National and Great National Theatres realized that they must perform also hire actresses if only to keep up with the competition. For their next play, Sati Ki Kalankini (Sati or Sinner) the Great National inducted five actresses, namely Rajkumari, Haridasi, Jadumani, Kadambini and eventually, *Binodini*. Their singing and dancing talents were well suited to the kind of *geetinatyas* that were in vogue. These were all plays centred on the heroine and with the advent of the actresses, proved to be instant box-office draws (Bhattacharya 1990–1991: 146–49).

Many of these actresses came from singing and dancing tradition, and were from lower caste and class background. Golap later known as Sukumari Dutta, was one of the first four women to join the stage as a professional actress. Her entry into acting provides a sketch of the route to stardom. Golap, whose quick ear and musical voice combined with good luck, was earlier recognized as a talented singer and was sent to Calcutta by her mother for training in kirtan singing. While she did not excel in kirtans, she sang well enough to come to the notice of Sarat Chandra Ghosh, one of the co-founders of the Bengali Theatre. Binodini who came a year later (1874) was initiated by Gangabai, a *baiji*, who lived in a rented room in her house. Gangabai later became known as the singer actress. The many *babus* (clients) who patronized the women of these 'anonymous' quarters often played the part of the unofficial agent or middleman in enabling the aspiring young singer or dancer to try her luck on the stage. Teenkori, a star-struck little girl, was given an opportunity to audition through the kind offices of a *babu* connected with the theatre (Bhattacharya 1990–91: 146–49; Bhattacharya 1998; Bhushan 1920; Bhushan 1919; Dutt 1914).

The entry of the actress on stage was marked by anxiety because she was assumed to be a prostitute and a public woman and therefore someone who transgressed the limits of respectability. There was a strong reaction

amongst the *bhadra samaj* in Bengal when such women were taken. The professionalization of the stage with the hiring of actresses provoked a spate of letters, editorials and speeches at public meetings. The central thrust of the attacks was the low class and the loose morals of the actresses. It was said that such 'loose' class and 'loose' morals of the actresses would corrupt the youth of Bengal and pollute and besmirch the respectable space of theatre. Bipin Chandra Pal, a militant nationalist, in his autobiography talks about how women actresses were first introduced, they were outside the social pale. The Brahma Samaj in the name of public morals registered the strongest protest against the new development in Bengal stage. Keshub Sen's journal *Sulabh Samachar* blamed Michael Madhusudan Dutt for introducing 'bad' women on stage. In fact years ago some educated women from the Brahma Samaj had presented some historical scenes by donning suitable dresses of the historical characters. However, not only Hindu society took up cudgels against it but even many Brahma people also could not digest it. They raised hell. This show was staged exclusively for Brahma Samaj Temple. The women never had even a remote thought of taking up theatre as a profession. Even then there was such a hue and cry against it. Vidyasagar, who saw in the stage an appropriate public platform for spotlighting social issues and for advocating social reform for women quit his association with the stage over the induction of actresses. It may be noted that after Vidyasagar's death in 1891, Tara Sundari took part in a special memorial function to honour the great man and enacted 'most-movingly' the part of *janani banga bhasha*, that is, Mother Bengali Language (Bhattacharya 1990–91: 146). Sometimes even if the acting of the actresses were highly appreciated, it was strongly felt that theatre should have done without actresses.

Around the performing woman an obsessive discourse of nationhood, regional-national identity, sexuality and public morality evolved. And, among, performing women it was the stage actresses earning her living in metropolitan theatre who became particularly vulnerable. The actress' visible acting self provided a common locus to Brahma and other social reform movements attacking conspicuous consumption, excessive drinking and womanizing. Christian missionary enterprise and purity movements railed and rallied against all of the above 'vices' as well as stage-sanctioned 'prostitution'. However, the real problem was that public theatre was apparently erasing the boundaries of the *bhadra* and the *abhadra*. The kind of prescriptive role that was being defined for women, actresses virtually by definition lived and worked beyond the boundaries of propriety (Bhattacharya 1990–91: 146).

The period when such actresses were taken was also the period when an intensive advertising campaign was employed to make theatre a family entertainment. It did so by secluding special spaces for respectable woman viewers. For the first time the two poles could be contained within the same space and a large drama unfolded beyond the stage as the respectable female gaze was turned on to its 'erotic' other.

Construction of the 'Ideal' and the 'Other': The 'Prostitute' as the 'Other' of Kulin Women

There was a debate in Maharashtra in the early 20th century as to whether *kulin* women should come to theatre or not. *Rangabhoomi*, a theatre journal of Maharashtra, invited open debate from readers on the subject of *kulin* women and theatre by publishing a questionnaire which dealt with the questions of moral values, development of art and the advantages and disadvantages of *kulin* women entering the theatre. The response from the men was tremendous. Only one woman seems to have participated in the debate. Though most of the respondents felt that female roles would be better performed by women but when it came to the question of *kulin* women joining theatre, they were not in favour of them doing so. Most men agreed to the concept of the 'development of art' so far as theatre was concerned but assumed that there was an inherent contradiction between art and morality. The choice was of morality over art for the stability of the society (Adarkar 1991; Rangabhoomi 1913, 1915, 1916; Tembe 1928). They voiced their concerns in following ways.

R. Shripad Krishna Kolhatkar (Khamgaon) wrote:

It is advisable that female roles should be performed by women.... However it is by no means easy for noble women to bring it into actual practice. We value the morals of women, especially of married women very highly. As there is no practice of mixed male-female gatherings women acquire the strength to protect their own character and a tendency also develops among men to treat them with respect. This strength and tendency is conspicuous by its absence in the present society. Consequently it is quite possible that a noble woman may go astray and an occasion may arise wherein they may be insulted on stage. A husband would never approve of his wife performing the role of somebody else's wife and the audience will also not feel respect to her. Even the touch by a *Shakar* to strangle *Vasantsena* is sinful by conventional standards. No noble woman would ever agree to be called a prostitute even for the duration of the drama. As prostitutes work in the Parsee and Bengali theatre there is no objection for Maharashtra also to do the same (Rangabhoomi 1916).

Mrs Kashibai Harlekar of Baroda wrote:

The probability of a woman joining the profession and yet maintaining her purity would be an exceptional one. As the purity of women is more important to the society than her skill in fine arts, noble women would not turn towards this profession. Even if progress of the theatre is necessary obviously the morals of women would be socially more valuable (Rangabhoomi 1916).

It was also said that 'predominance of emotions over thoughts amongst prostitutes would be helpful to them in acting as dramas provide ample scope for emotional expressions' (Rangabhoomi 1916).

It is important to see how society viewed prostitutes in the context of theatres. In the debate one can see the middle-class construction of 'ideal' and 'other' women, the prostitutes as the other of *kulin* women. For those, who thought women necessary for the 'art of theatre' but who did not want *kulin* women to lose their morality gave reluctant 'consent' to the prostitutes but with conditions that they should be *neetiman*, fit into the moral standard of the society, or else these prostitutes would spoil the morality of the men in the theatre companies (Adarkar 1991).

