

**ACTIVISM, SEX WORK, AND WOMANHOOD IN NORTH INDIA**

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## **ACTIVISM, SEX WORK, AND WOMANHOOD IN NORTH INDIA**

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This dissertation is an ethnography of a sex worker activist organization in North India. The NGO *Guria Swayam Sevi Sansthan* has been working to end brothel-based prostitution in Shivdaspur, a small red light area on the outskirts of Varanasi, since 1993. In the course of their 19-year interaction with the red light area, they have used a variety of tactics, ranging from non-violent protest of the exploitation of sex workers in Shivdaspur, to education programs, to “raid-and-rescue” tactics, settling on the latter tactic to further their cause. This dissertation describes both the NGO’s activism and its interaction with Shivdaspur, focusing on the ways in which the middle-class founders of the organization conceptualize the women they seek to aid. I argue that *Guria*-affiliated activists, and their middle-class supporters, view those who live and work in Shivdaspur through the lens of their own values and priorities, including a hard-lined focus on the implementation of human rights, respect for women, the importance of civil society, and the desirability of a functional, non-corrupt State. These values lead directly to the conceptualization of sex workers as living lives outside the boundaries of what is considered acceptable for women, and for human beings more generally, and ironically to activism that excludes sex workers as well as pimps and brothel keepers. Individual chapters of the dissertation describe various forms of such exclusion: “raid-and-rescue” activist tactics that draw on and contribute to an understanding of sex workers as bare life, the disavowal of sex workers’ marriages, the exclusion of Shivdasपुरi sex workers from an NGO-sponsored concert meant to

showcase the artistic talents of sex workers and other marginalized communities, and the silence and disbelief that surrounds sex workers' narratives of their lives and working conditions.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION: ACTIVISM, SEX WORK AND WOMANHOOD IN NORTH INDIA

*"Because what is inside the red light area has a repercussion with what is outside, you see – what is outside, what is the status of women outside? What is the status of law and order outside? What is the – you understand! This red light area is not out of India, you see?" -- Ajeet Singh, May 18, 2010.*

In 1993, Ajeet Singh went into Shivdaspur. Shivdaspur is a small village in Varanasi District, Uttar Pradesh; it also happens to be a red light area. Local lore has it that he was wearing a torn and tattered *kurta* (tunic), indicating at once a sort of humbleness or poverty and, perhaps, disreputability. His goal was to improve the lives of sex workers and their children. Nineteen years later, Ajeet's organization *Guria Swayam Sevi Sansthan*<sup>1</sup> is in Shivdaspur, with outreach operations also occurring in red light districts in Mao District and Allahabad (both in Uttar Pradesh), as well as a *bediya*<sup>2</sup> village in the state of Madhya Pradesh. The NGO has an operating budget of close to US\$100,000 funded by prominent international aid organizations, including CRY (Child Rights and You), Action AID, and the United Nations GIFT (Global Initiative to Fight Trafficking) program. Ajeet was nominated for the 2010 Front Line Award for Human Rights Defenders at risk, and was awarded "Man of the Year" in 2011 by Indian English-Language news magazine *The Week*. Shivdaspur, once a bustling red light alley lined with underage girls in miniskirts, is now a relatively

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<sup>1</sup> Literally, the name means "Doll Voluntary Aid Organization." The name was chosen because it is a voluntary (and also sometimes paid) organization that provides aid to sex workers, who are alluded to in the metaphor "doll." Ajeet chose this appellation because he likens sex workers to dolls, who are played with and perhaps even loved for a brief period of time, but can be cast aside and abandoned at any time.

<sup>2</sup> The *bediya* are a North Indian scheduled caste whose occupation has traditionally been sex work done by sisters and daughters of the caste. See Agrawal 2007 for a historical and ethnographic account.



sleepy, almost pastoral village, in which most of the major brothels are boarded up, and where semi-independent sex workers solicit from a few scattered doorways.

The dominant sound in Shivdaspur during the afternoons is that of children screaming out their ABCs and *ka-kha-ga-ghas* (the Hindi equivalent) and, later, playing rambunctiously in the Guria-operated children's center. On days when Ajeet Singh, or more often his wife Manju, are visiting the area, individual women come to the Center to discuss what can be done about problems ranging from harassment within the community and access to potable water in the village, to individual health problems that need to be addressed. If needed, follow-up appointments are scheduled with a trusted doctor on the Benares Hindu University campus, the doctors' fees paid by *Guria* if they are beyond the means of the women in question. Following an afternoon session in the Children's Center, when the older Shivdasपुर children have returned from their days in the local public and private schools which they attend under the funding and/or tutelage of *Guria*, all of the children gather in the NGO's second community building for a freshly-prepared meal of *sabji* (vegetables), rice and – on special occasions – *puri* (fried bread). The older children then meet under the branches of a large *peepul* tree on a piece of government-owned land in the heart of the residential portion of the red light district, for additional tutoring and help with homework. As a result of *Guria's* nineteen years of activism in Shivdaspur and on behalf of Shivdaspur, many children of sex workers attend mainstream schools without facing major social difficulty, and literacy rates among the children attending Guria's informal educational center are observationally high. Moreover, the emotional bond that the children of Shivdaspur appear to have with Ajeet, Manju, and other, long-term teachers

provides stability and structure in the lives of the children of Shivdaspur that was lacking prior to the NGO's arrival.

Lest it sound that Guria's interaction with Shivdaspur is an idyllic tale of activism and community transformation, though, it must be noted that considerable conflict and violence has attended the changes that *Guria* has brought about in Shivdaspur. In addition to its educational and health programs, as well as the sounding board and support system that *Guria* provides for many residents of Shivdaspur, the NGO has also engaged in "rescue operations," in which they, with groups of volunteers, have raided brothels in Shivdaspur in order to remove underage girls from prostitution, resulting in a host of legal activities that have decimated the red light industry in Shivdaspur. Ajeet's nomination for the Front Line award in 2010 came on the heels of a series of threats made against his life by Shivdasपुरi men, and relayed to him through hushed cell phone calls by a Shivdasपुरi resident whose name Ajeet did not reveal. *Guria* and the community of Shivdasपुर, as represented by the village-level politicians and other residents, were engaged in a conflict over whether the organization would be allowed to continue teaching evening tutoring sessions on the piece of communally-owned land under the *peepul* tree in Shivaspur village. Local *goondas* ("thugs," as they were termed by Ajeet, although the *goondas* themselves may have had different ideas about their identity) had broken the lock off of the storeroom door on this property, where *Guria* stored floor mats, books, and a gas-fueled lighting fixture, and turned the belongings out into the street, insisting that *Guria* was no longer welcome to teach the community's children in the evening. A mob of women had converged on the house of the two Shivdasपुरi employees of the NGO, demanding that the employees stop working for *Guria*.

In short, after a few years of tense coexistence, collectives of individuals within Shivdaspur were breaking what Ajeet termed the “blood-filled silence” that characterized Shivdaspur’s relationship with his NGO. For a month, NGO-community interactions were characterized by threats, accusations, and displaced belongings. During this time a tense *panchayat* (village council)<sup>3</sup> was called by the NGO, from which Shivdasपुरi women and community leaders walked out in protest of the NGO’s continued involvement in the community. During this time, *Guria* teachers and local children participated in regular sit-ins outside of the disputed property. NGO-community relations eventually settled back into a tense calm, but this incident is just one of many that have characterized the conflicts and compromises between *Guria* and Shivdaspur over the course the last nineteen years.

This project was originally conceptualized as a study of nostalgia and activism, seeking to outline the role of longing for the past, in the form of the glamorized South Asian courtesan, in inspiring attempts to change the present and future. *Guria Sansthan*’s involvement with *tawa’if* and *bai-ji* (courtesans), and their attempts to engender respect for them through an annual concert series and by providing classical music training to sex workers in order to refashion them as courtesans raised questions of how understandings of past traditions might inspire and inform contemporary activism. This project was intended to be a study of how *Guria Sansthan* and the women who engage in activism through the organization constructed the historical figure of the *tawa’if*, and how their nostalgia for pre-Colonial forms of sex work affected their activism in the present. How did

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<sup>3</sup> The Panchayat refers to a village-level form of governance in India, Pakistan and Nepal, in which a council of chosen representatives settled disputes within the village. The Panchayat was incorporated into the modern Indian democratic system, with Panchayat governments elected at the local level. *Guria*’s calling of a “Panchayat” was not literally a calling of the village-level political body of Shivdaspur, but more a figural allusion to the Panchayat as a means of arriving at justice.

women seeking to assume *tawa'if* identity in Shivdaspur understand that identity, and how did they conceptualize the past of sex work in South Asia as opposed to the present? Did they have a concept or understanding of the *tawa'if* that differed from *Guria's*? Did *Guria's* focus on the *tawa'if*, a much glamorized and romanticized figure in contemporary South Asian media and arts, help the organization to more effectively spread its message of respect for contemporary sex workers and reform of Shivdaspur into an “exploitation free red light area” in the public sphere? In short, how “useful” was nostalgia in inspiring activism?

In seeking to answer these questions, I anticipated conducting fieldwork that would draw on not only the positions and voices of *Guria Sansthan's* founder and current employees, but also those of contemporary Shivdaspuris. It was my intention to begin my fieldwork with interviews and participant observation with the NGO, including daily volunteer work in its informal children's school in Shivdaspur, following which I would use connections made during that volunteer work to conduct semi-structured interviews about the role of the *tawa'if* identity in their work and self-understanding with as many women from Shivdaspur as I could encounter. I intended to follow up these semi-structured interviews with more in-depth interviews with the women for whom *tawa'if* identity was most salient. The women's understanding of the *tawa'if* and the role of such an identity in improving the lots of contemporary sex workers through the NGO *Guria Sansthan* was then to be compared to the NGO's understanding of its work and the role of *tawa'if* within it. While I anticipated that my research questions might change during the course of fieldwork, it was my intention as a researcher to interact with and describe both the NGO and the community in which it works.

Upon my arrival to begin long-term fieldwork in August of 2009, it quickly became clear to me that using regular volunteer work with *Guria* to make my own contacts in Shivdaspur would be more difficult than I had thought. During my preliminary fieldwork in 2008, Ajeet had mentioned that the NGO's relationship with the community had become increasingly tense since the rescue/raids that his organization had conducted in 2005. He said it would still be possible to conduct field research in Shivdaspur with his organization, but that it would have to be slightly more difficult than it might have been had I come to Shivdaspur prior to 2005. Ajeet reiterated this concern when I returned in 2009, emphasizing to me that if I were to have access to Shivdaspur through his NGO, it would be necessary for me to interact with the community in the same way that the other teachers at the informal education center did. This would mean that I could not simply wander around the neighborhood, as this could be dangerous for a variety of reasons. The simplest of these reasons was that the area was considered unsafe due to the criminal activity that occurred there, a concern that was reiterated by many Benarsis with whom I spoke. Regardless of whether they had first-hand experience of Shivdaspur, Benarsis spoke of the area as unsafe, emphasizing their fear of being mugged or being verbally harassed and assaulted if they were to go into Shivdaspur. The concerns of *Guria* staff members went beyond that of mugging to the threat of physical assault, given that the NGO's goal to close all brothels that it viewed as exploitative was expressly antagonistic to economic activities in the village. Ajeet Singh echoed these concerns, but had a third concern as well: that as a foreigner affiliated with the NGO, I might be interpreted as a spy for them if I deviated from the NGO's routine activities within the village, which could be dangerous for not only myself and the NGO, but also for women seen talking to me, as such women might be

interpreted as colluding with *Guria* against brothel keepers in the area, as some Shivdasपुरi women had done in the past. Therefore, a condition of my conducting fieldwork about *Guria Sansthan*, and about Shivdasपुर under its auspices, was that I behave as any other NGO employee or volunteer. Interactions with the community of Shivdasपुर could be arranged when the NGO had some reason for doing so (holiday celebrations or educational programs, for example) and interviews with the individual women would also be arranged through the NGO.

Given that there seemed to be no other reasonable way to routinely access Shivdasपुर without the NGO, and that attempting to access Shivdasपुर in other ways would mean not working with the NGO, I opted to accept *Guria*'s control of my actions in Shivdasपुर, hoping to answer some of my original research questions, but also deciding to pay close attention to the NGO's interactions with Shivdasपुर. I turned my attentions to the reasons for the fraught relationship between the NGO and Shivdasपुर, and to questions of how the NGO continued to do social work in an area that was hostile to its goals, as well as how the individuals who make up the NGO understand those who live in the community in Shivdasपुर. As the period of my field research went on, the depths of the antagonism between *Guria* and Shivdasपुर became more apparent, culminating in a direct conflict between the NGO and village leaders over *Guria*'s use of land owned by the village government.

Although I was able to go to Shivdasपुर on a near-daily basis, my actions within the village were encumbered by my affiliation with the NGO, and therefore never did assume the sort of familiarity and rapport with the community that is the goal of ethnographic research. I was able achieve such rapport within the NGO, and with some of the young

women who came to Guria's informal school on a regular basis. Additionally, the NGO did facilitate (and tightly monitor) my meeting and speaking with several sex workers in Shivdaspur. As a result of these methodological restrictions, while this ethnography presents perspectives about sex work and the identity of the women who live in Shivdaspur from both Shivdaspuris and the NGO Guria, the ethnography skews more heavily towards presenting the attitudes and beliefs of the NGO. Other, valuable perspectives on Shivdaspur, most notably those of those who keep brothels, and who are involved in "pimping," "procuring," and "trafficking" (from the perspective of the NGO), were likewise lost due to my methodological constraints.

This dissertation thus has broad ethnographic components: The first is about the social attitudes towards sex work and sex workers that are held by the middle-class activists that constitute Guria's leadership, as well as many of the NGO's employees. The second is about the self-presentation of Shivdaspuris to me, as a researcher affiliated with the NGO. Questions of *tawa'if* identity gave-way to other aspects of Shivdaspuri women's self-presentation, namely wifehood (chapter 4) and a general silence on their work (chapter 6), although the legacy of the *tawa'if* identity for both the NGO and Varanasi more generally are discussed in chapter 5. Given that much of the focus in this ethnography is on the attitudes of middle-class and elite NGO affiliated activists towards sex workers, Guria's activism must be situated within the framework of contemporary anthropological and broader social science literature on the middle class and NGOs in India, as well as NGO activism in the broader world context.