One of the important aspects that emerges from the debate is the claim of middle class that by offering them theatre they would be reforming such 'loose' women. By offering them an opportunity for a decent profession, which in turn would improve their immoral behaviour, they would be reforming and uplifting the prostitutes. Hence the project would be beneficial to such women.

To quote a piece from Rangbhoomi:

This new opening for the prostitutes of earning money by teaching acting and making a name for themselves would provide an alternative employment for them which may persuade them to leave their old profession and thus become more moral and ethical. Nobody can be forced to be good. Especially one can never hope to make through coercion a saint out of a sinner whose blood itself has been polluted by sin and his entire atmosphere is polluted. However, if the dramatic profession were to be opened for them there may be some hope.... We must think about it from yet another angle. If you start to learn some art it gradually makes you more self-controlled and the level of living rises. For example, take acting. The efforts the students will have to put in the study, to forget one's individuality and transmigrate to the different personalities and be one with them will surely have a positive effect both on his intellect as well as morals. A prostitute working on stage would begin to feel that she should be more sensitive to public opinion. And she would not be able to behave in any way she wants. If she likes the stage work and an ambition seizes her to gain expertise in it and make a name she may

feel like leaving prostitution behind her. Whatever may some puritans say one can unreservedly say that those who offered to take the prostitute on the bandwagon of theatre and cast them in the mould have indeed done their mite in the betterment of mankind. I have myself seen plays in Calcutta Star Theatre. I did not find anything amiss in them. I also observed that both the male and female performers in the show were scrupulously adhering to manner in their behaviour. Whatever may be the family background and their private behaviour, there was a certain seriousness and gentleness in their performances. Performances of such actresses like Smt Tara Sundari is superior to even the best English actress (Rangabhoomi 1913).

How the theatre would be of beneficial to the 'condemned' section also emerges from the biographies written on some of the Bengali actresses by middle class writers who were struggling to carve theatre as a respectable space. Upendranath Vidya Bhushana in his biography on Bengali actress like Tinkori writes to 'how lakhs and lakhs of unfortunate women in the country lead animal-like life everyday. If these women are given proper education and initiation then from them would emerge many Tinkori, Binodini or Tara Sundari, who developed acting skills. They would get *sudhisamaj's* regards and *sadbhavad's* benefit. So that they could lead *ujjwal prabhamay* life. This would reduce the 'sins' of the world (Bhushan 1919).

One could also see a voice of caution in the middle class discourse as to the result of taking such women, who according to them would fall prey to higher temptations and leave theatre. G.B. Bhate, Natyakala Pravartak Sangeet Mandali, one of the respondent to the questionnaire, wrote in Rangabhoomi:

Will we ever be able to get a good singing actress on the same salary as a male counterpart? Those who earn over a thousand rupees per night would they ever be ready to toil for a month on a pittance of Rs 150 to 200 for a work which demands back-breaking work? Well, even if a prostitute were to be willing to do it in the interest of theatre, in her heart a doubt always subsists whether she is a steadfast *pingla* to ignore the entreaties of the *seths* and *sabukars* and the machination of mischievous characters in the town? If one the women were to devote herself to one of them, the drama companies would have to starve until they find a substitute (Rangabhoomi 1917).

Biographies of Bengali actresses also echo it. Upendranath Vidya Bhushana writes that the kind of background, that is:

The class and place and society where the actresses come from, they do not have their own say, and a lot of temptations come their way and many fall a prey to these pressures and leave acting. They have chances of failing because of the place where they are born. Their mothers wait for the days when their daughters would become young women so that she could have a *babu* with *bagan bari*, so that their sorrows would go away.

Upendranath Vidya Bhushana also says that that the society where these women grow, in that place:

A saint would also become wicked (*pravajana*) and deceitful. So they fall prey to *abhivavak* and loose their independent wishes and as a result, move towards hell day by day. There is an incident from Teenkori's life, too, of such pressure and temptations but she resisted it.

He further writes that:

Such incidents happen in many actresses life. If one does not resist such temptations then one cannot become a talented actress. But not all actresses could overcome such temptations. If such temptations could have been avoided then there would not have been dearth of actresses. Apart from Teenkori we would have seen many talented actresses. Even Tara Sundari a great actresses when she had reached the age of 15–16 (the crucial age for temptations) fell prey to such temptations and had left theatre for some time. It is with great difficulty one learns acting skills by youth and then a pleasure seeking rich man's temptation takes her away. That is why one does not get good actresses.

It was said that without *sadhana* (dedication) one cannot achieve *siddhi*. *Sadhana* and *tyag* are necessary for talented actresses. An example from Teenkori's life is highlighted a lot. Her mother had 'fixed her up' with wealthy *babus* who were willing to pay her mother Rs 200 per month plus an extra hundred for the daughter, only if she 'gave up theatre'. Teenkori stood up to the subsequent physical and verbal abuse that followed as a result of her refusal to give up acting. This was seen as a great *tyag*. It was said that Teenkori because of her qualities of *tyag* and *sadhana* got *nat* god's blessings and achieved *siddhi*. It was also said that Teenkori did not have any fault in her but the place where she was born made her vulnerable to falling down (Bhushan 1919; Bhushan, 1920).

The criticism and complaint of the shortage of actresses were based on the assumption that actresses had to come from such sections, middle-class women not being in the picture at all. However there was always an uneasy tension amongst the middle class because of the background of actresses. The middle class in its quest to make the theatre a respectable space had to negotiate with this uneasiness. One of the ways of negotiation was highlighting that it is not birth but *karma* which is important. Through *karmas* the actresses had become pure. They had shed the *dosh* of the place where they belonged and even if born low under initiation, had gradually emerged out of it. Invoking the notion of talent it was said that talent is more important than the place and class where one is born. 'So even if the actresses come from low and condemned society and despite being children of prostitutes their social

status is high because of their talent. In art their place is higher than *abhijat* section. So these actresses were worth respect and could be comparable with greater actresses of Europe. Binodini's example is given to highlight how she emerged as a great actress. She was not tempted by a pleasure-seeking rich man and it was her *sadhana* which made her a great actress. The sacrifice required should be like that of *mahayogi*. The examinations that actresses had to face were considered more difficult than school examinations as they had to struggle with temptations. It was emphasized that despite their being sinners but in *sadhuwatha* trait and *saacharit* speciality, they had emerged pure and moved towards the path of truth by shedding sin. These talented actresses were now considered part of *sudhisamaj* of which, according to them, there was not an iota of doubt (Bhushan 1919; Bhushan 1920).

In the whole debate prostitution is bereft of 'self-respect' and onus for such offence rests with the women in prostitution, perceived as an embodiment of promiscuity. Besides it overlooks the economic aspect, that is, the poverty and the poor background of this section of women. Economic aspect emerges very strongly from Binodini's autobiography. Binodini is fully aware of her class background and the economic need of a job like that of an actress. However, unfortunately such job does not offer much wage which would take care of them. Teenkori's mother, who pressurizes Teenkori to accept the offer of babus, echoes such concern. She tells her daughter that one should not let go such offers, as they are big people, and if she remains in their shelter, all her aspirations would find fulfillment. She also asks what will she get by doing theatre? Women in prostitution are not morally depraved; it is historically specific and materially rooted. The structurally-induced material factors such as poverty, deprivation and its interaction with the patriarchal cultural setting that marginalizes women from access to education and the job market for instance, render commercial provision of sex service a survival strategy for large masses of women.