## **NGOs and the Middle Class**

NGOs have been widely linked to, and critiqued for, their association with and participation in the entrenchment of neoliberalism by providing services and support systems that were previously considered the responsibility of governments (Jakimow 2012; Kamat 2004; Ong 2007; Petras 1999), and in some cases privatizing redress of the sorts of social justice issues that have historically been the objects of mass public movements (Pinkney 2009). Aihwa Ong describes “emergent spaces of would-be NGO administration” in which those who are disenfranchised or excluded from access to state power and protections appeal not to the state itself but rather to NGOs to enforce their rights vis-à-vis the state. “By mapping a biocartography of the politically excluded, NGOs negotiate with various governments and cultural authorities for a transnational sense of moral responsibility” to the excluded (2007:21). NGOs thus mediate between the state and those who, for a variety of reasons, lack access to the state. However, because of the private and in some cases voluntary nature of NGOs, “unlike governments and state bureaucracies, there are no mechanisms by which NGOs can be made accountable to the people they serve” (Kamat 2004:156). Allowing promotion of rights and the provisioning of social services to fall to non-governmental entities thus allows responsibility for the public good to fall into private hands while reducing recourse on the part of the populations served by NGOs. In addition to the association of NGOs with the spread of neoliberalism, NGOs have been described as producing and/or coopting normative perspectives on the populations that they serve (Cheng 2010; Jakimow 2012; Nagar and Raju 2003).



While acknowledging the entanglement of NGOs with neoliberal governmental and economic policies, and noting the rise in sheer number of NGOs with the expansion of privatization in the governmental sphere, several anthropologists and cultural geographers (Kipnis 2007; Mercer 2002; Townsend *et al* 2004) caution against flattening the world of NGOs into the reified henchmen of global economic liberality. Rather, individual organizations might fall anywhere along the spectrum of supporting (intentionally or otherwise) governmental disavowal of the public good to opening up “spaces of resistance” (Townsend *et al* 2004:872) to these same processes. In India, non-governmental and voluntary organizations have additionally been characterized as policers of the State (Jackinow 2012; Sooryamoorthy and Gangrade 2001). Set against a backdrop of readily acknowledged and expected (if shameful) State corruption,

the role of voluntary organizations [in India] is to serve as watchdogs and create capacity among the people to remain constantly vigilant so that nobody dupes them. They can play pioneering roles in developing people’s institutions and as catalytic agents make them self-reliant. They should empower people and create confidence in them to take care of themselves rather than depend on others.” (Sooryamoorthy and Gangrade 2001:xi-xii)

NGOs in Sooryamoorthy and Gangrade’s view serve a vital public function in forcing the government to live up to its obligations to its citizens, a function that Ajeet Singh was keen to expound upon. If the State simply routinely enforced what he considered the very good laws that it already had re: prostitution and trafficking, his organization would have little work to do. Guria’s actions thus police the actual Police into enforcing anti-trafficking laws in Shivdaspur. As will be shown in chapters 2 and 3, Guria enables (and enforces) mediation between the police, the State, and individuals disenfranchised by poverty, caste, illiteracy, and violations of both the law and gendered norms of sexuality. This forced mediation helps some individuals to access social services and the protection of the law

that is owed to them by the State, but additionally forces the State to crack down on the predominant form of livelihood in Shivdaspur.

Because NGOs often mediate between the state and those excluded from access to State services or other forms of social power (such as education or information), they are often additionally in a position to produce discourses about the excluded. Jakinow (2012), in her study of small-scale NGOs in the northern Indian state of Uttarkhand, describes NGOs and their workers as “peddlers of information”: they peddle information *to* the poor, about how to improve their lives, but also deal in information *about* the poor or marginalized, which the NGOs themselves produce. The production of such information on the part of NGOs is intended to raise social and state-level awareness about the difficulties faced by the marginalized, and to encourage the provisioning of services that might bring relief to the specific population at hand. However, as ethnographers (Cheng 2010: 192-218; Jackinow 2012:27) have described, in pluralizing the voices of the groups that they represent, for the purposes of fund- or awareness-raising, NGOs can flatten the voices of the populations they serve, often producing (or reproducing) damaging narratives about the capacities and plights of the marginalized, thereby perpetuating marginalization. Describing this problem in the context of discourse on trafficking constructed by South Korean anti-trafficking NGOs, Cheng argues that

the problem of accessibility [to trafficked women] justifies the generalization of a few (often the most tragic) testimonials as representative of hundreds of thousands of cases that appear as no more than statistical estimates. This gives NGOs disproportionate power to speak for a largely invisible group (2010:196).

Guria, as explained throughout this dissertation, produces narratives of sex workers as enslaved victims of trafficking, violence, and neglect on the part of their families, the state,

and society more generally. Such narrative production is experience-based (i.e., it comes from the NGO's nearly 20 years of on-the-ground experience in Shivdaspur), but in its production and dissemination of this narrative as normative, it ignores facets of Shivdasपुरi women's lives that are salient to them as individuals even as it glosses over the aspects of their lives (wifhood, familial care, household drudgery) that are concordant with broader narratives of Indian womanhood.

Despite their socially recognized roles in the necessary policing of the State, provisioning of services to marginalized segments of society, and producing information about the marginalized, NGOs in India are additionally the objects of considerable criticism and skepticism due to the corruption and self-aggrandizement of their leaders. Sooryamoorthy and Grenade comment :

Apprehension is common over the decreasing charm and reputations of NGOs over the past few decades. The term NGO itself has acquired a pejorative connotation. Voluntarism is now being likened to comfortable living, money, and a secure job. NGO leaders, as often heard, are becoming ostentatious, not only in their personal behavior, but also in their work, which usually aims at the downtrodden. The leaders live in palatial houses and have become jet-setters. The hallmarks of voluntarism—austerity and simplicity—are jettisoned. Have the NGOs lost the sanctity they could once boast of? (2001:5).

They note the tendency for NGOs in Asia as a whole, but even more specifically in India, to be founded by one charismatic individual who retains control of the organization even as it grows, making all of its decisions without involving other staff members, or individuals from the communities and populations that the NGO ostensibly serves. During my fieldwork, I found that the corruption of NGOs and voluntary organizations in Varanasi is legendary amongst Benarsis, with many stories told in everyday conversation about organizations that proved to be corrupt in the past : an organization that solicited and

imported clothing and blanket donations for the homeless that left the donations to rot in a back room of the NGO president's house, for example, or NGOs that switch the cause for which they are working based on what is fashionable with funders, sometimes making such switches yearly. In my experience it was common, when someone mentioned an NGO, for the speaker to note in an aside that the particular organization in question was "legitimate," "well-organized," or "not corrupt," thus providing positive commentary for one organization but negative commentary on the corruption of the sector as a whole. This corruption is linked to a perceived tendency for young, educated people to found NGOs as "self-employment scheme[s]" (Sooryamoorthy and Grenade 2001). Anxieties about NGOs being formed in order for their founders to assure their own employment or economic well-being are likely tied to broader anxieties over the characteristics of the growing Indian middle-class, from whom such NGO founders are likely to be drawn.

Much has recently been written about the characteristics of the middle class that has burgeoned in India since economic liberalization in 1993. Although the "middle class" itself is incredibly varied, it is often identified with education, consumerism, and conservative social values. The feature with which many contemporary anthropological (Brosius 2010; Jaffrelot and Van der Veer 2008) and political science (Fernandes 2006) accounts of the Indian middle class are concerned is their consumption patterns, particularly given that the middle class is at least in part defined by what it consumes. Those desiring to be middle-class also participate in the consumption of aspirational luxury goods associated with "modernity." Patterns of consumption are additionally linked to (and constituted by) the consumption of media (Mankekar 1999; Mazzarella 2003). What the middle class consumes is tied, however, to anxieties about loss of tradition (Cohen 1999) and India's

place in a globalized world. The middle class is thus not only constituted by what it buys (or aspires to buy) but also by certain sets of social values, linked to a positive attitudes towards and engagement with education, conservative attitudes towards women's modesty and an insistence on the value of women in the domestic realm (Fernandez 2006:11-13; Mankekar 1999:8-11), and conservative and often nationalistic identities aimed at preserving India's traditions in the face of Westernization (Cohen 1999:104). Those in the Indian middle class thus self-style themselves simultaneously as modern consumers and guardians of a traditional Indian past.

The Indian Middle class as a group of modern consumers overlays slightly older, pre-liberalization middle class attitudes that value thrift and a deliberate decision *not* to project themselves as consumers. Mazzarella writes that, in the context of the Indian advertizing industry,

This thriftiness was often [...] explained as an Indian sociocultural tendency to downplay material wealth that was both ancient and at the same time specifically embedded in post-Independence Indian public culture in the form of Gandhian asceticism and Nehruvian socialism. An agency planner remarked: 'If [a product is] purely seen as glamour, if it's purely seen as style, in this country where a lot of people – especially as you go down pop [population] strata – a lot of people are very diffident about projecting...I mean, they *underproject* themselves" (2003:272).

From the perspective of the advertizing industry, Indian thriftiness is a social value that must either be overcome or accommodated in encouraging middle-class and affluent Indians to spend, although Mazzarella notes that his interlocutors described the concern with thrift and a desire to de-emphasize wealth as attitudes that were decreasing precipitously among the younger generations of the middle-class.

It is here that questions of NGOs and middle-classness come into the picture. Concern with the corruption of NGOs stems from concern that the middle class, in its desire

to consume, side-steps questions of morality in its attempts to secure income at the expense of serving the poor and disenfranchised. Jackinow observes that while most Indian NGOs are meant to serve disadvantaged or exploited populations within India, they are overwhelmingly founded and run by “elites” (2012:27) and that, furthermore, the act of running an NGO confirms and increases the elite status of their founders. NGOs can thus be a strategy of social maintenance (or mobility within already “elite” categories) for their founders : “doing development work is often a part of strategies to maintain or attain a higher class status of individuals and families” (2012:34). While doing development work or social work can thus be a strategy for personal and familial elevation within society, I argue that while comingling individualistic advancement strategies with altruistic group aid can be corrupting of the stated good intentions of an NGO, there is need for ethnographic understanding of the individuals who operate NGOs in India. Jackinow argues that

NGO studies have often made the mistake of treating the subject of their analysis as the organizations themselves, separate from the people that constitute them. This lacuna has resulted in a lack of understanding of how development work feeds into an economy of practices, specifically paying insufficient attention to the political economy of NGO founders and workers (2012:33-34).

This ethnography, in its focus on Guria’s founder Ajeet Singh, brings to light some of the factors that motivate his activism, as well as those factors that affect his ability to conduct activism, and that influence the sort of activism that he chooses to do. Although he as an individual is critical of the Indian middle class’ status-consciousness and what he views as its increasingly rampant materialism, he comes from and is influenced by middle-class concerns: access to education, the continuation of certain Indian traditions which he regards as valuable, and a concern with the status of women. At times his views are shaped

in opposition to middle-class values (i.e., he argues that women should not be shamed for engaging in sexual activity, nor should they be compelled to do so in order to survive financially), but they nonetheless are formed by the social milieu from which he comes, and with which he continues to interact (i.e., he argues that sex workers who perform within the classical music milieu – courtesans – are to be supported artistically, whereas those performing sexualized Bollywood-esque songs are not).

This ethnography speaks to these discussions of NGOs and (more obliquely) middle class-ness by addressing the following concerns in relation to the specific case-study of Guria Sansthan :

First, this dissertation describes the motivations of activists and social workers who seek to help sex workers in contemporary North India. As I will argue in subsequent chapters, Ajeet and many of his staff are motivated by the romantic and altruistic notion of bettering the lives of those whom they perceive as abandoned and abused by Indian society and by the Indian State. Their focus on sex workers, women whom they perceive as abandoned or lost by their families, and as violently sexually exploited for the pleasure of customers and for the financial gains of brothel keepers, *dalals*, and traffickers, speaks to a collision of paternalistic and feminist liberality. Guria and its activists, who are currently mostly (but not exclusively) middle-class men, understand the lives that sex workers live as being unacceptable for women in that their humanity is stripped away by the degradation that is assumed to be inherent in their work. Guria thus works to liberate sex workers from this exploitation by dismantling the power structure of Shivdaspur. In doing so, the activists associated with Guria perceive themselves (and are perceived by other middle-class Indians in Varanasi) to be fighting the violent and amoral system of brothel

prostitution in order to rescue women from its exploitation. They also continually make value judgments about what sort of actions and lifestyles are acceptable for the women of Shivdaspur, which leads to the next theme that this ethnography addresses.

Second, I argue that the middle-class sex worker activists make judgements on how it is appropriate for lower-class and lower-caste individuals to live, thus situating Guria (and other activist organizations like it) within the realm of discourse production about sex workers (and the lower class and caste echelons from which the particular sex workers that Guria seeks to help are drawn), as well as discourses about who is to be included or excluded from liberal middle-class discourse on how people ought to live. As such, the discourse that they use about sex workers, and the activist tactics that they choose, are an imposition of certain types of middle-class values on sex workers and red light areas.

The founders and activists associated with Guria Sansthan are drawn from the Indian middle class. While they all exemplify the older middle class ideal of thrift, choosing simple clothing and working in a decidedly non-ostentatious office run out of Ajeet Singh's home (where several of the teachers associated with the organization's informal school in Shivdaspur also live), Guria Sansthan workers (with the exception of those drawn from Shivdaspur) are of a higher caste and class status than many (but, importantly, not all) of the women they seek to aid. The preoccupations of an elite (or aspiring-to-be-elite) middle class, with a simultaneous emphasis on modernity (here expressed in aspirations to transnational human rights rather than transnational forms of elite consumption) and desire to guard what is deemed good or useful in Indian tradition, shape the narratives that Ajeet Singh and those associated with Guria tell about Shivdaspur. This dissertation describes the shape that these narratives take, revealing the pre-occupations of an activist



elite passionately involved in reshaping the life experiences of those positioned below them socially. The activists' values are readily visible in their discourse about Shivdaspur and Shivdaspuris, as well as the choices they make in their activism. A preference for broad-based, creative education designed to teach more than how to make money is described in chapter 2. "Rescue work," with assumption of citizenship and endowment with human rights is championed over forms of sex worker activism that involve the entirety (or even the majority) of the red light community, on the grounds that doing cooperative organizing work within the red light district involves collusion with its corrupt and violent power structure (chapter 3). Sex worker's own narratives of marriage are recast as aspirational fictions meant to hide the true workings of the area (chapter 4). A nearly extinct form of sex work from India's pre-colonial past, the *tawa'if*, is preferred to the contemporary sex worker because of the perceived salaciousness and commercialism of the sex worker, in contrast the educated refinement of the *tawa'if*. Women's descriptions of their lives, and desire not to speak about their work (or to speak bluntly about it), are described as self-protective but misguided lies (chapter 6).