There is a strong voice in this debate, that of Govind Tembe, who is a strong proponent of women to join theatre. He does not want 'loose' women but wants only educated and *kulin* women to join theatre. He considers theatre as an art, an alienable part of the Creator's design, and sees the function of this art to create a more beautiful and sublime atmosphere. He was trying to give respectability to theatre. One of the arguments strongly given by him for women to join theatre was that theatre would benefit immensely from women because of their natural feminine qualities. According to him:

The lives of women are naturally divided into two time zones-one pre-natal and the other post-natal. It appears that god intended them to celebrate the first part of life in dancing, singing and acting with abandon and the latter in bringing up children etc. Their psycho-somatic make-up also supports

this observation. Look at the supple body and graceful movements so very necessary for dancing, a melodious voice eminently suitable for singing and a natural inclination towards imitativeness so very necessary for drama and an inborn sensitivity indispensable for all the three arts—and it is difficult to deny that the deity has showered quite liberally on women. Artistically speaking it is the woman alone who really walks; the male just tramples on the roads (Tembe 1928).

He made a comparison between the two sexes in order to prove women were beneficial for the art of acting by highlighting the imitative qualities seen in young girls playing with dolls. He emphasized how girls imitate and transform themselves into the roles of mother, wife and grandmother with utmost involvement as against boys of that age who cannot concentrate on a single game. He felt that if this 'talent were gradually developed and deliberately diverted towards the stage the art would reach dizzy heights within a short time' (Tembe 1928).

However Tembe wanted only educated and *kulin* woman to join theatre. To those who opposed *kulin* women joining the theatre considering it an 'immoral space, which would open the doors of immorality to them, and full of temptations and various sentimental scenes, which would make them vulnerable', Tembe said that this would only happen if the girls were 'uneducated and shallow'. He further said that:

If a girl which has always remained under the protective cover of a mother and has grown in the natural, unfathomable ignorance was to be caught in a tempest in the outside world, she may lose her head and stray on undesirable road but not an educated girl.

He strongly said that theatre does not need such women at all. He emphasized that only educated women should come to theatre as they alone could scrupulously guard their character. According to him

To think that educated and noble men and women will swerve away from the path of morality the moment they come together for the development of the profession and art is tantamount to considering good behaviour, culture, character, nobility and other virtues as worthless.... Whether on stage or off stage, an actor is mainly in front of the society. Consequently, a thoughtful actor or actresses from the educated class have to take care to maintain purity of their actions almost cent percent more scrupulously than others.

To make his point stronger he said that 'educated women carrying on different professions have scrupulously guarded their character'. He said that:

It is a proud achievement of women that, despite the lack of any conventional norms, they entered the profession and boldly moved about in a male-dominated society and also guarded their character. This is the precise reason

why educated women, who are proud of their artistic associations, should get the gold of their character tested on the dramatic touchstone and in the fire of emotions and convince the fault-finder that there is no profession from which Arya women cannot come out unscathed and with head held high.

Govind Tembe felt that once educated women proceed to enter the theatre, the art would prosper and the profession would become respectable (Tembe 1928).

There is a strong emphasis in Govind Tembe's argument that if the women are educated and *kulin*, they would strongly guard their character, considered to be the most important aspect of middle class 'ideal' women. Women could be part of public space only if they could preserve those traits. Tembe felt that women could guard their character because of their *kulin* background and education which would enable them to internalize a properly-gendered self-image. Some of the works like those of Partha Chatterjee has highlighted that it is precisely through their internalization of a self-image of virtuous domesticity that middle-class women have been able to maintain respectability while venturing out into the public sphere; these good women were able to carry their 'home' identities out into the 'world' with them. The middle-class women had simply become so identified with the spiritual and moral sphere of the home that it remained intact wherever she went. Moving in public, the respectable woman carries with her an inner strength forged indoors. As Chatterjee writes: 'Once the essential femininity of women was fixed in terms of certain culturally visible spiritual qualities, they could go to schools, travel in public conveyance, watch public entertainment-programmes and in time even take up employment—outside the home' (Chatterjee 1991: 130).

Thus the whole debate on the introduction of actress on stage is tied with middle-class morality, respectability and social reform. The whole debate was in a patriarchal framework. Those who opposed *kulin* women from joining theatre and hence gave a reluctant consent to take prostitutes and even those like Govind Tembe who strongly argued for *kulin* women joining theatre were talking in patriarchal frame work. In the construction of both was an 'ideal' and an 'other' woman. Agency of women and its subjectivity was invisibilized in this debate.

Negation of Women's Creative Agency: Invisibilizing Professional Actresses

The whole middle class quest was to develop theatre as 'art'. The creative urge of women was not the question. In fact the nationalist discourse of middle

class had negated or erased their creative aspect. Many actresses came from singers' and dancers' tradition and were extremely creative and talented and many were aspiring to be singers, dancers and actresses. They brought before the public gaze the complexities of some of the most 'literary' heroines of contemporary novels. They created characters who not only appealed to the public imagination but often exceeded the dramatist, the novelist and the director's conception of his own character. It is only when playing diverse roles that the actress was granted a sense of fulfillment (Bhattacharya 1990–91: 152–53). It would not be an exaggeration to say that these actresses 'blazed new trails' and set standards for 'classics' that were re-enacted by subsequent generations. Theatres made great achievements because of contribution of such actresses. In fact, whenever a talented actress left any theatre it caused anxiety to the directors. Theatre directors wanted good actresses to join them and for this the actresses would be offered higher wages as compared to the earlier theatres they worked with (Bhushan 1919; Bhushan 1920).

In fact, the position of the professional actresses itself was the creation of the new educated middle-class culture, supplying a need produced by the requirements of the new public theatre modelled on European lives. To train these actresses became a remarkable educative project in itself, producing women schooled in the language and sensibilities of a modernist literati. Most crucial to actresses like Binodini and Teenkori were the regular 'reading sessions' that teachers like Girish Ghosh, Amrital Basu and Ardhendu Shekhar Mustafi conducted, explicating the subtleties of a particular character and situating the character within his/her social and cultural context. Girishchandra not only encouraged Binodini to see other dramatic performances, but also insisted that she came back after the performance and offer a critique of it. Her review was then subjected to his critique. Binodini had also heard from Girishchandra about the lives of other famous English actresses (Bhattacharya 1990–91: 152–53; Bhattacharya 1998).