Thus, this dissertation is simultaneously an ethnography of NGO-coordinated activism on behalf of<sup>4</sup> sex-workers in contemporary Varanasi, and also a history of encounter between a red-light community and the social workers and activists who operate under the name *Guria Swayam Sevi Sansthan*. In the context of researching this ethnography and this history, I was confronted continually with a divide in communication style and opinion depending on whom I was speaking with, and where they fell in the

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<sup>4</sup> The activism is described as "on behalf of" sex workers for two reasons: one, it is not activism being conducted *by* sex workers, on their *own* behalf, but rather is being done by non-sex-workers; secondly, it is unclear whether or not this activism is activism that the sex workers of Shivdaspur desire.

process of this encounter. The leadership of the NGO was verbose and confident, intent upon impressing its interpretation of reality on me, the sympathetic foreign researcher. Residents of Shivdaspur were to a large extent silent (although not necessarily silenced) on the topic of this encounter and the reasons for it, although as a set of overlapping communities that share not only geographical space but a variety of contiguous and competing interests in sex work, and as such some in the community were vocal with regards to how they would like to be perceived and portrayed. Methodologically, this text is thus an attempt to enumerate the hows and whys of the social work enacted on Shivdaspur by, through and with Guria, but also an analysis of who speaks when it comes to the red light district, and who chooses or is forced to be silent, as well as the content of their silences. Each chapter endeavors to tell both, and sometimes multiple, sides of the story, whether that particular story is about education and activism (Chapter 2), the physical and structural violence wrought by brothel raiding (Chapter 3), the ideo-cultural violence of denying sex workers the status of “wife” (Chapter 4), the programmatic implications of activism that distinguishes between “good sex workers” (i.e., *tawa’ifs* or courtesans) and “enslaved prostitutes” (Chapter 5), and silence and the power of representations of sex work within Shivdaspur (Chapter 6), respectively.

Whereas methodologically this dissertation focuses on issues of silence, power and representation, theoretically it engages with questions of how sex work interacts with notions of gender and personhood: What does it mean to be a woman, and what does it mean to be a female sex worker, in contemporary India? Can the exchange of sexual services for money be conducive to a good life in South Asia? More specifically, is it thinkable that a sex worker is also a good woman in this context? Obviously, these

questions contain loaded words and unpacked concepts. Following activist convention, the use of the term “sex worker” in the questions belies an affinity for the notion that the exchange of sex for money is a valid form of labor or work, as opposed to a form of gender-based exploitation, as would be implied by the term “prostitution.” What constitutes a “good life,” or a “good woman” are similar mine-fields of interpretation and counter-interpretation: the meanings of the terms will vary widely based on the context in which they are defined and therefore cannot be assumed, but it is my goal to define such terms in the contexts in which this ethnography plays out.

To begin with one such context, Ajeet Singh and the activists associated with *Guria* would answer the questions above in the following way: To be a woman in contemporary North India is to be discriminated against and forced into dependency on any number of men or more powerful women: fathers, husbands and brothers if one is not a sex worker, with ‘trafficker,’ ‘*dalal*’ (pimp), brothel keeper, and customer thrown into the mix if one *is* a sex worker. To be a sex worker is to be abused and enslaved within the current context of sex work and trafficking in North India, although Ajeet Singh in particular will acknowledge quite bluntly that sex work is not *inherently* abusive and characterized by slavery, and could come to exist in an “exploitation-free” (Ajeet’s term) context. In its current iteration, however, sex work is not labor because it is characterized by slavery and therefore not conducive to a “good life.” “A good life,” for the activists associated with *Guria*, would mean a life in which you are able to make your own decisions about what sort of work to do. It would entail being able to decide whom to marry, or whether to marry at all. It would also be a life in which pursuit of money and status is not one’s only goal, and in which artistic self-expression and/or caring for others are virtues. It is not, by the logic of the

organization, possible to be a “good woman” while engaged in sex work, but this is, first of all, a result (again) of the current context of sex work and, secondly, not the fault of individual women enslaved within this context. The ethnographic flesh of these briefly sketched positions will be presented throughout the other chapters of this dissertation.

Given these sorts of answers, though, it is useful here to provide the basics of the theory that will be used to interpret my ethnographic findings, because the theory that is used is shaped by the answers *Guria* provided to questions regarding womanhood, prostitution and sex work, and the lifestyles and livelihoods of those who live and work in Shivdaspur. I rely heavily on three strands of theory, braiding them into the work as they are useful: (1) Foucault’s *biopolitics and Benjamin’s bare life*, as expanded upon by Giorgio Agamben (2) Wittgenstein’s *forms of life*, as explicated by Veena Das, and (3) the theories of violence of Michael Taussig and E. Valentine Daniel. Although these theoretical positions will be explained in detail as they become useful in the text, for the sake of introduction each will be outlined briefly here.

### **Biopolitics and Bare Life**

Biopolitics in the Foucauldian sense refers to the application of political power to human life. To give a simple example related to sex work, sex workers are generally considered to be at higher risk than the general population for contracting sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS. One could argue that, indirectly, the application of social and political power is responsible for this situation. Although HIV/AIDS knows no boundaries in terms of possible infection, a biopolitical argument can be made about who, due to political and social advantage or disadvantage, is more or less likely to become a sex

worker, and within that population of sex workers who, due again to political or social disadvantage, is less likely to be able to insist that his/her clients use condoms. More directly, biopolitics is often seen in the response of the State to the “fact” that sex workers are more likely to contract HIV/AIDS than other segments of the population. Biopolitical action in this vein might take the form of State-sponsored attempts to encourage condom usage in the sex worker population, or to require mandatory HIV/AIDS testing in order to continue working in State-licensed brothels, for example. Indeed, in India, sex workers are conceptualized and treated as the epicenter of the AIDS epidemic in the subcontinent as a result of “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” (Shah 2006:338). As a result, sex workers are at the nexus of biopower emanating both from the State and NGOs as they work to curb the spread of HIV/AIDS through condom distribution and educational programs.

Although these understandings of biopower and biopolitics inform my analysis of the activism of *Guria Swayam Sevi Sansthan*, a subset of biopolitical thought is particularly useful: the concept of *bare life* as described by Walter Benjamin in his “Critique of Violence” (1996) and expanded upon by Giorgio Agamben (1998). At its base, the concept distinguishes the simple fact of being biologically alive (i.e., *bare life* or *mere life*) from a life imbued with meaning, and more specifically rights, vis-à-vis the State. In formulations of this distinction, only life imbued with meaning and rights is considered to be worth living, and capable of being sacrificed (in a war, or for a cause, for example). I argue in chapter 3, that the activists who make up and are associated with *Guria Swayam Sevi Sansthan* conceptualize women who engage (or are forced to engage) in brothel prostitution as

constituting “bare life,” a status from which they can be “rescued,” reformed or rehabilitated into a life imbued with political and social rights, and therefore meaning. In other words, they can come to live a life that might be more conventionally regarded as “good” or worthwhile. The irony of this conceptualization is that viewing sex workers as “merely alive” in the current context of brothel prostitution and “sexual slavery” can be used to bring structural or physical violence to bear against them, with the understanding that even if this is regrettable, it is in service of a greater good.

### **Wittgenstein’s Forms of Life**

In a similar vein, I draw upon Veena Das’ (2007) use of Wittgenstein’s (2009) concept *forms of life*. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein argues that “to imagine a language means to imagine a form of life” (2009: 11<sup>e</sup>); the words that are used designate the form of life about which one is speaking. Thus, a bird “pecks” whereas a human “dines.” Additionally, what is *say-able*, and what is regarded as truth, is also determined within the language upon which people agree: “What is true or false is what human beings *say*; and it is in their *language* that human beings agree. This is agreement not in opinions, but rather in form of life” (Wittgenstein 2009: 94<sup>e</sup>). Das uses Wittgenstein’s concept here to help illuminate who speaks what when it comes to certain types of gendered violence related to the Partition of 1947 (discussed at length in Ch.6). Das writes:

Cavell argues that when Wittgenstein talks about human beings agreeing to the language they use, this agreement is not to be understood as an agreement in opinions, or even as a contractual agreement as in the notion of shared ideas or beliefs. Rather, there are two ways in which the notion of agreement can be read: the first is the agreement in the forms that life may take, and the second is the idea of what distinguished life itself as human (2007:88).

There are two ways in which this concept is useful for the topic at hand, both related to the conceptualization and representation of sex workers. One relates directly back to the concept of *bare life*: in defining or describing brothel-based sex workers as having a “bare life,” or as slaves, the NGO *Guria Swayam Sevi Sansthan* asks for (and often receives) agreement that the life of a brothel-based sex worker is not an acceptable form of life for a woman. This idea will resurface in chapters 3, 4, and 5. The second way in which this concept of *forms of life* is useful is as it relates to the self-representation of Shivdasपुरी sex workers to me as an outside researcher: their desire to avoid frank or detailed discussion of their work or the condition of their labor operates as tacit agreement that such topics, and such labor, are not a fit form of life for a woman. My willful ignorance of this tacit agreement – my attempts and desire to talk about these very things – were met with silence, annoyance, and at times stupefied bewilderment at my ignorance of what seemed naturally agreed upon as an unfit topic of conversation. This topic is taken up in detail in chapter 6.

### **Ethnographies of Violence**

Finally, in counterpoint to these arguments about the characteristics of the lives of sex workers, and the social and philosophical valuation of those lives, I draw upon the descriptions and theoretical attitudes towards violence presented by Michael Taussig (1987) and E. Valentine Daniel (1996). Both ethnographers contextualize violence within and argue for its understanding as integrated into the general human experience, rather than viewing the experience of violence as somehow outside the realm of the rest of life. Whereas Ajeet Singh and Guria understand the violence experienced by sex workers as

aberrant – as constituting a situation in which the life of a brothel prostitute becomes unbearable or unliveable – Taussig and Daniel describe both the extraordinarily disruptive nature of violence but still fold it back into ethnographic, or anthropographic, narratives of the lives that people live. Thus, instead of using violence to separate those who have experienced it from those who have not, and thereby valorizing lives that have been free of violence as exemplary, the experience of violence is something that binds people together in a more generalized human condition. Daniel, for example, argues for writing an *anthropography* of violence rather than an *ethnography* of violence because:

To see the ultimate significant effects of [his] work as ethnographic would exculpate other peoples in other places whose participation in collective violence is of the same sort; even more dangerously, it could tranquilize those of us who live self-congratulatory lives in times and countries apparently free of the kind of violence that has seized Sri Lanka recently, could lull us into believing that we in our country or our people were above such brutalities (Daniel 1996:7)

The experience of violence in such theorizing is not used as an exclusionary factor, roping victimized people off from those who have lived without enduring the physical and psychic trauma of violence. Taussig and Daniel are not the only ethnographers to engage with anthropological contexts of extraordinary violence. I argue for their particular usage here because of their insistence on keeping the experience of violence within a framework that is not necessarily characterized by aberration or an attempt at transcending the violence, but rather with the inclusion of violence in day-to-day life. This body of theory will come into play most fully in chapters 6 and 7.

Drawing on the works of Daniel, Das and Taussig to make sense of how Guria understands the experience of brothel-based sex work should not, however, be taken as a statement that the violence of sex work is necessarily comparable to the violence of war or



ethnic cleansing. While acknowledging the violence that can accompany sex work, and that violence experienced by *individuals* in sex work can be similar to that experienced more systemically in situations like civil war, enforced famine and slavery, or ethnic cleaning, it is *explicitly not* the case that sex work as an occupation is comparable to such experiences. Specifically, it is important to note that there is nothing inherent in sex work itself that should be understood as leading inexorably to the experience of extraordinary violence, even if violence does attend the experience of prostitution in Shivdaspur.

However, I argue that the activists associated with *Guria Swayam Sevi Sansthan* do view the violence of brothel-based sex work (and being trafficked into it) as equivalent and directly comparable to these other forms of violence. Furthermore, *Guria* is emphatically not alone in this regard: it is not the only activist organization to view the experience of trafficking and sex work as such, nor is it uninformed by bodies of international, governmental and non-governmental understandings of human trafficking (c.f. Doezema 2010). The body of literature about violence of the nature described by Daniel, Das and Taussig is therefore useful in interpreting *Guria's* understanding of the lives of brothel-based sex workers, as it helps to contextualize *Guria's* hard-lined activist response to a system that it understands to be comparable in brutality to slavery or war. Likewise, although the scale of violence is different, subsequent chapters will show that the secrecy and silence that surround sex work in Shivdaspur, as well as the loss of chastity-based honor that sex work entails, directly parallel the ethnographic realities described by ethnographers of violence.

In laying out this portrait of Shivdaspur's interactions with *Guria*, I intend ultimately to examine how red light districts and prostitution themselves are understood within the

context of contemporary India. To put it bluntly, red light areas are conceptualized as bounded zones of danger, iniquity, and grossly gendered human rights violations; these conceptualizations are shared by both the public at large and the activists who work for and through *Guria* alike. Whereas for the public these concepts serve to underscore the notion of red light area as spectacle (Shah 2006, discussed below), *Guria* activists' understanding of the area is more nuanced in ways that allow for the transcendence of spectacle into sincere (although still fraught) attempts at transforming Shivdaspur as a red light area.

### **Red Light Areas as Public Spectacle**

Svati Shah (2006) has argued for the analysis of Mumbai's largest red-light area, Kamathipura, as spectacle in the sense offered by theorist Guy Debord (1994), meaning that representations or images of a given phenomenon become the means by which social phenomena are understood, and are produced or presented in such a way that they reinforce and perpetuate currently existing social orders. As with Shivdaspur, media representations and popular perceptions of Kamathipura as a red light district focus on the squalor and degradation of the area:

Visual and textual representations of Kamathipura [...] rarely function to mobilize actions or interventions directed among or toward 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. In other words, the effect of these representations is to maintain Kamathipura as an exceptional space as compared to the normative social spaces at which images and stories about prostitution in Mumbai are targeted (Shah 2006:280).

As such, when Kamathipura is represented as an area in which venereal disease runs rampant, where people live in crowded squalor, and/or where an alternate or lacking morality prevails such that sex, sexuality, and girls and women, are sold, it serves not as an exposé meant to engender outrage and action. Rather, the salacious nature of these representations works to underscore the comparative health and morality of the public towards which these representations are geared.

I found similar such spectacular representations to be common in newspaper representations of Shivdaspur. The newspaper articles I was able to locate, spanning from 1993 to the present, describe Shivdaspur as an area unlike others in the city, zeroing in on the lawlessness and immorality of the village. A newspaper story from 1994, headlined “In Shivdaspur’s Red Light Area, Two day’s curfew” describes a police crackdown on prostitution-related activities in the area, noting dryly that people living there are not currently allowed to leave their houses to do basic marketing, or even to use the toilet, a detail which serves to underscore the filth and inhuman conditions in the neighborhood (Varanasi Today 1994). A 2010 article, likewise, describes the routine drunkenness of men in the area, showing a picture of local men clasping their ears, a gesture of sheepish embarrassment, following their arrests for public intoxication.