However, in the popular imagination, their acting prowess was seen as the continuum to the deception or *chalana* and artfulness 'natural' to women of their persuasions. No matter how consummate the artists who were pre-eminent favourites, the women actress could never supersede the fact that she lived a public life and consented to be hired for amusement by all who could command the price. Many of these stars did see the stage as the locus of dharma, while realizing at the same time that socially they were grounded for life in quite another region. The sense of achievement as actress was constantly undercut by the absence of having a place to stand, and a *sansar* to which they could belong. For an actress and more if she was also a prostitute—all evidence of respectability was ruled out. She was

'no better than she should be'. Their 'active' role, usually in sharp contrast to the passive-suffering wife, was in fact taken as an indication that they had lost true womanliness. In fact, stage actresses were doubly damned since their profession demanded a lifestyle that had little housework and child-rearing *sanskars*. Paradoxically, their greatest strengths—an unconventional family structure, the ability to defy authority if necessary, uninhibited access to male company, the capacity to work late nights and keeping irregular hours, touring the provinces and distant cities usually unchaperoned—only served to reinforce the stereotype of 'low class' women with no morals (Bhattacharya 1990–91: 155).

However such location outside the unconventional family structure did not mean that they were outside the patriarchal structure as some studies like Veena Talwar's on the lives of courtesans has tried to highlight (Oldenburg 1991). In fact, they were also largely upholding the patriarchal ideology. Despite the relative mobility, a certain measure of economic independence and the often powerful roles enacted by them, the actresses were ultimately bound by ties stronger than that of money or professional success to a predominantly middle-class ideology of domesticity. One might refer to this as a combination of the *Grihalakshmi/Annapurna* ideal with the often overlapping role of *sati*. The extent to which dominant ideals of 'purity' and 'domesticity' were internalized by the actresses themselves and their representation of such ideals in their writings is an attempt to 'redeem' themselves. Binodini's images of the mother as a true woman, or a *sati* as a true woman has to be seen as a part of the repertoire of received roles within which they were obliged to construct their sense of self. It is only when playing such roles that the actress were granted a sense of fulfillment. No wonder then, that many of these stars did see the stage as the locus of dharma, while realizing at the same time that socially they were grounded for life in quite another region (Bhattacharya 1998; Bhattacharya 1990–91).

Actresses saw in theatre a way out of or a possible choice between degrading prostitution and a means of reasonable, if somewhat uncertain income but it did not bring respect to them. However, as women they could not really move out from the 'assigned' social position into which they were born. The 'curse of birth', of *janmashap* is, incidentally, the phrase most frequently used even by the most compassionate of their colleagues while commenting on their achievements. They were clearly beyond the pale of social reform movements, as these were targeted primarily at middle-class women. They not only faced disrespect but also discrimination. The actresses' earnings were lower than their male counterparts. Their status as wage earners through theatre work (monthly salaries and later, bonuses) was never considered

sufficient to assure their economic independence. There was a constant pressure from their mothers and other female relations, as has been discussed above in the case of Teenkori, to accept the status of a mistress or become an *ashrita*, literally to be 'sheltered' by a rich upper-class male, thus gaining a modicum of financial and social security. However, such 'prizes' came with a price: the precondition to being 'protected' was retirement from the stage, or at least the forfeiture of their professional status. Binodini related in *Amar Katha* how she was obliged to resort to duplicity in order to keep her babu happy; her salary was paid secretly to her mother while she had to pretend to an amateur status. Tara Sundari, too, repeatedly left acting for the same reason. After marriage, the stipulations became even more stringent. Golap quit the stage soon after she became Mrs Sukumari Dutta. Binodini too gained the respectable status of a second wife after she had left the stage. Marriage or liaisons with the rich, even the faithful lovers and husbands, did not ensure any economic or social security. Binodini recounts the trauma of being threatened by an erstwhile babu whom she loved but who had eventually succumbed to parental pressure and married someone else. Binodini spent over thirty years of married life with a man who both respected and loved her, but she was thrown out of her home immediately after her husband's death. Sukumari had to go back to the theatre after her husband's sudden departure for England and his subsequent death there (Bhattacharya 1990–91: 150–51; Bhattacharya 1998). Binodini's autobiography reveals the extreme crisis of identity that she and other actresses like her must have suffered. Binodini's autobiography indicates a most disturbed mind, a body used and a woman betrayed by theatre.

Actresses 'deserved' the respectability accorded only by a middle-class home or *sansar*. If Binodini is well known enough to be cited as one of Calcutta's proud possessions, it is largely because she is seen to have redeemed/raised herself by virtue of her encounter with Sri Ramakrishna. This scene has been reconstructed in plays, biographies and popular journalism until it has acquired the power of an exemplum. Recast in the discourse of romantic redemption, Binodini becomes merely a charismatic public referent and less entitled to our admiration, sympathy and understanding as an actress and writer (Bhattacharya: 1990–91: 163).

Thus the actresses' lives were indicative of the contradictions of a new world of middle-class cultural production. Public theatre was a space where all issues of modernity, gender roles, caste, education and class were thrashed bare, despite the continuous debates centred around the actresses' 'immoral' presence. Inherent within the theatre world lay not merely an acknowledgement of sexual difference between men and women but a 'sub-world' attributed to

the sexuality of the prostitute actress. The peculiar configuration of class and gender made actresses a minority within a sub-group, both in terms of their background as well as the world of the stage. In the nation's narrative they were outside the pale of society, beyond the pale of social reform movements, which were targeted primarily at middle-class women.

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23

Producing the spectacle of Kamathipura

*The politics of red light visibility in Mumbai*¹

SVATI P. SHAH

...[I]maging (and *imagining*) of specific spaces associated with sex work is a crucial means by which the (contested) identity of the female street prostitute as the 'Other' is produced and maintained' (Hubbard, 1998).

In this article I examine the ways in which the iconicity of prostitution in the city of Mumbai is inflected by narratives of danger and moral decline, through public health and journalistic representations of one of the city's longest-standing red light areas, Kamathipura. In pulling apart this iconicity, I interrogate the idea that the experience of doing sex work here eclipses the importance of any other work or personal migration histories for understanding the texture of how, why, and in which context women sell sex in this district. In exploring Kamathipura's role in the image of sexual commerce, I examine the role of the district in shaping the iconicity of Mumbai itself.

Located a short distance from the Mumbai Central commuter railway station, Kamathipura is Mumbai's oldest red light district, and is integral to the image of prostitution in Mumbai and in India. An estimated 5,000–10,000 sex workers and their families live in the district itself². The vast majority are migrants from rural areas all over India and, to a smaller degree, from Nepal and Bangladesh as well. Kamathipura's role as 'the' iconic Indian red light district is unrivaled. This iconicity is part of a public discourse of prostitution, produced through media representations, public health and

anti-trafficking interventions, through gossip and rumour, and through films. Stories about prostitution in the district primarily circulate through social networks, and form a cascading, generalized awareness about the existence of this underground economy, an awareness informed by histories of the area that blur into stories, myths, and even fantastical narratives of coercion and desire.

Using examples from ethnographic fieldwork in Mumbai, conducted over the course of 18 months, I discuss the ways in which these discourses are engaged, in turn, by sex workers living and working in Kamathipura. I conclude by addressing the question of whether public discourses and regulation of visible sexual commerce in the city, such as those which swirl around Kamathipura, may inform the degree to which sexual commerce may increasingly be practised in less visible and more episodic modes, rather than being a primary income-generating activity. The regulation and attempted erasure of sex work in districts like Kamathipura are framed by historical and contemporary debates on trafficking, migration and urbanization.

Kamathipura in Public: Producing the Image of Mumbai Prostitution

The image of prostitution in Mumbai relies heavily on images produced through a wide range of public discourses about Kamathipura. Bollywood films, for example, regularly refer to Kamathipura by name, or allude to sex work and the district in dialogues which euphemistically conflate women and girls 'standing by the roadside' with the inherent 'dangers' of the city.³ During field work in Kamathipura, injunctions against my visiting the district abounded, and included the belief that the area as a whole was immoral and dangerous, and that I would be subjected to immorality and/or danger by setting foot there. Although everyone living in Kamathipura does not sell sex, almost anyone who lives, works or passes through Kamathipura is subject to the stigmas associated with prostitution. Broadly speaking, these stigmas confer a questionable morality, danger, and/or social degeneration on any person or place associated with sexual commerce; these are reinscribed by the state through the criminalization of the most publicly visible aspects of sexual commerce by the ITPA, Immoral Trafficking (Prevention) Act, which, in addition to criminalizing solicitation, criminalizes anyone surviving off the earnings of a sex worker, thereby criminalizing any adult or child living in a brothel as a presumed sex worker, or as someone cohabiting with a presumed sex worker (Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1990;

Sukhtankar, 2002). This dialectic between stigma and criminalization produces Kamathipura as a unique space within the life of the city. The criminalization of prostitution through the ITPA and the local Police Acts is experienced by residents of Kamathipura as routine raids, police sweeps, and extortion by representatives of the state for personal gain. Residents of Kamathipura are targeted because the sexual commerce there has been produced as a visible, factual, and therefore 'known' activity. Due to the visibility of soliciting clients for sex in Kamathipura, and the generalized sense throughout Mumbai that the district exists for the sole purpose of prostitution, residents have alternately experienced severe state-sponsored regulation, multiple levels of extortion, generalized indifference, and exoticized consumer interest. Public health interventions targeting HIV transmission have become an integral part of this system of representation and regulation. In part, Kamathipura's visibility within the physical and political geographies of the city has made the sexual commerce which takes place there emblematic within HIV/AIDS discourses as a 'high-risk' zone.

Media and Programmatic Interventions in Kamathipura

The presence of international and local HIV/AIDS related organizations working in Kamathipura reflects the reality of HIV as a significant health issue, as well as the expansion of funded health and AIDS programme targeting sex workers. This expansion has occurred to the degree that we may use the term 'AIDS industry' to describe their magnitude and reach. The sense of urgency to intervene in the AIDS epidemic among sex workers was fuelled by several epidemiological studies conducted in the early and mid-1990s which demonstrated that female sex workers in some Indian cities, including Mumbai, were at relatively high risk for contracting HIV (see Bhave et al. [1995]; Jain et al. [1994]; Pais [1996]). However, till date, no national level, comprehensive epidemiological study has been undertaken among sex workers. Instead, smaller-scale studies, combined with anecdotal information about individual sex workers' sexual histories, continue to show the increased risk of HIV among female sex workers. This heightened risk is primarily linked to women's inability to negotiate condom use with clients and partners. Programmes have had varied success in addressing these issues directly, and have attempted to do so by including collaborations with print and television media to disseminate information.

The media has had a long and productive relationship with the practice of prostitution as a sensational topic. Heightened awareness and fears about HIV/AIDS have produced yet another axis of interest for print and television journalists about sexual commerce. In many instances, the process of reporting about sexual commerce means the reiteration of a generalized set of elisions between prostitution, risk, and disease. An article in *The Hindu* entitled 'The Ironies of Kamathipura', is an example of journalistic reporting on Kamathipura since the early 1990s, and gives a personal account of the area, as well as the journalist's attempt to produce visual documentation of Kamathipura's sex workers.

Of all the places in the world for a television shoot, Kamathipura, Mumbai's infamous red-light area, is probably the most explosive. Mumbai is a big city with many red light areas. It is very easy for women from neighbouring States and districts to slip into prostitution here. Brothels mushroom all the time and have spread out to the most distant suburbs which betray even the slightest signs of human habitation. As there is a steady influx of migrant labour, the sex worker is assured of the basics for survival. But nothing can beat Kamathipura in the heart of Mumbai. Set up long ago by the British for their troops, it was their official 'comfort zone'. Legend has it that the tiny area boasted the most exotic consorts. Today, Kamathipura is bursting at the seams with women and garbage. Every inch of space has been occupied. New brothels have come up in nooks and crannies and there are so many sex workers without institutional support that they have no option but to freelance. Since there is no space in the brothels for them to sit in, they hang around outside in the lanes, solicit customers and then rent vacant beds, if any. The tiny lanes which slice the area into ribbons are packed with people and their belongings. While food is being prepared on a stove, a child defecates next to it. Somebody is having a bath a few feet away and yet somebody else is fornicating close by. In the midst of all this are hawkers, card sessions, goats on a tether, pimps on the prowl, customers looking for a bargain, tourists and countless sex workers. The air is thick with pollutants and decibel levels can rupture an uninitiated ear drum with ease (Menan 2001).

The scene described in the article is one of overwhelming scarcity in a densely populated urban area on the verge of infrastructural collapse. Rather than the people, the most vivid images are those of sprawl, filth, and chaos. The existence of Kamathipura itself is a kind of 'taking over', a disturbing eyesore in the middle of the city and a visible example of extreme urban poverty. The 'taking over' extends to the women working as sex workers there; with the description of women 'easily slipping' into prostitution, the area seems to exert a kind of gravitational pull for poor female migrants.

The reporter goes on to describe the experience of filming in Kamathipura since the early 1990s.

I have been involved in at least 50 television shoots in the area ever since HIV/AIDS and prostitution became the big media story of the decade.... Most television shoots in Kamathipura are the 'wham bang' variety. The cameraman holds the camera in one hand at about knee level and walks about as nonchalantly as he can pretending he is carrying a piece of luggage. Colleagues walk on either side ostensibly to protect him. Or the camera is wrapped in a piece of cloth and carried on the shoulder with a tiny opening for the 'third eye'. The walk through the area, in such cases, is like a military march past. One has to be quick and fast. If anyone catches on, there will be mayhem. Another method is to get into a vehicle and shoot through the windows. This is comparatively luxurious and the cameraman can shoot the ambience at will. If the vehicle is moving, well and good. The chances of being attacked are remote. The vehicle can go up and down the tiny streets and adjoining roads until satisfactory shots are taken. Of course, if there is any suspicion, all hell will break loose. Then the vehicle will be stopped and broken into. The crowds will love it and every little urchin and his cousin will join in the fun. But sex workers in the cages have now grown wise to all this. If they see a slow moving vehicle they instinctively start pelting it with stones.... But times have changed and equipment has got very sophisticated. In a recent shoot for French television, we shot the *Devadasis* in Kamathipura with a camera the size of a fountain pen. There was no violence or fear. Just friendship, smiles, backslapping and a great shoot (Menan 2001).