Similar to these media representations, many of the things that people with whom I spoke casually told me about Shivdaspur focused on visual imagery assumed to be true about the place: women in very tight shirts that were very low-cut front and back, who lived and worked in very tiny rooms, the depth of their necklines and squalor of the tiny rooms symbols of their immorality, misfortune and impoverishment. A woman working for a film company doing research about trafficking, whom I met through an acquaintance

at a coffee shop, told me that she had been led around Shivdaspur by another woman who claimed to have volunteered for *Guria* for several years – though she did not disclose the woman's name, and neither Ajeet and Manju could figure who this might have been. The film researcher, Rekha, was shocked by the stories about Shivdaspur that she was told by this guide. Specifically, when Rekha noted to her guide that the peaceful, pastoral nature of contemporary Shivdaspur was not what she had expected, her guide supplemented this vision of Shivdaspur with another, saying that while on the surface it may not appear to be so bad, each of the buildings in fact goes down four stories underground, where trafficked girls are held, exploited, and traded -- all figuratively and literally underground. A village of women and *dalals* making a living from sex work and trafficking (and also animal husbandry and mustard farming) could not express the exploitation and degradation of the area adequately, and hence a network of underground dungeons had to be imagined in order to do so. Ajeet and Manju, never quick to glamorize Shivdaspur or to portray it positively, quickly dispelled the idea of a literally subterranean Shivdaspur: one or two of the brothels and houses might have a small underground storage area, but there is nothing on the order of what Rekha's guide told her.

Although the activists associated with *Guria* offered negative depictions of Shivdaspur, placing their responses to sex work and sex workers within the realm of broader reactions to the same topics, the negative representations put forth by *Guria* move beyond spectacle in that they are, by dint of their activist intentions, meant to inspire actions that change the lives and living and working conditions of sex workers in Shivdaspur. While discussions of Shivdaspur with Ajeet and other activists affiliated with *Guria* also yielded many stories of degradation, filth, and criminality, these were presented

less in terms of shocked gossip and more often as a justification for their actions in the community. According to *Guria*, the degraded conditions of Shivdaspur were not fit for human beings, and the *Guria* activists were trying to make Shivdaspur a place where human beings – primarily women and children – could live happily and without fear of exploitation.

However, while red-light districts are sites of criminal activity and degradation, they are also neighborhoods and communities where individuals live, socialize, bear and raise children, and grow up. Red light areas are also, as the quote at the beginning of this passage states, microcosms of gender and power relations that are easily found outside their boundaries; in effect, they are not separate aberrations in the landscape of contemporary South Asia but rather parts of the landscape's constitutive whole, a point which will be underscored in each of the following chapters.

### *Methodology*

This ethnography is based on three periods of anthropological fieldwork conducted over the course of five years, beginning with a preliminary visit to the NGO *Guria* in August of 2005, continuing with a series of interviews and observations at the NGO's offices and at its *balwadi* (children's center) in August of 2008, and culminating in a 10-month period of participant observation with the NGO in Shivdaspur from August of 2009 to May of 2010. During my longer and most recent period of fieldwork, I did volunteer work as a teacher in the *balwadi* four afternoons a week, conducting informal interviews with the NGO's teachers, volunteers (both local and international), and with women from Shivdaspur when

they happened to be in the *balwadi*, either as volunteer workers or as visitors. At this time, I also made semi-regular weekly visits to *Guria's* headquarters, during which time I was allowed access to the NGO's newspaper archive, as well as a select few of the legal documents pertaining to cases the organization was bringing against traffickers, and several grant proposals for financial support from various agencies. In the office, I regularly conducted long formal recorded interviews with both Ajeet Singh and his wife, Manju, on the activism of the organization. Formal interviews were also conducted with Anu, *Guria's* primary employee from Shivdaspur, as well as six sex workers from Shivdaspur that Ajeet and Manju selected for me to interview.

In order to contextualize Shivdaspur and *Guria*, I conducted formal interviews and field visits with another social worker in Varanasi who was working to rehabilitate women and children who lived in the train station in Varanasi, and who engaged in sex work as one among many jobs. I also visited another prominent sex-worker activist organization based in Kolkatta, Durbar, during which time I was able to interview two of their employees and go on an "exposure visit" to the red-light area Sonagachi. Finally, I conducted two formal interviews with western volunteers affiliated with American study-abroad programs operating in Varanasi in 2010.

All told, the information presented in this ethnography is based on approximately forty formal interviews that I conducted with seventeen individuals, as well as countless informal interviews with a broader range of people; ten months of participant observation (more observation than participation) with the NGO *Guria*; ten months of broad-based observation of people's attitudes about prostitution in Varanasi, as evoked by their responses to my research topic; three field visits to other areas where prostitution is

practiced as a form of livelihood, *Guria's* newspaper archive related to its activism; several sets of documents pertaining to the NGO's legal cases and funds-seeking activities; and multiple publications of the NGOs *Guria* and *Durbar*.

The backdrop to this more formal fieldwork setting was my day-to-day life in Varanasi, where I lived with an extended family in one of the two wings of their house that they rented to foreigners. One of the family's three sons, who managed the renting of the wings in the house, also dabbles in social issues and runs an NGO dedicated to improving HIV/AIDS awareness and education in the area; several of his friends also work in the NGO sector in Varanasi, and both he and his friends sometimes also worked as research assistants or guides for foreigners conducting research. Although the entire family was interested in the research that I was conducting, and what I was finding in Shivdaspur, the middle son in particular spent a lot of time talking with me about what I did and saw. He often also provided stories and examples of the ways in which men in Varanasi interacted with prostitutes and the ways that Shivdaspur was regarded in Varanasi. Conversations with this young man and his family thus helped me to understand the background and context of what I saw, heard, and was told by the NGO *Guria* and by residents of Shivdaspur.

Similarly, I had many conversations about sex work and Shivdaspur with people who visited the household where I lived, and with the people whom I encountered in leisure time that I spent outside of the household and outside of the formal context of research. The house where I lived was located in a relatively well-to-do (although not overtly wealthy) residential neighborhood called Badhaini, located a short walk away from Assi Ghat, the southernmost riverfront area of the city of Varanasi. While Assi was

historically the sleepy southern end of the city (Eck 1998), it has become an area increasingly visited and inhabited by tourists in the last five years, home to several coffee shops and organic, vegan restaurants and cafes, and a small pizzeria that predates the coming of multinational chains like Dominoes and Pizza Hut. There are also several bookstores in the area, one specializing in academic texts related to India. The individuals who run and work at these businesses provided me with contextualizing background information for my research: with their opinions on Shivdaspur and prostitution, as well as with contacts with individuals who might be of some help to me; it was through people that I met in one of these coffee shops that I was introduced to the social worker who was seeking to provide aid to the sex workers who work out of the Varanasi train station, for example. The opinions and knowledge of these individuals, like the opinions and knowledge of the family with whom I lived, provide the ethnographic backdrop to my research.

### *Primary Interlocutors*

#### ***Guria Swayam Sevi Sansthan***

The specifics of *Guria's* activism will be discussed at length throughout this dissertation. At the outset, though, it is necessary to provide some background information on the organization to serve as orientation for the rest of the discussion. Here, I will address the basics of the organization's history, ideological orientation, and cast of characters.



The NGO was founded in late 1993, receiving its official registration as a non-governmental organization in December of that year. The organization grew out of a smaller, more personal project involving sex workers and the adoption of their children that Ajeet Singh, the NGO's founder and president, had undertaken in the late 1980s and early 1990s. The appellation *Guria* ("doll") was chosen for the organization as a metaphor, referring to an interpretation of sex workers being treated like children's toys: played with, perhaps fervently and affectionately for a while, but ultimately being cast aside at the whim of those who use them. The organization, following the thinking of Ajeet Singh, walks a somewhat precarious path in its stance on sex work. *In theory*, the organization is not opposed to sex work; *in practice*, it very rigorously opposes prostitution as the patriarchal enforcement of sexual slavery. While the organization does not take a moralistic stance against individuals engaging in the lower rungs of sex work (i.e., individual women selling sexual services), acknowledging that they are simply doing work that is available to them (or that they are forced to do), it *strongly* opposes the legalization of prostitution in India. In 2005, the NGO conducted a series of "rescue operations" in brothels in Shivdaspur, in order to rescue underage girls; in the days that followed, it resoundingly criticized raids conducted by the police to close down the brothels in Shivdaspur.

The seemingly contradictory attitudes of the organization can be explained by its insistence that, in an ideal setting free of patriarchy, underdevelopment and coercion, a grown woman would be able to choose to do sex work and, in that context, it would be acceptable. The organization thus has no moralistic objection to the exchange of sex for money in and of itself. However, *Guria's* position is that the current state of the sex

industry in India is simply too exploitative to be tolerated. A journalist in 1999 summed up the organization's stance thus:

Given that it is not possible to stop the oldest profession of the world, Singh says, what Guriya [*Guria*] aspires to do is fight against forced prostitution, and help those who wish to be free from this condemned existence. Treating the sex workers, whose 'duty' it is to provide utmost sexual satisfaction to their clients, as an outcaste and untouchable is highly condemnable, says Hajjan Bai, a sex worker who [is affiliated with *Guria*]. We, too, sell our labor like a truck driver or a factory worker. If they are not castigated for their work, why should we [be]?, she questions. Singh, on behalf of Guriya, also attacks this double standard of male sexual morality and seeks to provide a forum where sex workers can speak out their minds and fight against exploitation in the name of morality. [Times of India 1999].

However, as will be explained in more detail in Chapter 3, the current system of prostitution in India is understood by the organization to be irremediable. While this non-moralist stance places *Guria* outside the company of Christian evangelical anti-prostitution organizations such as the International Justice Mission, the organization's insistence on ending the current system of prostitution, and its opposition to legalizing the trade, do place it within the realm of neo-abolitionist sex-worker activism and prevent it from aligning with Marxist and leftist organizations, such as the Kolkata-based *Durbar*, who fight for sex worker's rights as laborers. These issues will be explored in greater depth later; here, my description of *Guria's* ideological stance serves only as one of many frames.

The organization's goals, as described to me by Ajeet Singh in 2008, and again in 2009, are four-fold:

- (1) Ending trafficking, and re-trafficking.
- (2) Ending child prostitution.
- (3) Ending second-generation prostitution.
- (4) Creating an "exploitation free" red light district.

In pursuit of these goals, the organization has used many approaches over the years: education (the *balwadi*), organized protest (marches through Shivdaspur and the forming of human chains by sex workers in the area to protest police exploitation and societal stigma), public health initiatives, helping to arrange marriages and business ownership for children born in Shivdaspur, the publishing of a magazine devoted to the topic of sex work, sponsorship of an annual concert with music and dance performances by women in prostitution, police sensitization training, “rescue missions” (brothel raids), and direct legal action against brothel owners and traffickers. The approaches about which I was able to gather the most ethnographic data are education (discussed in Ch. 2), the “rescue missions” and subsequent legal actions (discussed in Ch.3), the concert (Ch. 5) and the magazine (discussed briefly in Ch. 6); the other approaches were rarely engaged in by the time I conducted my fieldwork.

### **Ajeet Singh**

Ajeet Singh does not like to talk about himself, and as a result the biographical information that I have about him is – despite the hours we spent talking – sparser than might be ideal. Born in 1971, he is the only son of four siblings. His father was the owner of an aluminum rolling mill, and has extended family in the area around Varanasi. His early schooling, through Standard 10<sup>5</sup>, was in Dehra Dun, but for Standards 11 and 12 he attended La Martiniere College in Lucknow, following which he began a History degree at Hans Raj College in Delhi.

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<sup>5</sup> The Indian education system consists of 12 Standards, which are roughly equivalent to American “grades.” Primary School generally consists of Standards 1-6, and Secondary School of Standards 7-10, although there is some variation from state to state. Standards 10-12 are generally called Higher Secondary School or Senior Secondary School.

Ajeet's focus on sex work began in 1988 when he attended a family wedding and saw a performance by a sex worker as part of the festivities. He felt sorry for her because of the way other male guests behaved with her, and set out to help her and her children by adopting the children. When these initiatives (discussed in more depth in Chapter 2) failed, he founded *Guria*, and has been working with the organization primarily in Shivdaspur, but also in Mao District and Allahabad, ever since. His wife, Manju, worked for *Guria* prior to their marriage, and they now have a young, inquisitive daughter, Barish, who often toddles through the offices and meetings of the organization.

Ajeet is gregarious and compelling as an individual. For all the little that he likes to talk about the details of his personal history, he speaks quickly and excitedly about his work and activism through *Guria*, and conversations that I had with him about these topics will surface repeatedly throughout this ethnography. Beyond his understanding of the contemporary form of sex work in North India as a grave social injustice, it is important to note that his activism is informed by a Gandhian preference for (brothel-raiding, or “rescue work” aside) non-violent protest, as well as a very strong belief in the value of service work. His desire to “serve” others stems from a spiritual epiphany he had years ago, and which – despite trying several times – he never seemed to think he had explained adequately to me. At its base is a sense that life is short and that monetary gains, or gains in social status, are ultimately superficial and lacking in concrete meaning, and that spending your time well in life is about doing what you think is morally right to help your fellow human beings, even if doing so results in hardship and death. The following is one of his attempts to explain this motivation:

What motivates me to go on? Many people do not understand this part but I always say it anyway: It is the power of the inward journey. You need to

understand life. [...] If I equate [the value of] life with material things, then I will look into loss or profit, and decide whether or not to do something based on profit... [However], I don't look at it in that way. This is a vision you can have only when you move inward, when you explode the definition of life... [Life] is so negative, everyone is going to go and die within 50 or 60 years [...] It [the knowledge that life is short] must percolate down in your body, in your entire being, and then you calm down. You calm down to a level where you are down to the philosophy of really serving. Then the arrogant idea that you are something, that you have to become something, in terms of material gains, or in terms of possessions, just vanishes. You don't have anything left in you that you want, and so you just calm down. That's it, I am as good as the dust. Because it's all interrelated, it's all very interrelated, if you don't have the real knowledge – and I'm not talking of bookish knowledge -- if you don't have the inward knowledge and this understanding of life, then you are always arrogant, arrogant through power or through wealth, and you don't get the truth, OK? So it is the search of truth that has kept me quiet and calm. It's not about winning or losing, gaining or not gaining, you see. [This is] something I know is right and I'm doing it, going ahead with it, to contribute whatever I can contribute. [It's like a] relay race: I do it, I pass it on to someone else and I finish up and I am dead, and someone else carries on. Good things must go on. Slavery can never be justified. And no one can say that I am doing something wrong. So when you don't [evaluate life] in terms of material gains with that arrogance, [that] arrogant mind, then this whole motivation of losing or gaining is lost, and you are very calm. And in that deeper understanding, you shrink! You shrink down, you become humble, and you want to serve. [Ajeet Singh, personal interview, 5/18/2010]<sup>6</sup>

I provide such a lengthy quote so as to present Ajeet's motivation to the reader the way that he presented it to me : long-winded, and a bit unclear, although drawing its basis from an internal moral authority of quasi-mystical "real knowledge," which cannot be attained through books and/or the pursuit of money and status. Like Ajeet's organization's stance on sex work, his motivation operates on a highly idealistic plane, having seemingly little to do with the practical political struggles with which he engages on a day-to-day basis. Additionally, in its basis in real knowledge located inside the self it becomes, on its own

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<sup>6</sup> My interviews with Ajeet Singh were conducted in English. For the sake of consistency between the text in general, Ajeet's quotes, and quotes from other informants which were translated from Hindi into American English, I have "translated" Ajeet's statements from Indian English to American English.

terms, unassailable: he does what he does because he knows that it is right, and that sense of rightness emanates not from social convention, status, or education, but essentially from itself.

In contrast to this ethereal, at times tautological, ideological motivation, Ajeet is remarkably skilled at *realpolitik*, carefully navigating the politically fraught stage for his activism that is Shivdaspur. His organization has succeeded in altering the landscape of sex work in Shivdaspur: at the same time that it has dramatically decreased the amount of sex work that occurs in Shivdaspur (and the population of sex workers that reside and work there), it has changed the demographic of who engages in sex work and how. Whether one wants to evaluate these changes as positive or negative, his work has meant that he has run afoul of brothel keepers, traffickers and the police, all the while carefully manipulating to his benefit media representation of his work and the actions (and inactions) of the police and local government on prostitution. He will be the first to tell you of all the times that he has had to go into hiding to protect his safety and that of his family, and in the same breath tell you that he does not care about his safety: perhaps if someone as high-profile as himself were to die as a result of the fight against brothel prostitution, people would be forced to pay attention to the problem, he said several times. And, for all his insistence that he is not out for status or acclaim, he is indeed at this point in time a high-profile individual, having been named The Week's<sup>7</sup> Man of the Year in 2011. Achieving fame and status genuinely does not appear to be his goal; this does not prevent him from using fame and status to his advantage if and when he attains them.

It will become clear, throughout this dissertation, that I do not always agree with

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<sup>7</sup> "The Week" is India's largest-circulation nation English language newsmagazine.

Ajeet Singh, particularly on issues of agency or the ways in which women engaged in sex work are regarded, and on the issue of the utility of rescue work. That said, I respect both him as an activist and his work in Shivdaspur. He is extraordinarily dedicated to his work, and to the women on whose behalf he works. Ajeet has not changed the topic or focus of his organization over nineteen years of working in the NGO sector, nor does he seem to follow trends in NGO funding or the whims of his funders. Perhaps most tellingly, he has not abandoned his cause or the area in which he works despite the personal difficulty it has caused him.

### **Manju**

Like her husband Ajeet, Manju does not talk much about her family or her background. Trained as a stenographer in Delhi, she began doing volunteer work for *Guria* in 2000, teaching in the *balwadi*. Because she grew up in an orphanage, she has some affinity for the children. After several periods of volunteer teaching in Shivdaspur, she moved from Delhi to work permanently for *Guria* and is one of the organization's longest-serving volunteer-employees: because of the difficulty of working with the children in Shivdaspur, and because of the very deep social prejudices against sex work, it is difficult for the organization to find good teachers who will commit long-term to the organization.

Manju is very clearly loved in Shivdaspur. For security reasons, neither she nor Ajeet can go regularly to the *balwadi* anymore, although Manju goes considerably more regularly than he does. When she does come to the *balwadi*, she is greeted enthusiastically by the children and generally participates in their education for the day – leading a meditation or a clay-sculpting workshop, or drilling them for their exams at the end of the

school year. She also generally has some other business at the *balwadi*, as local women come to talk to her about problems they are having in the neighborhood. On a regular basis, the children in the *balwadi* write letters to her and she responds, individually, to them; she respects the privacy of the letters enough that she would not share their contents with me, even in a general way.

Manju is tough and seemingly fearless. In many conversations that we had, as well as once in a public speech at a rally in Shivdaspur, she very calmly, very clearly iterated that she would gladly die in the service of the cause of stopping exploitative prostitution in Shivdaspur. She relates her sympathy for the women in Shivdaspur to her experiences as a woman, and to her sense that the work is miserable, degrading, and sometimes simply annoying for the women who do it: she described to me her understanding that women do not always want to “accommodate” their husbands, sexually, and that it must be unpleasant to have to “accommodate” customers regardless of whether or not one felt like it that evening. Her emotional connections and friendships with Shivdasपुरi women were often visibly apparent. At times, she would talk with me about women from Shivdasपुर whom she had been friends with who had left the area – either to leave the trade or to move to a red light area more amenable to sex work than Shivdasपुर currently is. Her sadness at missing her friends, and at the thought that they might still be doing sex work somewhere, was palpable.

Manju joins Ajeet and the organization *Guria* more generally in not morally judging women who practice sex work. However, it often seemed to me that she sat more bluntly in judgment of the trade than did Ajeet. This is not to say that he was forgiving of prostitution, but rather that he and I would often discuss the myriad exceptions to the



general rules of his understanding of it, whereas Manju left no gray areas in the black and white of her interpretations. Besides Ajeet, she is the second activist figure most clearly associated with *Guria*, and represents the organization in Ajeet's stead when he cannot be present.

## **Anu**

Anu was, at the time of my 2009-2010 field research, an eighteen year old woman who had participated in *Guria's* program from early childhood, remembering what Shivdaspur was like for children before Ajeet and Manju started a structured program for the children in the *balwadi*. For the past several years, she has been working as one of the primary teachers for the younger children who come to the *balwadi*, partially filling the role that Manju left following the 2005 rescue operations. Anu's involvement with the NGO is a result of her natural aptitude with the children, it seemed, as they minded her considerably better than any of the other teachers; it was also characterized to me by Ajeet as an "experiment" of sorts, an attempt to provide an alternative livelihood for Anu such that she would neither find herself drawn into sex work nor married off at a young age. The NGO was, in short, trying to help her be independent as a young woman. She is the daughter of a harmonium player who died in Anu's early teens, leaving Anu's mother widowed with several children to take care of. Anu's mother also occasionally works for *Guria*, preparing the afternoon meal that the NGO serves to the children who come to the *balwadi*; other employment has been provided to Anu's mother over the years, as well, to help keep the family afloat without affiliating more directly with sex work in the village. As Manju describes it, after the death of her father and head of household, other *dalals* in the

area were moving in, trying to “catch up” Anu, and so Ajeet and Manju helped to support the family in order to protect the daughters.

Anu’s relationship to the NGO, and to Ajeet and Manju, is characterized by a complex mix of respect, reverence, gratitude and – as she transitions to adulthood – frustration with the difficulties of what is expected of her. She enjoys her work with *Guria*, although often wished that her wages were higher, and hopes to use the access to education that the NGO provides and her self-assessed comparative lack of desirability in the realm of marriage (she thinks of herself as dark-complexioned and overweight), to become a social worker working through *Guria* for the betterment of Shivdaspur.

### ***Chandni***

At the time of my research, Chandni was a young woman in her late teens. She is a “*Guria ka baccha*” (Child of Guria), who has been attending the *balwadi* program from her early childhood to the present. A close friend of Anu<sup>8</sup>, she would often come to the *balwadi* and help out with the younger children when she was not focusing on her own schoolwork, and accompanied Anu to the *Guria* offices when she went. Slight of frame and enthusiastic in her speaking, she was bright and engaging, often asking me detailed questions about fashion in America. Chandni has a particularly close relationship with Manju, which they both characterize as being like that between a mother and daughter. Although Chandni has a large family in Shivdaspur, she felt that the size of the family prevented her from getting the sort of individualized maternal attention that Manju gives to her. *Guria* supervises her

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<sup>8</sup> Pseudonyms have not been used here because so few women are as closely involved with Guria that these two would be immediately identifiable by anyone involved with the organization, or by anyone who visited the organization.

medical care, and for a long portion of time during my research she was being treated for tuberculosis, having previously failed to complete the full course of medicines necessary to cure her of it. Depending on her health, she was a regular face at the *balwadi*, and many of my most productive conversations about what it was like to grow up in Shivdaspur under the tutelage of Ajeet and Manju and the *balwadi* teachers came when Chandni and Anu would sit and talk to me, often bringing other friends from the neighborhood into the conversation.

### **Guria kae Bachae (“Guria’s Children”)**

Although children never served formally as my interlocutors, I did spend a tremendous amount of time with those who attended *Guria’s* informal day school, the *balwadi*. By watching and interacting with them day in and day out it was possible to get a sense of the tremendous variation in familial life in Shivdaspur. Some children routinely came to the *balwadi* in tattered clothes, their hair uncombed and their legs and feet dusty from the walk to the school. Others came in neatly pressed outfits, their hair carefully braided and oiled. A few of the children preferred to quietly read or play in the corner, but on the whole, they were a noisy, rambunctious, *shararti* (naughty) crowd that few teachers other than Anu or Manju could cajole into discipline. In contrast to other, more reserved and well-behaved children with whom I interacted in Varanasi, they were boisterous, unruly and self-confident, happy to attend *Guria’s* school and to chat with any volunteers who were there. It was apparent, and they often said, how much they enjoyed coming to the *balwadi*.

### *Ethnographic Setting*

Varanasi, also known as Benares or Kashi, is a city of 3.6 million people in the state of Uttar Pradesh. Situated along the Ganges, the city is a sacred site for Hindus, Buddhists and Jains. Within the Hindu context, the city is said to be “never forsaken” by the deity Shiva, and the city is a popular pilgrimage destination. Considerable ethnographic attention has been given to the religious significance of the city (Eck 1998) and to the performance and meaning of ritual within it (Lutgendorf 1991). Bathing in the Ganges here, as in other cities, is considered purifying; for Hindus, dying within the city (or, technically, a circumscribed area in and around it) is said to grant instant *moksha* (release from the cycle of death and re-birth). For this reason, the city has been the setting of anthropological studies of contemporary aging (Cohen 1998) and funerary practices (Parry 1994).

Alongside its religious significance, the city is known as a site of artistic and educational prominence within India. Historically, the city’s courtesans were particularly famous for their skill and grace; the city always comes up, even if only as a historical footnote, when courtesans are mentioned. Courtesan culture has been on the decline, however, since the red light area moved from the heart of the city in an area called Dal Mandi, to Shivdaspur, on the outskirts of the city. The city has also been known for its style of weaving – heavy brocades, some with silver and gold woven directly into the fabric – but this industry, too, has been on the wane in recent decades. For these reasons, ethnographies of the city have focused on artisans (Kumar 1988, 1992) and artists (Lee 2002).

For all of its religious and cultural significance, the city is considered – in comparison to major metropolitan centers like Delhi, Mumbai, Hyderabad, Kolkatta, and Chennai – something of a backwater. Delhi-ites in particular were often “sympathetic” to me when I said I was doing my research there, citing the failings of the city’s infrastructure and its lack of fashion as reasons for their pity. However, I found the city to be enjoyable, if at times a bit hectic. Benarsis are known for their laid-back, somewhat introspective approach to life (Kumar 1992; Eck 1998), and were generally very happy to provide me with whatever connections they thought I needed for my research, making it a rewarding place to do fieldwork.

### **Shivdaspur**

Shivdaspur is a small red-light area on the outskirts of Varanasi district, Uttar Pradesh, India. Indian census data indicates that it’s population is 449, which corresponds with Guria’s sense of a population around 500; population estimates for the broader village of Shivdaspur are ~10,000. There are no comparable government statistics, but the NGO estimates a highly mobile sex-worker population of 150 to 200 women. Shivdaspur is not the only area in which sex work is conducted in Varanasi. It is estimated that only 8-9% of sex work in India occurs within such bounded districts (Kotiswaran 2011:13). I was told of, and visited, several other contexts for sex work in the city: hotels, the railway station, and temples at dusk are described as popular places for customers to meet sex workers, and there are occasional stories of small, stand-alone brothels operating in other areas of Varanasi and its environs. However, Shivdaspur is – and red light areas more generally are

– the most visible facet of sex work in the city, and thus the focus of the activism being conducted by *Guria*.



**Figure 1 – Map of Varanasi, with Inset Map of Shivdaspur, Google Maps, 2010.**

The village of Shivdaspur is located on either side of a U-shaped road connecting on both ends with State Highway 74, as indicated in Figure 1, above. Shivdaspur is a pastoral area abutting an industrial zone – the turn-off from the Highway to enter Shivdaspur is marked by a pen of water buffalos, where they lounge in the shade provided by a yellow plastic tarp, their noses often covered with oats and other fodder. Turning down the alley,

one sees a multi-storied, operational brothel on the left, and on the right a long-row of padlocked doorways in a closed brothel, to which goats are sometimes tied. On the left, immediately after the operating brothel, are three smaller, tin-roofed buildings, one whose roof is seasonally covered in brightly blooming bougainvillea, another out of which a small *paan* shop is run, with local men often lounging in front of it, and the third of which is what appeared to be a single-family household/brothel, outside of which the same middle-aged woman solicits nearly daily. Behind these buildings on both sides is open space, used for grazing animals, as well as a large pond. Following the road further back until it begins to curve, one comes to an area of densely packed buildings and several shops, small alleys leading to houses of varied solidity and opulence, from tin-roofed brick structures to marble-floored, modern concrete buildings (few, if any, of which are multi-storied). Following the curve of the road further, one comes to a large, dusty hospital compound, and then to a series of houses surrounded by small fields and weed-choked ponds. Finally, the road leads to a small commercial area devoted to mechanical repair, at which point it meets up with the Highway again.

Local conceptions of this space, as elaborated by NGO workers, the children who come to *Guria's balwadi*, or school, and my regular rickshaw driver, divide this road into three areas. The area towards the bottom of Figure 1, near which there are two ponds, is Shivdaspur Village, sometimes also called Shivdaspur Alley. Shivdaspur Village/Alley is indisputably a red-light area: the road here is lined with brothels, from whose doorways women are regularly seen soliciting at all times of day (more women are out at night, but I regularly observed women awaiting customers during the afternoon, and as early as 8am). Guria Sansthan's two buildings are located within this area, as is a large public field where

water buffalo are often tied, and where goats sometimes graze; the land is occasionally used as a parking lot, and tents and *pandals*, temporary structures made to house deities for worship during Hindu religious ceremonies, were set up there during festivals. This is the area in which the vast majority of my field research was conducted, because of its accessibility vis-à-vis the NGO.