The violence of both the filming and the reaction it provoked are striking in this telling of events. In this passage, while the actions of the film crew are related sympathetically, the response of local residents is seen as irrational, even animalistic. Over the course of my own field research, which included interviews with NGO workers and sex workers working in the area, stories of journalists being attacked by unwilling objects of these shoots had taken on the quality of local legends. The telling and re-telling of these events functioned as parables of relations with outsiders looking for a story of strangers 'necessarily' filming without permission. The anecdote about stones being pelted at slow-moving cars points to the long history of uninvited cameras in the area, as well as a local desire to reduce and control this kind of visibility. Sex workers in Kamathipura regularly accused photographers of giving them 'a bad name'. Their marginally successful non-compliance with, and resistance to, attempts to re/produce abject images of prostitution serve to criticize the carefully edited visual documentation about their lives disseminated through print and television media. In the era of HIV/AIDS, the potential stakes in delivering high-quality footage of sex workers in the area to media outlets have

grown dramatically, such that stories on Kamathipura are being produced for a decidedly global media market. This global market has itself been modified with the spread of fears about HIV, and the spread of the HIV pandemic itself, such that the newer story of HIV and sex work has become both an adaptation and extension of historical, orientalist fascination with prostitution, economic and social abjection⁴, and poverty in the global South.

The Spectacle of Prostitution

In addition to providing some of the frames of reference which inform many of the policy, health and legal initiatives that target sites of where sex work is visibly, 'publicly', practised in the city, the newspaper article also represents a genre of what I will provisionally call 'prostitution reporting'. This genre includes documentary films, such as *The Selling of Innocents* (Gupta, 1997) and *Born Into Brothels* (Briski and Kaufman 2004), as well as newspaper and television news reporting which, taken together, go beyond describing the relationship between HIV and sex work, and produce a spectacle of daily life in Kamathipura. I use 'spectacle' here to mean

...that aspect of situationist theory that describes precisely how the social order imposed by the contemporary global economy maintains, perpetuates, and expands its influence through the manipulation of representations. No longer relying on force or scientific economics, the status quo of social relations is "mediated by images" (Boy, 1994: 4).

Maintaining the 'status quo of social relations' in Kamathipura, and between Kamathipura and its surrounds, through images is key to this area because it is at the heart of the city's main southern districts, rather than being at the edge of the city, and because local discourses of rescuing women and girls in Kamathipura have abounded since the beginnings of colonial discourses on charity. However, visual and textual representations of Kamathipura rarely function to mobilize actions or interventions directed among people living and working in the district. If disseminating these kinds of images did inspire their viewers to action, one might imagine the scene in Kamathipura to be somehow productively changed following the release of a film or media story, which depicts sex workers in the district as impoverished and abused. Rather, any pre-existing negative conditions in the red light area seem to be maintained or intensified as a result of these representations.

The result is that of these kinds of representations maintaining Kamathipura as an exceptional space, as compared to the normative social spaces in which images and stories about prostitution in Mumbai

are consumed. In other words, Kellner writes, ‘the spectacle is a tool of pacification and de-politicization; it is a “permanent opium war”’ (Kellner 2003: 44). The ‘popularity’ of these images among the viewing public, evidenced by the high demand for stories on Kamathipura in Europe as reported by Rajendra Menan, and by the routine nature of outsiders entering the district and wishing to interview, speak with, film, or photograph female and *hijara* sex workers there, begs the broader question about the ‘public’ itself. Whom does this image-making target, and with what effect? What is the effective subject of these representations?

To be sure, women soliciting clients for sexual services are at the heart of any visual or textual descriptions of the area. Images of women soliciting clients for sexual services, encoded as impure, immoral, and diseased within the matrices of honour, purity, and morality, have a potent discursive power. This discursive power is conceptually linked with Phil Hubbard’s articulation of the uses of ‘otherness’ in his work on urban geographies as marked by prostitution. Regarding the question of imaging/imagining women in prostitution themselves, he writes:

That the figure of the female prostitute has always constituted a central figure in the social imagination, and has played an important symbolic role in the definition of moral and sexual standards, is unequivocal.... In particular, the construction of prostitutes as Other to dominant heteropatriarchal norms is considered with reference to the imaginative and discursive identification of red-light districts as spaces of Other (or alternate) morality (Hubbard 1998: 55–56).

If sex workers in Kamathipura represent an ‘alternate’ morality, that is, the lack of morality, the spectacle of Kamathipura helps to constitute a viewing public which is moral, pure, and, recalling the histories of venereal disease and prostitution in India, without disease. In light of this reading, the sense of desperation in Menan’s article as he recounts the lengths to which journalists have gone to retrieve images of Kamathipura at work takes on a different meaning. The stakes in producing these images do not simply include the job at hand; rather, these representations serve to maintain the status quo within wider discourses of purity, morality, and bodily integrity.

An HIV/AIDS Prevention Campaign in Kamathipura

Population Services International (PSI) is a US-based NGO which conducts condom distribution and HIV-prevention and awareness programmes

throughout the global South. Population Services International has been based for more than ten years in Kamathipura. In this section, I offer an analysis of PSI's national HIV AIDS public awareness campaign, conducted from November 2002 through February 2003, called 'Balbir Pasha'. In offering an analysis of the campaign, and how images used in the campaign became part of the narrative of Kamathipura during this time, I do not intend to do a critique of Population Services International's programmes in general. Population Services International's work is both significant and geographically diverse. I am interested in the Balbir Pasha campaign here because it was able to generate a rich set of discourses about the city, the prostitution, and the district.

The campaign was conducted in the high-HIV prevalence states of Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Manipur, and Nagaland. The campaign was extremely visible in Mumbai, with billboards concentrated in or near red light districts. The campaign was funded through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), with funds earmarked specifically for combating HIV/AIDS, and used television commercials, print advertisements, and billboards. It was successful in several respects, especially in sparking public discussion about HIV and sex work. The campaign's content relied on a storyline whose main character was a man called 'Balbir Pasha'. The campaign's slogan, 'Will Balbir Pasha Get AIDS?', was accompanied by scenarios in which Balbir Pasha's sexual behaviour was assessed for his risk of contracting HIV. Figure 23.1 shows one of the first images from the campaign. The cartoon bubble reads 'Will Balbir Pasha Get AIDS?' Photographic images in the campaign almost always depicted lower middle class or working class male labourers, like this one, which shows men at work delivering food *tiffins* to offices throughout the city. These cryptic images were run initially in order to spark interest, and were followed up by pictorial billboards which depicted three scenarios about Balbir Pasha's sexual behaviour with women who were never directly identified as sex workers. However, the iconographic images of women in the billboards were designed to be understood as sex workers. Sex workers, according to the PSI in the campaign, are 'potential bridging populations' that can facilitate the spread of HIV 'into the general population' (Population Services International, 2003).

The iconography used to depict women doing sex work in the images, as shown in Figure 23.2 such as that in 'Theme 2', used the sexualized silhouette of a woman leaning against a doorway. Population Services International received criticism for the campaign from *Mumbaikars* and from government agencies. In Maharashtra, the Maharashtra State Commission of Women, the state Ministry of Health, and the Advertising Standards Council of India either

Figure 23.1
Initial 'feeder' image from the Balbir Pasha campaign
(Population Services International, 2003)



demanded the campaign's withdrawal, or asked PSI to 'defend' the campaign's content. The campaign continued despite these criticisms. According to PSI's report on the campaign, many of the criticisms were aimed at its depiction of sex workers.