Following the curve of the road further back, and to the north, is an area called Bhind Basti. The majority of the women who work in Shivdaspur in fact live in this area, which Ajeet describes as a “suburb” of Shivdaspur. As can be seen in Figure 1, the density of buildings back here is considerably higher than in Shivdaspur Village. Besides densely packed houses, there are several shops in Bhind Basti – tea stalls, barber shops, a local Public Call Office, and at least one tailor. Vendors selling fruits and vegetables, as well as bangles, earrings, and other trinkets visit regularly during the daytime. Chickens, ducks, and goats wander through the alleys, foraging through whatever trash they can find. There are also several small temples located in Bhind Basti, including the ubiquitous (for Varanasi) temple dedicated to Shiva, a small two-story concrete structure behind a large peepul tree, under which Guria provides evening tuitions for school-going children in the neighborhood. Adjacent to Bhind Basti is a floral nursery, and during the spring the children often came to Guria’s Center with flowers plucked from the plants grown there.

As the road curves eastward, in Figure 1, to return to the Highway, the area transitions from Bhind Basti into Manduadih Block – the transition is demarcated cleanly by the intersection of another road (leading towards the market at Manduadih, as well as the local police station), and the presence of the hospital. Beyond this, the road as it curves



up to meet the Highway again contains many small houses, although it has also been described to me as an “Industrial Area.”

How and if these various and somewhat ambiguously designated spaces are linked to sex work varies depending on whom you are talking to. As verbally mapped to me by my regular auto-rickshaw driver, and confirmed by the NGO, sex work occurs in both Shivdaspur Village and Bhind Basti. Manduadih itself was once a red-light area, but many of the brothels have now been closed as a result of Guria’s actions, and it has been simply a residential and industrial area since roughly 2006. Driving through Manduadih both during the early evening and during the daytime, I never noticed any women soliciting. Manduadih Block was considered, by my regular auto-rickshaw driver, to be a safe area – Bhind Basti and Shivdaspur were not considered safe, the Basti especially, because of its relative isolation from the main road.

Presentations of these areas by those who live in them varies somewhat from this account. Those who live in Manduadih Block, including many of the children who come to Guria’s Center, view Manduadih as a ‘good’ area; the Basti a little less good; and Shivdaspur Village as an outright bad, “dirty” (*ganda*) place. Sex work is rarely, if ever, accounted for directly in these understandings of space, although it is alluded to through the epithet “*ganda kaam*” (“dirty work”). A girl from Manduadih once explained the lay-out of these neighborhoods to me as such: the people who live in Shivdaspur are “bad” and they do “dirty” things, whereas those who live in Manduadih are “good.” When I asked for further elaboration of this, I was told that in Manduadih, people speak good Hindi, and the women can wear modern, Western clothes, whereas in Shivdaspur and Bhind Basti, people speak Bhojpuri and the women must wear burquas over their traditional clothing (*salwaar-*

kameez). People living in Bhind Basti likewise look down on those who live in Shivdaspur Village, even though people from this area for a very long time denied that sex work happened at all in the Basti, indicating instead that it occurs only in Shivdaspur Alley – “a bad, dirty place.” Many of the older girls who sometimes visited Guria’s Center told me that their parents did not like for them to come to the Center because it is in Shivdaspur Alley, and therefore they were only allowed to attend the Evening Tuitions run by the NGO near the Shiv temple in the Basti.

Those living in Shivdaspur Alley are, at least to some extent, socially excluded by those living in the Basti – there were two occasions during my fieldwork when attendance at the Center was remarkably low, because all of the children living in the Basti (as well as the two local women employed by Guria) were busy with a wedding in the neighborhood, to which the children who live in Shivdaspur Alley were either not invited or at which they did not feel welcome – these children were also often excluded during games, or otherwise teased more regularly than others by children from the Basti.

According to Ajeet Singh, the individuals who live in Bhind Basti hypocritically try to distance themselves, morally and economically, from those who live in Shivdaspur Village, but in reality they are all involved in sex work. Many of the families who live there are *murasis*<sup>9</sup>, meaning that they are/were hereditary musicians who accompanied the performances of sex workers. In the moral and status economy of sex work in South Asia, at least as it was historically practiced, those who provided musical services are ranked

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<sup>9</sup> The term *murasi* for these individuals was provided by the NGO – I never heard any individual associated with Bhind Basti use the term. The *murasi* are an ethnic group associated with traditional forms of sex work in South Asia, but who do not themselves practice sex work (see Saeed 2001, *xix*). Anu’s family had been headed by a harmonium player until he died in the early 2000s, leaving the family without a primary male money-earner.

more highly than those who provided only sexual services, because they were in a position to distance themselves from the exchange of sexual services for money by arguing that the services they provided were artistic: those providing “only” sex are at the bottom; those who provide sex but also dance are slightly higher; those who sing are higher still, as they are not providing the erotic excitement of dance; and those who only provide musical accompaniment can claim an even higher moral authority given that they work on the margins of sex work<sup>10</sup>. In the NGO’s conception of Shivdaspur, however, this hierarchy is useless: if you are involved in sex work, you are involved in sex work – it does not matter who actually performs the sex work itself. In fact, in their conception of the moral economy of sex work only the woman herself has any claims to moral authority or righteousness: the rest are “parasites,” earning money from her labor. The *murasi* in this conceptualization are recast as pimps:

But these players, those are basically pimps, all the musicians playing for the tawa’ifs they are basically pimps. They bring customers for the women, in addition to playing music to accompany them. That was the traditional way it happened. (Ajeet Singh, Personal Interview, 4/3/10)

It is not just musicians who are cast in this light, though, but all of the men who work and live in Bhind Basti, regardless of what their nominal occupation is. I often asked about professions in the neighborhood, and was told that men in the *basti* or from the *basti* (in the case of those who had migrated to Mumbai and Bangalore) did a variety of types of work. Those who had migrated to a larger city were said to be involved in cabinet building and cloth-dyeing, whereas those who were still in the neighborhood did a variety of low-wage and low-status work, including selling tea, rickshaw-pulling, and sari-embroidering.

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<sup>10</sup> Similar hierarchies of sex work have been observed historically (Oldenberg 1990; Post 1987; Srinivasan 2006) and ethnographically (Brown 2005).

These men are also conceptualized and described as pimps, “parasites feeding off of the women,” as are men who run shops, and those who operate utilities such as public call offices – they flock to the area because there is money there, and are therefore also implicated in the pimping and prostituting of women. As one informant explained:

Even if the women don’t want them there, they are parasites, they will be there. It’s not a question of the women wanting [them] or not [I had asked if the shops and businesses in the red light area were there to cater to the women.] A pimp *will be there*, a brothel keeper *will be there*, even if you throw them away they will come back. It’s like sugar; ants will come around because there’s “money” there. Because there is crime, there is money there and so these secondary stake-holders will also come. Those who are shop-keepers in the red light area are also pimps : you can add “plus pimp” to their job title [i.e., *chai*-seller + pimp, rickshaw-puller + pimp]. There is one barber shop, there is one tea shop, and the people that run them are *totally* pimps, they are totally pimps, *right?* Some of them are dangerous also, they do some trafficking jobs, and they are allied to some of the brothel keepers. There’s a gang, and they are part of the politics of the whole thing.

This understanding of individuals who operate any sort of business within Shivdaspur or the *basti* extends beyond the men to women involved in petty business. Even an old woman who sells vegetables, it was explained to me, is a “parasite” supporting the continued prostitution of women, and sapping their earnings : the larger the population in Shivdaspur, the more vegetables she will sell, and therefore she is in favor of more brothels, more trafficking, more of the sort of politicians and police officials who turn a blind eye while accepting bribes.

This explanation of the NGO’s understanding of the depth and roots of prostitution in Shivdaspur is meant to highlight an important point: the defining feature of Shivdaspur is prostitution, even though there are many other activities going on there. Its economy is perceived to be rotten to the core with the crime, corruption, trafficking, and moral failures that allow sexual slavery to occur, and no one earning money in any way is excused from

the stain of these crimes. The money is tainted with criminal activity, an indelible ink that makes accepting the money as payment for non-sexual goods and services tantamount to supporting prostitution. It is important to note that the individual women who earn the money are exempt from this stain in the NGO's eyes, but it makes it impossible for the individuals working and living in Shivdaspur to be identified as anything other than sex workers, pimps, brothel keepers, and traffickers. Thus from the vantage point of the NGO, to be in Shivdaspur is to be unable to escape the stain of prostitution, regardless of what other economic activities one might engage in.

In dramatic counterpoint to the NGO's portrayal of people in Shivdaspur, Shivdaspuris themselves do not mention sex work, unless they are referring to the sex work of others. If one put one's blinders on, and took the statements of those from the neighborhood at face value, Shivdaspur would not appear to be a red light area populated by women selling sex, and their associated "parasites," but instead a small, relatively impoverished village. The street is lined with small businesses which sell sundry items: snacks, toiletries, packaged drinking water, and stationary. Stepping up to the counter of one such shop, the shop's proprietor, knowing I was affiliated with the *balwadi*, proudly told me that his store stocked "everything for children," displaying an array of notebooks, pens, crayons and folders, as well as a few small toys. People in Shivdaspur raise their livestock (chickens, goats and water buffaloes), tend the mustard field, and earn money through small, sundry jobs: rickshaw pulling, tea-selling, sari-embroidery, washing dishes and cleaning houses. In the morning, men play with their children, talk to their wives about their households before affectionately taking leave of them for the day, and relax away the hottest hours of the afternoon in the shade of the local *paan* (betel nut) and tea stalls.

Children come home in the early afternoon in their school uniforms, and learn to fly kites on the roofs of the buildings. Men and woman, some from within the same village, some drawn from nearby villages, get married each year. The women wear *burqas* in public after marriage, and proudly show off their infants to other women at community gatherings. To hear some Shivdaspuris tell it, there is nothing more to see than the normal, hum-drum everyday goings-on of any other village. And, of course, all of these things happen – excepting, of course, that for many outsiders the vision above is nullified by the fact that the young man heading down the street to the *paan* stall had just walked out of a brothel, that the woman he left in the brothel was heavily made-up and dressed for a day of solicitation, and by the fact that the man who runs the betel nut or tea stall might from time-to-time have a hand in the trafficking of minor girls from Bengal. For those involved with *Guria*, these facts do nullify the others; I was repeatedly cautioned that while the neighborhood might look like anywhere else, it was different and, furthermore, dangerous.

And, of course, those from Shivdaspur and the *basti* do also understand Shivdaspur as a red-light area, and present it (in other ways) in that manner as well. The women standing in Shivdaspur Alley dressed for work are presenting themselves as women who will exchange sex for money, and the men associated with these women present themselves as protectors, urging unruly or belligerent men away, keeping a nearly constant eye on the women themselves. Beyond the visual, as mentioned before, individuals would verbally allude to the *ganda kaam* (dirty work) done by others, and argue that they could not come regularly into Shivdaspur Alley from Bhind Basti because their families did not think it proper. The very decidedly black-and-white Shivdaspur described by the NGO thus

gives way to a plurality of descriptions of the area, which in my mind overlay one another like so many sketches on transparencies.

It is important to note here that one of the representations of Shivdaspur by community members is the same as the self-representation of the communities, families, and gender relations of non-sex-work communities. They focus heavily on familial relations and on normative Muslim or Hindu (and, in that case, primarily Braminical) gender relations. Children in this context regularly refer to their *ma-bap* (a slangy term for parents, plural – mother *and* father) at home; women and girls talk about marriage, and take pride in their children, or, if they are still children themselves, in caring for their younger siblings. Modesty, in all non-solicitation contexts, was guarded more heavily in Shivdaspur than in any other context that I experienced in Varanasi; at moments when my *dupatta* (a shawl worn over the chest and shoulders, and considered symbolic of a woman's honor) would slip forward from my shoulders, women and girls in Shivdaspur were quick to call my attention to it or rush to reposition it, an experience that I have never had in other contexts where such slippages were generally not remarked upon. Women in Shivdaspur never initiated conversations with me about sex work, although they spoke to me often about their children, about their poverty, and about the difficulties of the housework. In these respects, Shivdaspuris defined and presented themselves as men and women like any others, refusing discussion of or acknowledgement of occupation-related differences in lifestyle.

One seemingly unusual facet of Shivdaspur Alley, Bhind Basti, and Manduadih Block was the relative integration of Muslims and Hindus in the area. Ajeet and Manju estimate that there are slightly more Muslims than Hindus living in Shivdaspur, which accords with

the identities of the children who came to Guria's educational center. In the rest of Varanasi, there is an apparent separation of Muslim and Hindu areas of town, whereas in the red light area Muslims and Hindus lived intermingled and, more remarkably, participated in each other's religious festivals. For example, I attended a health lecture sponsored by the NGO during Ramadan, the Islamic month of fasting. At the beginning of the lecture, a snack of samosa (potato-filled pastries) and grapes was passed out to all of the young women in attendance, none of whom ate the snacks during the event. During a break, they encouraged me to eat my snack. When I asked why they would not eat theirs, they explained the fast to me; as a result, I asked if they were all Muslim, at which point each young woman identified herself to me as either Muslim or Hindu. Regardless of their religious affiliation, they explained, they were friends and so they fasted together out of a sense of solidarity. Manju identified this intermingling and solidarity, in the face of broader patterns of communal violence in India, as one of the most admirable features of the community. "In the whole country, you can start a riot [based on Hindu-Muslim enmity]," she said, "but here you cannot start [such] a riot."

Concern with religious identity was sometimes in evidence in Shivdaspur. Who did or did not eat pork, for example, was often a topic of conversation. Likewise, the religious identity of one's friends was often listed along with their names, as children would say things such as "My friends are Rajiv, Talib, and Raju. Two are Hindu and one is Muslim." Despite such concerns, however, there did not seem to be an segregation of the community by religion, and the lists of friends always included some combination of Muslim and Hindu individuals. Rather, segregation within Shivdaspur was based more on perceived class and moral status in relationship to prostitution, as explicated in the distinctions made between



those who live in Shivdaspur Alley, Bhind Basti, and Manduadih Block described above. Outside of Shivdaspur, likewise, the area was not obviously associated with one religious community or another. Thus, although communal factionalism is prevalent in contemporary India, it does not appear to be one of the factors through which Shivdaspur is understood, either from inside or outside the community. This communal harmony within Shivdaspur is perhaps the result of the intense exclusion that it experiences as a red light community, and due to the fact that prostitution and trafficking are commonly understood as a poverty-based problem or moral failing, rather than a communal one.

### **Sex Work, Prostitution, Victimhood and Agency**

Much has been written over the last fifteen years on the topic of how we are to regard individuals who sell sexual services for a living. It is currently fashionable, in different theoretical circles, to argue either that women engaged in sex work are victims, or that they are agents, or, more accurately, that they are both. Following a host of other empirical studies (Agustin 2008; Banerjee 2000; Bernstein 2007; Brennan 2004; Dewey 2008; Dewey & Kelly 2011; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Kotiswaran 2011; Montgomery 2001; Sahni, Shankar & Apte 2008; Tambe 2009; Zheng 2009), this ethnography is written with a view that sex workers are agents operating within various sets of social and economic circumstances: how restricting those circumstances are varies considerably by context. It is also written with the understanding that many ethnographies of sex work and trafficking have found that, contrary to popular belief, sex workers choose rather than are forced to work in their occupation (Brennan 2004; Cheng 2010; Kotiswaran 2011;

Parrenas 2011), although this understanding does not negate the possibility of forced prostitution.

Women from Shivdaspur related experiences to me of victimhood and helplessness, such as being beaten by brothels keepers or failing to attract enough customers to support themselves, but also described achievements in their lives, such as raising children who were now working and saving to build a home. Thus, while recognizing the social stigma that is attributed to their profession, as well as the day-to-day forms of violence and exclusion that some sex workers experiences as result of their work, their skill at navigating and shaping their lives must also be acknowledged. Guria as an organization, however, skews quite heavily towards viewing sex workers as victims, arguing that statements that focus on the agency of women within the system of brothel prostitution miss the forest for the trees, and help to perpetuate an unjust system of sexual slavery. Throughout the dissertation, portrayals of sex workers as victims will be balanced by the ethnographic realities of the actions and self-portrayals of sex workers themselves.

However, the purpose of this ethnography is not to traffic (pun intended) in pronouncements on agency or victimhood in any objective sense, but rather to explicate and interpret the webs of meaning through which such women are understood and represented, and through which they represent themselves. Part of the reason for this focus on meaning is academic and/or ideological: the subject of agency has been very well explored by other scholars, and as such does not bear re-examination here. Another, and perhaps larger, reason is that the study at hand is not able to address such a question empirically. It is not possible to give an account of what is “really happening” in Shivdaspur, vis-à-vis the agency of the women who live and work there in part because my fieldwork

was so tightly controlled by the NGO *Guria*. What I was able to see of Shivdaspur was largely shaped by their interests. Acknowledgement of Guria's careful curation of my experience of Shivdaspur is not offered as a criticism of the NGO, or to suggest that they intentionally (or nefariously) biased my experience and interpretation of Shivdaspur. Ajeet Singh and the activists who work with him very generously allowed me to observe the sphere of their activism, all the while taking both my safety and theirs into account in an environment fraught with stigma and conflict.

In addition to the NGO's control of my interactions with Shivdaspur, Shivdaspuris had their own ideas about what I should see, know, and think about Shivdaspur that did not include a desire to spill their deep, dark secrets about prostitution and sex trafficking to me. Even as I got to know certain residents of Shivdaspur better, there were topics that were rarely brought up. While people became more willing to answer such questions over time, it was clearly a topic on which they would rather have kept silent in my presence. Those who did speak on the topic seemed unsure of what I wanted to know, or what they were willing to tell me. For example, one woman said that she had come to Shivdaspur on her own, and of her own volition, only to say fifteen minutes later that she had been led there by a middle-man, and routinely beaten by the first brothel keeper for whom she worked. There is no reason to think that people were purposefully trying to lie; just that they represent themselves to themselves and to outsiders in ways that are inherently ambiguous and fraught with contradiction.

## Sex Work in India

Sex work in India has been studied from a wide variety of disciplinary vantage points. From the perspectives of public health and social work, there is a plethora of information about HIV and AIDS rates, trafficking, and the demographics of sex workers (see, for example, O'Neil *et al* 2004, Dandona *et al* 2005, 2006; Rekhart 2005). From the perspectives of social sciences such as psychology, public health and political science, much has been written about the stigma and caste-and-gender-based exploitation that accompanies sex work (c.f., Cornish 2004; Blanchard *et al* 2006; Jayasree 2004). Additionally, there are a number of historical studies of colonial era sex work (Banerjee 2000; Chatterjee 1993; Tambe 2009), and bodies of historical work that focus on courtesanship in South Asia, describing indigenous varieties of sex workers, especially the north Indian *tawa'if* or *bai-ji* (Chandra 1973; Dang 1993; Nevile 1996; Oldenburg 1984, 1990; Patnaik 1985; Pinch 2004; Qureshi 2006; Sharar 1975), as well as the South Indian *devadasis*, or temple dancers (Kersenboom-Story 1987; Marglin 1985; Soneji 2012; Parker 1998).

Compared to the volume of work written *about* sex workers and sex work as a social or public health problem, there are relatively few *ethnographic* studies of sex work written from an emic perspective in South Asia (Brown 2005; Brown 2007; Kotiswaran 2011; Maciszewski 2001; Maciszewski 2006; Sariola 2010; Saeed 2002; Shah 2006; Soneji 2012), most likely due to the very methodological research problems that I encountered in conducting this research. Of these works, two are set in Pakistan, both within the same red light district, *Heera Mandi* of Lahore (Brown 2005; Brown 2007; Saeed 2002). Whereas Saeed's (2002) work focuses on the performing industry that existed within Heera Mandi,

examining the different interests of the musicians, pimps, prostitutes and brothel keepers involved in the industry, Brown (2005; 2007) zeroes in on the poverty and abuse that attend the lives of one family of *tawa'ifs* (courtesans). Maciszewski's (2001; 2006) research describes the difficulties and successes of contemporary courtesans, mostly hailing from the red light area of Muzzaffpur, Bihar, as they try to inhabit and use for their benefit an increasingly historicized and nostalgically romanticized identity (*tawa'if*) even as the patronage and status historically attached to that identity has dwindled to nearly nothing; it was her work on courtesans that initially introduced me to the NGO *Guria*.

Finally, there are the recent works of Kotiswaran (2011), Sariola (2010), Shah (2006) and Soneji (2012). Sariola's explores the HIV/AIDS and sex work NGO industry in Chennai, considering how HIV/AIDS prevention programs might operate if they included the full range of women's motivations for engaging in sex work (which include love and desire in addition to the commonly assumed motivations of personal finances and structural force), as well as the identities *other* than sex worker that such women claim which include (as I also found) those of mother and wife. Expanding on the idea of spectacle, Shah's (2006) broader work focuses on the discursive production of sex work, trafficking and migration as objects of fear, and of transnational social and gendered concern (Shah 2003; 2004; 2007; 2008, 2010).

Kotiswaran's (2011) ethnography describes sex workers' narratives of their work as labor (as opposed to exploitation or slavery), and concludes that their work should be recognized as work. Refreshingly moving out of the structure/agency debate, she argues on Foucauldian grounds and from the positioning of materialist feminism that the power exerted in sex markets does not operate unidirectionally *against* the sex worker, but rather

that sex workers operate in collusion with and against other stakeholders within sex markets as they see fit:

The interests of stakeholders, including landlords, brothel keepers, customers, hooligans, and the police, do not form a unitary system of domination against sex workers. Instead, the alignment of their interests, if and where evident, is contingent. [...] the power relations among the various stakeholders, including among sex workers *inter se* in the highly internally differentiated sex markets of Sonagachi and Tirupati, are fluid. In the process, patterns of power relations—even equilibriums—seem to emerge, but are open to destabilization (Kotiswaran 2011:13-14).

Thus, power shifts between various stakeholders over time, and, following the Foucauldian maxim that “Where there is power, there is resistance” (Foucault 1978:95), sex workers will always be exerting power and having power exerted on them in varying amounts depending on a host of historical, temporal and political variables. Even in the most violent and hierarchical modes of sex work in the Subcontinent – including scenarios such as those that *Guria* says occur in Shivdaspur, in which individuals are trafficked into debt-bondage in brothels and physically forced to engage in sex work– power shifts and flows constantly in such a way that any one individual is never *wholly* victim in the way that *Guria* would have it. From this stance, Kotiswaran argues that when individuals or collectives of sex workers, such as those she encountered in Tirumala and Kolkata, argue that their work is in fact *work* and should be legalized as such, they should not be dismissed as victims in possession of a false consciousness.

Davesh Soneji (2012) has produced an ethnographic history of the lives of South Indian courtesans (generally glossed by the term *devadasis*), in which he describes the lives of such women since the legal institution of a social reform that made their lifestyle, occupation, and “culture” illegal in the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. Tracing the effects of these reforms on individual *devadasis* and their communities, he argues for the

incommensurability of *devadasis* with 20<sup>th</sup> century conceptualizations of modernity. *Devadasis*, then, have been highly marginalized within the contemporary Indian State, and conflated, to their detriment, with the egregious systems of abuse that are understood to characterize all sex work communities in contemporary India. Although he is uninterested in challenging the notion that “agency, understood in contemporary feminist terms, is, and for the most part has been, unavailable to most women in these communities” (2012:13), this is based in a desire to understand *devadasis* on an individual rather than systemic level.

Compared to what has been written ethnographically about sex workers in India, there is much that is written *about* prostitutes and sex workers, in terms of salacious, poverty-porn journalism and opinion pieces, as well as feminist arguments about how we are to regard sex workers. Gangoli (2007) summarizes much of this nicely, noting the tendency of Indian feminists to either ignore entirely the question of prostitution and sex work (on the grounds that engaging a topic so closely related to questions of gender and immorality will be problematic for attempts to improve the lots of Indian women more broadly), or to regard it as an issue of the most abject kind of exploitation and victimhood. Indeed when it comes to representations of sex workers in this type of literature, that of the exploited victim is by far the most common image. These representations are related to broader arguments about the exploitation and devaluation of women and girls more generally. Prostitution, trafficking and sex work are seen as visible manifestations of this devaluation and exploitation, as well as a litany of gender abuses in the region, such as high rates of sex-selective abortion, malnourishment or undernourishment of women, sexual double-standards, public sexual harassment of women, and overt sexism.

Unsurprisingly, then, India is home to a host of organizations like *Guria Swayam Sevi Sansthan*, which operate from a number of perspectives, ranging from the abolitionist (International Justice Mission, *Guria*, *Aapne Aap*, STOP) to the Marxist workers collectives aimed at destigmatization and decriminalization of sex work as a profession (*Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee*). These other organizations will be brought into the discussion as necessary throughout the dissertation, as will the question of the exploitation and victimhood of sex workers. To contextualize *Guria* at the outset, though, it must be noted that abolitionist organizations are more thick on the ground than are workers' collectives in the sex-work-related NGO sector, and that *Guria*'s descriptions of sex workers as exploited slaves is not uncommon in this context, regardless of its accuracy.

Indeed, *Guria* as an institution finds itself situated within a long historical process related to the reform of prostitutes and sex workers in India. The standard history of such reforms begins with colonial-era regulations of prostitution that spanned Britain's empire and sought to control and regulate prostitution on moral and public-health grounds (Levine 1996; 2004). Such reforms continued through modern Nationalist movements in the subcontinent to reform both Indian dance (as a symbol of Nationalist pride) and the women who historically had performed dance in the subcontinent ("prostitutes," including *tawa'ifs* and *devadasis* who, because of their non-conjugal sexuality were subsumed by this category). The Anti-Nautch and Devadasi reform movements (*c.f.* Kannibaran and Kannibaran 2003; Vijaisri 2004; Whitehead 1998) sought to remove women from sex work on the assumption that middle-class (or upper-caste) understandings of gendered morality should be extended to and adopted by all women. Reform continues in the modern abolitionist movement, which argues against sex work (and the violence and abuse that can



attend it) on both moral and feminist grounds: sex work (or, more properly, “prostitution” as it is understood) is considered a form of gendered violence that must be eradicated in order for women, particularly third world women, to be liberated and empowered. In this current iteration of reform, the (im)morality of selling sex takes a backseat to the victimhood of the sex worker (*c.f.* Bernstein 2007; Kotiswaran 2011).

Soneji (2012) notes that historically these reforms have been situated within a middle-class/upper-caste feminism, in that they have been instigated *by* middle-class/upper-caste women *for* women of lower caste and economic background. Reformers have generally come from superior caste and class backgrounds than the women whom they are trying to help, and seek to bring the perceived benefits of middle-class womanhood – such as chastity and marriageability – to sex workers. Contemporary abolitionism aimed at sex work follows this format, and *Guria* finds itself within this same class/caste orientation. Although Ajeet Singh is not Brahmin, he is of a higher caste and class background than the residents of Shivdaspur. Likewise, the activists associated with the organization are generally not of the same low caste/class status as Shivdaspuris, and the foreign volunteers who work with *Guria* come from solidly middle-or-upper-class backgrounds in the West. However, *Guria* tiptoes outside this framework in that the organization’s goal is emphatically *not* to bring about Sanskritized or middle-class gender relations in Shivdaspur, because the organization recognizes those gender relations as violently patriarchal. Thus, in contrast to previous reformers’ attempts to expand middle-class gender relations (and restrictions), *Guria*’s actions seek to bring about a sphere of women’s empowerment in the red light district that it conceptualizes as non-existent *outside* of the red light area in contemporary India. However, in its choice of “Rescue-and-

Report” tactics in Shivdaspur, as it works to dismantle the current structure of brothel prostitution, ironically disenfranchises the women who are currently imbricated within that structure. Thus, as with both historical and other contemporary reformers, *Guria* seems to view the notions of choice and agency as a zero-sum game: either full victimhood, or full liberation.

However, as previously mentioned, there are increasingly perspectives on sex work in India that include notions of choice and sex work as a form of labor. Gangoli (2007) briefly addresses these as well as? Indian feminist perspectives that ignore sex work, or regard it as exploitation. Indian sex worker’s memoirs (Durbar 2006; Jameela 2010) describe both the benefits and abuses that attend their profession, and generally do present the work as a choice (if not a particularly desirable one). Additionally, the organization *Durbar* has emerged as a striking advocate for human and labor rights for sex workers as sex workers, as opposed to human rights for sex workers as women who, from the abolitionist perspective, ought not to be sex workers in the first place. The existence of such organizations is relatively new in this context, however, and the relative merits of both perspectives will be addressed at the end of this ethnography (Ch.7).

Although the work of such organizations, in concert with ethnographic works which concretely take the perspectives of sex workers into account, such as those of Daves Soneji, Amelia Maciszewski, and Prabha Kotiswaran, provide an important counterpoint to abolitionist and reformers’ perspectives on sex work they necessarily focus on sex work as an all-encompassing identity: one that is either forced upon sex workers from outside, or proudly assumed by them in the context of activism. In contrast, Shivdaspur provides an ethnographic argument for a desire on the part of a red light community to ignore or

slough off such an identity in favor of more normalizing discourses of South Asian identity. Following Sariola and Kotiswaran's work on other South Asian sex-worker activist organizations, in the chapters that follow I situate Guria and Shivdaspur within broader discourses of gender, sexuality and exclusion, and describe the relationships between conceptualizations of sex work and sex workers and the methodology which Guria uses to conduct its activism.