[A] criticism was that the campaign was perceived to be 'anti-women' as it depicted that the male character (Balbir Pasha) could be at risk for AIDS since he is having unprotected sex with a woman (Manjula), thereby implying that HIV is passed on from the woman to the man. This concern was particularly voiced after the second theme of the campaign, in which it is suggested that Balbir's 'regular' partner Manjula has several 'regulars' of her own. In addition to women named Manjula that took personal offence (and called the *Saadhan* [PSI] helpline to express their outrage), some women's groups made a point to argue that as the name Manjula is a Hindu name, the campaign targeted this specific religious group. PSI staff responded by explaining that rather than trying to stigmatize women working in the commercial sex industry, the campaign aimed to protect them, by motivating their male clients to adopt safer sex practices. This principle follows the UNAIDS approach of 'men

Figure 23.2

The three billboards that were placed all over Mumbai, especially in or near red light districts (Population Services International, 2003)

Theme 1

The indoor and outdoor media produced contained dialogue and/or text that communicated the following line, pictured on the billboard to the right:

“Balbir Pasha sometimes forgets to use condoms when he is drunk. But by not wearing a condom just one time, it is possible to get AIDS. Will Balbir Pasha get AIDS?”



Theme 2

This message, as with the others, appeared in newspapers as shown to the left, on billboards, on train posters, bus shelters, and via television and radio programming.

“Balbir Pasha only goes to (has sex with) Manjula. But others go to Manjula too. Will Balbir Pasha get AIDS?”



Theme 3

The execution of this last ‘main message’ was the first time the Saadhan helpline number was mentioned, almost as a precursor to the final “Connect to Help Line” phase that immediately followed the rollout of this message.

Balbir Pasha only has “relationships” with healthy-looking people. But you can’t tell by looking who has AIDS. Will Balbir Pasha get AIDS?”



make a difference’, which places greater responsibility on men to change attitudes and behaviour, which in turn would enable the empowerment of women necessary for protection from HIV infection (Population Services International 2003).

Although the PSI report does not discuss sex workers’ responses to the campaign, this argument suggests that women’s empowerment is its ultimate goal. If women’s empowerment itself is reliant on men’s behaviour change, we may ask what definition of ‘empowerment’ is being used here? Does ‘empowerment’ mean male clients using condoms more regularly with female sex workers, or is there another meaning of ‘empowerment’ embedded in the campaign, one which includes women desisting from sexual commerce altogether? Despite the campaign’s focus on male clients of sex workers, critics of the campaign stressed that it hurt the image of ‘Indian women’

as a group. Strong public reactions against the usage of the name 'Manjula' for the character of the female sex worker in the campaign, for example, indicate that some women with this name, and some Hindu middle-class women, felt implicated, by association, with prostitution. PSI also received criticism about the use of the name Balbir Pasha on the grounds that the name would be offensive to Punjabi and Pashtun communities. PSI received enough criticism about this aspect of the campaign to warrant a response to this issue in a *Times of India* interview published near the end the campaign. In the article, PSI stated that the name Balbir Pasha was fabricated, and was not meant to indicate a particular region or community, so that no one would be offended (*The Times of India* 2003). As it happened, much of the public discourse on sex work, and Kamathipura, inspired by the campaign was expressed as a debate about names. The following narrative from my fieldwork during this period illustrates some of the public reactions and criticisms generated by the campaign.

I bought a 7-rupee tabloid newspaper today called 'JAM' (*Just Another Magazine*) with a spoof on the Balbir Pasha campaign. The front page read 'Will Balbir Pasha Get Laid?' with a caricatured 'Mrs Pasha' in the same black-on-blue motif as the campaign itself. The 'Mrs Pasha' figure is wielding a rolling pin and looking angry because she's just 'found out' that her 'husband', Balbir Pasha, is also a client for paid sex. The newspaper was sponsored by Pepsi and, written mostly in English, targets English-speaking urban teenagers; this issue also included a Shakira pin-up, and a pull-out poster of the band Santana. Having bought it on the train platform in the morning, and having forgotten it my bag, I wound up carrying it around all day in plain view, unaware of the interest it would attract. On the commuter train during rush hour, I managed to find a seat in a very crowded car in the all-gender general compartment. I sat down and tried to bury my head in the paper, which was by now tattered from all the passing around it had already been through. On the journey to Mumbai Central, I eventually noticed that the man sitting opposite me was staring at my copy of 'JAM'. He finally caught my eye and said in English, 'Can I just see it, please?' while reaching for the paper in my lap. 'Look,' he said, pointing to the image on the front and smiling with bemusement to a younger man sitting two people down, 'Balbir Pasha.' The man holding the tabloid looked to be in his forties, with salt and pepper hair and moustache. Wearing a pressed white short-sleeved shirt and carrying a burlap sari bag, he fully looked the part of a respectable, middle-class businessman or merchant on his way to work.

'Do you know this campaign?' I asked. 'Balbir Pasha?' He nodded.

'What do you think?'

‘See,’ he said authoritatively, ‘this gives wrong impression. The way they have put this up everywhere, in bus stops and all, it isn’t nice. The children can see, they will ask their parents. It doesn’t look nice. See, with one thing they have been very good. Balbir is a Punjabi name, and Pasha, it is a common name in Afghanistan. But Manjula, a lot of women from the Gujarati Kutchhi community are called Manjula. And think how they feel seeing this.’

‘So, “Balbir Pasha” is good because it’s not an Indian name?’

‘Pasha is not Indian, yes. But *Manjula* ... think how they must feel.’

Reactions against the use of the name ‘Manjula’ in this ad campaign revealed the contours, or lack thereof, in public perception and stigmatization of sex work. Even the association of a name, and therefore of a region, language, and religion with a cartoon, an iconographic sex worker was deemed unacceptable by some. For many, this merited an attempt to have the campaign stopped altogether or, at least, required a phone call to PSI to register a complaint.

Despite this attempt to launch an awareness campaign aimed at male clients of female sex workers, public perceptions and discourses about the campaign remained focused on women. The meanings of this focus can be understood in the broader context of perceptions of women doing sex work, of red light areas, and of Kamathipura, such as those represented in *The Hindu* article on filming in the district.

Conclusion

In her article ‘The Discourse of Global Compassion and the Media’, scholar Birgitta Höijer recounts Natan Sznajder’s thesis on the concept of visually-mediated public compassion.

According to Sznajder, public compassion originates in an abstract, theoretical and rational idea of humanity, not in religious charity. It is closely connected with the ideas of the Enlightenment and *the humanitarian movements that arose in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, such as movements to abolish slavery, child labour, and so on*. Sznajder defines two perspectives on public compassion: one related to democratization processes in which equality is central, and the other related to the market society, in which an extending exchange of goods and services unintentionally also extends the moral concern for strangers. He also discusses the Marxist critique according to which compassion is ‘nothing other than the narcissistic desires of an exploitative bourgeoisie to feel good about itself’ (Sznajder 1998: 121; Höijer 2003: emphasis added).

In discussing representations of Kamathipura in this article, I have attempted to map the intersection between Sznajder's genealogical argument about compassion and Debord's theory of the spectacle (1994). Sznajder's necessarily genealogy references imperial Britain, where, in the 18th and 19th centuries, religious and humanitarian movements famously included the campaign against white slavery. This campaign became emblematic in Josephine Butler's, and the Ladies National Association's eventually-successful efforts to repeal the Contagious Disease Acts there. The Contagious Disease Acts in India, which were suspended five years after they were repealed in Britain, helped give rise to abolitionist discourses of prostitution; discourses which contributed to a host of attempts to regulate and eliminate sexual commerce, including the ITPA. Contemporary criminalization of sex workers and/or clients focuses on visibility, on prostitution that is 'seen' by 'the public', and on the existence of urban red light zones like Kamathipura.

Kamathipura's existence, and the existence of the women, children, men, and *hijaras* who live and/or work there, is mediated through its existence as an object that can and must be seen. One aspect of this mediation is the way in which the criminalization of prostitution is expressed as a criminal sense of literally *being seen* as a red light zone. The other aspect of this mediation is the proliferation of visual representations of the district and, by extension, of 'prostitution *itself*'. These representations are being produced by media, state and non-state actors, and by local social networks.

If stated, the driving force behind these representations is said to be that of producing awareness, concern, and even action on behalf of sex workers in India. Sznajder's latter definition of public compassion as 'related to the market society, in which an extending exchange of goods and services unintentionally also extends the moral concern for strangers' reflects this intention, though the result of these representations is more often 'spectacular' in the Debordian sense. A key element of the definition of a 'spectacle' in this sense is that, rather than being mobilized to action or concern, the audience—in this case, 'the public'—participates in acts of shared voyeurism. These acts are criticized unequivocally by Sznajder in his use of Marx's argument that compassion is 'nothing other than the narcissistic desires of an exploitative bourgeoisie to feel good about itself' (Höijer 2003). I do not mean to suggest that the notion of 'public' in this context is restricted to the middle and upper classes. Given the range of representational modes, I have discussed in this article—television and print media, billboards, NGO and governmental reports and presentations, as well as gossip, opinions and rumours disseminated through fluid social networks—it would be impossible to limit the notion of audience to some generalized notion of the bourgeoisie.

However, using the notion of spectacle as that which ‘maintains the status quo’, it is plausible to think of these representations as sets of practices which reiterate and maintain norms vis-à-vis gender and sexuality. In other words, whereas ‘the public’ is not a euphemism for ‘the bourgeoisie’, the ‘public’ does become a way of naming non-sex workers. Rather than maintain class divisions per se, participating in the discourse of material abjection in Mumbai’s red light areas serves to maintain distinctions between sex workers and non-sex workers, because members of ‘the public’ are able to participate in the *spectacle* of prostitution by specifically *not* visibly participating in prostitution itself.

The spectacle is constituted through the construction of otherness, in which the spectacle represents the sex-worker-ness against which the audience understands its own non-sex-worker-ness, and the normative moralities from which it derives. The power of how prostitution in Kamathipura is represented is evident in the daily life in the district through repeated references among sex workers to raids and remand homes, the police, and the assertion of having arrived there by one’s own choice. Spectacular representations of Kamathipura as abject create a more normative image than would representations of sexual commerce as being, for example, one strategy among many for attaining a sustainable livelihood. While Kamathipura has offered a rare opportunity for attaining slightly more stable housing and work than other options would for some, the serious consequences of social stigma and illegality deriving from sexual commerce for sex workers are apparent. In this regard, one Mumbai sex worker asserted that ‘sex workers have a bad destiny. Domestic workers have a good one.’ Despite sex workers’ ability to support entire families in the city, and to send much needed remittances to their villages as well, the stigma of prostitution as a threat to individual and family honour precludes its open acknowledgement. Instead, narratives about daughters working as day-wage workers are woven throughout the story of what the family ‘knows’ about how these remittances are being earned and sent back home. The epistemology of work between the city and the village, and in the city itself is layered. Women in Kamathipura often spoke of the complex relationship between ‘knowing’ and ‘believing’ in terms of what could be spoken about without suffering social and economic consequences. Ultimately, the ground used for navigating the distance between what is seen, spoken, and known about sexual commerce in the city is constituted by shared engagements with stigma, honour and law.

Kamathipura stands as one example of how the politics of prostitution and visibility produce one another in Mumbai. Extending this argument beyond Kamathipura, there are myriad spaces throughout the city where

sexual commerce occurs, including streets, minor red light districts, and spaces for soliciting other kinds of manual labour (Shah, 2005). These spaces being less visibly used for sex work, and more liminal as zones for soliciting labour, contribute to a less regulated degree of stigma, police raids, and the like there. In a sense, the visibility of prostitution in Kamathipura produces the invisibility of sexual commerce throughout the city by essentially driving it underground. This is unlike Calcutta, where the most visible spaces for sexual commerce are also the most visible spaces for sex worker-led organizing. The Sonagachi Project in Calcutta's main red light area has been in existence since the early 1990s, and has pioneered a model of peer-led regulation of red light areas to enforce nearly universal condom use, to monitor, address, and prevent trafficking in red light areas, and to advocate against and prevent police harassment. Both the Sonagachi Project and groups like VAMP, a collective of sex workers associated with an HIV/AIDS-related NGO in Sangli, southern Maharashtra, call into question the lack of a speaking subject in discourses on prostitution in Mumbai. This is not to imply that sex workers in Kamathipura do not engage with questions of law, visibility, etc. However, unlike Calcutta and Sangli, which are respectively urban and rural, Mumbai has not been able to maintain sex worker-led collectives or organizations.

Rather than producing an organized response from sex workers in Mumbai, the legal structures in place have tended to produce more invisible sex work, in the form of sexual commerce conducted in greater secrecy, or conducted more episodically. At the same time, Kamathipura proliferates with a range of service-oriented and abolitionist NGOs. For this, and many other reasons, Kamathipura's iconicity as a red light district in India is unique. In the era of neo-liberalism, as governmental concerns about trafficking and cross-border migrations have intensified, Kamathipura will most likely face greater degrees of changing legal regulations, and will continue to be the subject of debate. What will ultimately develop in this space may be both more visible in law and in 'public' view, while considerably less visible in practice.

Notes

1. Reproduced with permission from Svati P. Shah, *Producing The Spectacle of Kamathipura: The Politics of Red Light Visibility in Mumbai*, *Cultural Dynamics*, 18(3): 267–90. (© 2006 SAGE Publications, London, Thousand Oaks, CA and New Delhi).
2. Kamathipura is a slum area, which means, among other things, that there is a great deal of irregular and transitory housing. Even with a systematic survey, it

would be difficult to have an exact count of how many sex workers live and work in the district. This estimate is based on reports from local NGOs who provide services to sex workers in the district.

3. For example, in Saathiya (2002).
4. Bobby Jordan, a reporter for a South African newspaper, is more explicit about this in his characterization of Kamathipura as 'the fleshy centre of India's HIV time-bomb' (Jordan, 2002).

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