## CHAPTER 2

### GURIA'S CHILDREN: EDUCATION AND THE LEGITIMACY OF ACTIVISM IN SHIVDASPUR

*Guria Sansthan's* goals are as follows:

1. Ending trafficking, and re-trafficking.
2. Ending child prostitution.
3. Ending second-generation prostitution.
4. Creating an "exploitation free" red light district.

Throughout the organization's nineteen-year history, it has focused on achieving these goals mostly within the bounds of Shivdaspur. In this chapter, I consider one of the major components of the NGO's activism in its attempt to achieve these goals: the education of the children of sex workers. Throughout the chapter, the importance of education for the NGO is discussed. As described in the introduction, value attributed to education is a fundamental attribute of the Indian middle class, and of those who aspire to middle-classness. Tanya Jakimow asserts that "the legitimacy of the middle class is primarily based on its cultural capital, namely, its competence in English, education qualifications, and occupational skills" (2012:34). In its informal education center, Guria provides support and tutoring for children enrolled in private English medium schools, as well as in government schools, helping the children to attain not only literacy but also marketable skills. However, other content at the educational center reinforces Ajeet Singh's personal valuation of play and creativity (which is attractive to foreign donors and volunteers), as well as facets of traditional Indian culture that he finds to be valuable in countering what he sees as the rampant materialism spreading through contemporary India. Additionally, I argue that positive appraisal of the education center in the eyes of most Shivdaspuris – the children find the center to be "fun," and parents agree on the value of educating their

children and thus appreciate the NGO's support -- provides a platform of legitimacy for the NGO's presence in Shivdaspur, even as it seeks to end the primary economic activity of the area.

From an abolitionist perspective, the education of the children of sex workers makes sense in long-term service of their third goal in particular, although Ajeet Singh initially envisioned education of everyone involved (both the children and their mothers) as the key to stopping the entry into and the continued practice of prostitution. If the women and their children were better educated, they would have other options, which Ajeet assumed they would choose over sex work. This is, to some extent, still the logic of *Guria's* interventions with children in Shivdaspur. However, the education provided by *Guria* is focused not only on academic successes but also on creative and spiritual development. Nor does being educated, in Ajeet's experience, routinely prevent women from continuing to engage in sex work, or automatically prevent their children from taking up the trade later in life. In addition to the educational objectives of the NGO, though, the organizations' interactions with the children of Shivdaspur serve a broader purpose: providing the NGO with a legitimate, and nearly universally valued, purpose for being in Shivdaspur. In this chapter, then, I describe *Guria Sansthan's* educational initiatives, and the broader uses of those initiatives, beginning before the NGO's existence with Ajeet Singh's attempts to adopt the children of one individual sex worker.

### **Adoption of a Sex-Worker's Children**

To the extent that *Guria* is an outlet for the activism and aspirations of Ajeet Singh, the history of the organization begins in 1988. Ajeet describes his decision to start the NGO as an outcropping of the following experience:

In 1988, when I was seventeen years old, I got the idea for *Guria*. I went to a cousin's wedding, where I saw a dancing girl. She danced all night as part of the festivities, and people looked at her vulgarly. In the morning, I went to speak to her, and told her that I would adopt her children. She was a Muslim prostitute, from Varanasi, but had moved to Azampur district, and so I went to see her there and asked her "What if I adopt your children?" At first, she did not agree. She laughed at me, actually, but I was persistent and in 1991 I adopted her children. One and a half years later, though, the children went back to their mother. And then in 1993, I started *Guria* and my work in Shivdaspur. So, my work [with sex workers and their children] started in 1988 – that is how I count it – but *Guria* did not come into existence until 1993.

At that time, when I had adopted the children, I had such a lot of social pressure. Even today, can you imagine what people would say – being a bachelor, and adopting and raising a prostitute's children? I've never bothered about people and what they say. I did it because it was what I wanted to do. But it was a very difficult time: I did not have any earnings, or an organization to explain what I was doing, and the social pressures were tremendous. Even today, I acknowledge that it was the most difficult time of my life. I can face the brothel keepers and the criminals and the guns today, I don't find it as difficult as it was then. I was too young, maybe. I adopted her children, but then the adoption failed, so in 1993 I thought "I must have an organization. I must go about this in a more organized way." That is when I founded *Guria*. [Personal Interview, May 18, 2010]

At the time, Ajeet was working on a History degree at Hans Raj College in Delhi, and this very personal venture into something like social work shocked his family. In adopting this woman's children, his goal was to allow her children to grow up outside of the context of a red-light district, and thus provide them with the opportunity to be something other than sex-workers or pimps and petty criminals when they grew up. This proved extraordinarily difficult, though, and although he temporarily succeeded in adopting her children, and enrolling them in a private school, he faced considerable suspicion as a result of his actions. His parents were not supportive because of the social stigma surrounding the children, and the incredulous suspicion surrounding his actions, as it was assumed that adoption of her children meant that he himself was having a rather scandalous relationship with a sex

worker. Ajeet generally does not talk about this time, except to note that it was more difficult, emotionally, than any other time in his life and career as a social worker and activist. He also acknowledges that the experience taught him that the problems associated with sex work would be better fought on a larger-scale, systematic level, than on the very personal and individual level represented by the adoptions. As such, he moved to the institutional level, and at the end of 1993 he founded an NGO and started his educational work in Shivdaspur.

### **The *Balwadi***



**Figure 2: Bead Decorations made by children attending the Balwadi.**



**Figure 3 : The Balwadi decorated for a festival.**





**Figure 4: Children beginning to line up to leave the balwadi at the end of the day.**

The most visible facet of *Guria's* activism in Shivdaspur is the *balwadi*, or kindergarten, which they operate free of charge for the children of Shivdaspur. Daily attendance varies considerably, with as few as eight children on some days, and upwards of seventy on others; most often, thirty-forty children of varying ages come. In 2010, sixty-four children who were attending formal schools in the area (either under the financial sponsorship of the NGO, or whose school fees were paid by their mothers) were also attending the *balwadi*, and an additional forty-six children who did not attend formal school were registered. Of the school-going children, many of them had classes only in the

morning, making it easy for them to attend from 12:30pm to 4pm every day. Older children, whose school day runs longer, often arrived later.

The kindergarten itself is held in a small, two-story white concrete building, with a gated courtyard. The blue metal front gate that leads into the courtyard is sometimes left open while the *balwadi* is in session, but is more often bolted from the inside, such that children arriving late must rattle the bolt or otherwise call to be let inside. If I arrived late, I would have to knock, but generally in this case the old woman who sold *paan* out of a small stall across from the building, or another local shopkeeper or *dalal* would come to my aid and make a racket much louder than I would have, to ensure that I got inside. Coming in the front gate, one walks down a small ramp into a dusty, packed-earth courtyard; to the left is a small, one-room concrete structure in which art supplies, hair oil, and medicines for the children are kept. To the right is a large pile of bricks, which are occasionally put to use in various projects, and a thin, scraggly tree to which a volleyball net is sometimes tethered. Straight ahead are two squat concrete buildings, with a stairway between them that runs up to a second story. The building on the right serves as a lavatory, outside of which there is a water pump; the building on the left houses the two classrooms used in the *balwadi*. Neither room has electricity, and the room on the ground floor has no furnishings at all, although its walls are pasted over with examples of the children's artwork, as well as a list of the children who attend or have attended the *balwadi*, and those going to formal schools outside of Shivdaspur. The room on the second story is carpeted in thin green Astroturf, and houses a plastic slide and teeter-totter, both of which are kept on top of a large metal storage container full of toys when they are not in use. There are two sets of recessed shelves in the room, one full of moldering stacks of paper, and the other full of small slates,

pieces of chalk, a tambourine, the attendance books, and several combs and bottles of hair oil, as well as a few pairs of nail clippers. When I bought a set of storybooks and alphabet books for the *balwadi*, these too were stored there; a library of children's books is kept in *Guria's* other building, a few doors down on Shivdaspur Alley. From the balcony that runs along the length of the building outside of the second-story classroom, you can look out over the courtyard and part of the Alley; and from the stairs leading back down to the courtyard, you can see the back side of an abandoned brothel, two large green ponds in which water buffalo wade, a stray palm tree or two, and a large mustard field. Clay for use in the *balwadi's* art projects is harvested from the pond beds in the hot season, when the ponds completely dry up.

The day at the *balwadi* is loosely structured. Children begin to arrive in groups at 12:30pm, and at 1pm the teachers (four or five on any given day, all of whom are men except for Anu) call the class to order, making the children sit in lines in the second-storey classroom. A leader is chosen by the teachers for each line, and the children sing two or three songs as a group, in call-and-response fashion, the leaders singing out one line, which is then repeated (often at top screaming volume) by the other children lined up before them.

These songs are largely inspirational, moral, or nationalist in character. One song, sung quite frequently, was about the friendship between Gandhi and Nehru. Another very common song was an English children's rhyme, "God's Love is So Wonderful," which reminds the singer that God's love for them is boundless. Occasionally, the singing is followed by a few calisthenics, and then the children sit down in their lines, to be led through a series of clapping games (*tali*) by a teacher with a tambourine. In some cases,

they clap rhythmically, and in others are encouraged to vary intensity as well as rhythm, which leads to a lot of theatrics. If the children are having an unusually difficult time concentrating on the clapping, they might be encouraged to pretend to laugh, pretend to cry, and then are encouraged to scream at top volume, which they do with considerable gusto. This tends to calm them down enough for the daily meditation.

The meditation varies in quality and content with who is leading it. On the rare days when Manju comes to Shivdaspur, the children are led through long meditations of up to thirty minutes, as she encourages them to imagine a variety of scenarios: they have all gone to the mountains, and are playing in the cold, cold snow; they are seeing a large bird fly through the blue sky; they have been playing with our friends, and maybe they have done something naughty, which has caused one of their friends to cry, and so they are encouraged to think about how that will feel. Manju's meditations are longer and more visual than others, although one of the other teachers would occasionally lead the children to imagine a trip to the Lucknow zoo, including the details of what it would be like to be on the train, the sounds it would make, and what sort of animals they would encounter once we got there. In other cases, the children might be led through a very short meditation about the virtues of doing "good" things, and not "bad" or "dirty" things so that their parents would not be disappointed with them. Regardless of the guided portion of the meditation, there was often a long period of quiet breathing that followed; as the teacher was talking, many of the children, particularly the smaller ones would fall asleep sitting up, and the teachers would walk about the room carefully guiding the sleeping children to the floor. This was something that I eventually enjoyed quite a bit – spotting the child who was clearly dropping off to sleep, and weaving quietly through the meditating kids to help the

sleepy ones nap. Those who had fallen asleep would nap for a while, and the others would sit quietly, until the teacher verbally ended the meditation session. The meditation sessions are intended, according to Ajeet and Manju, to help calm the children down and get them in touch with themselves and their feelings, as well as to encourage them to think imaginatively and to imagine the feelings and intentions of others. Hence, the meditations focus on visual imagery and on considering how other people might feel as a result of their actions. As such, the meditations are intended to counteract Ajeet's understanding of the red light district as a place in which compassion and creativity are ignored in favor of the pursuit of money.

After meditation, the children are divided into two groups – older children (6 or 7 and above) are sent downstairs for reading and mathematics practice, and the younger children stay in the upstairs room, where they are drilled in alphabets (both the ABCs and the *Ka-Kha-Ga-Ghas*, the Hindi alphabet) and counting to one hundred (both in English and in Hindi). Sometimes, this is followed by an art project or alphabet writing practice for the slightly older children in this group, but more generally after these lessons it is play time: the slide and teeter-totter come down off of the storage box, and stuffed animals, balls, and *carrom*<sup>11</sup> boards come out, with the teachers carefully distributing the small disks needed to play the game, and collecting them from the children at the end of the play-session. If the weather is pleasant, and enough older children are there, a volleyball net is strung up in the courtyard and impromptu teams form, the ball ricocheting around the courtyard and sometimes flying up over the walls and out into the street.

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<sup>11</sup> *Carrom* is a table-top game that resembles a combination of billiards and shuffleboard, in which one tries to flick small round disks into holes at the corner of the board.

Playtime is boisterous, disorganized and, a large part of the reason that children come to the *balwadi*, particularly the younger ones. The children largely control their own activities, with teachers stepping in to sort out disputes; on some days, the teachers would help to organize volleyball games, the occasional cricket game, or elaborate games of tag and wrestling. This was where some of the teachers shone in their interactions with the children, which is not to say that they are not engaged with their teaching – only that the children are *shararti* (naughty) and unruly, and as such they are considerably more fun when they are being allowed to play, rather than when one is trying to run multiplication drills with them.

The days unfold on more or less this schedule, with the children lining up to leave at 4pm, when they walk together through Shivdaspur Alley to *Guria's* other building in the area, a large, 5-storey concrete building that is not completed. At the time it was built, it was initially intended as a night *crèche* for the children. Construction began on it in 2005, and it bears the marks of its original intention as a sort of children's home in the heart of the red light district. The vision behind the building was that the children could live near to their mothers but not have to be at home in the evening, particularly if their home is regularly used as a brothel. The second floor has an arts and crafts room, where the more elaborate clay sculptures done by the children are kept, as well as a multi-colored, pastel room that is walled in with lockers. Above this floor, though, there are several stories that are unfinished – the concrete is poured, but they have not been decorated or otherwise made habitable, speaking to the abandonment of this project following the upsets caused by the raids *Guria* conducted in October of 2005.<sup>12</sup> The roof of this building is sometimes

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<sup>12</sup> The raids are covered in detail in Chapter 3.

used for special occasions – to set off fireworks on *Diwali*, or as a place for visiting circus performers to teach tricks to the children – and the communal room on the ground floor is used for health lectures and occasions like movie-viewing on Republic Day, but otherwise the building speaks to a sort of arrested progress when it comes to the activism involving Shivdaspur's children.

The ground floor of this building has two storage rooms, an anteroom, a large communal room, a functioning kitchen, and a courtyard with water spigot and two squat toilets. The children come to the communal room everyday for a meal, usually rice, *sabzhi* (vegetables), and *roti* (flat-breads) or *puri* (deep-fried flat-breads). For some of the children, depending on the stability of their home situation, this might be the most complete meal that they have in the course of the day. A few of the children arrived at the *balwadi* everyday clearly hungry, not for lack of money for food in the household, but rather because much of the household had been up working until late in the evening, and so breakfast had not been prepared. Some of the kids are sent to the *balwadi* with a few *rupees* of pocket money to buy something from a shop or cart along the way, arriving with small paper cones of fruit, nuts and other snacks. Regardless of its nutritional necessity, the afternoon meal was something that the children looked forward to, and provided a job with a small monthly stipend for Anu's mother, who generally cooked the food. After eating together in the communal room, the children went home.

Friday reliably offers some variation to the usual schedule at the *balwadi*. On Fridays, often in lieu of lessons, there is a Children's Meeting. In the Children's Meeting, all of the kids sit in a large circle in the upstairs classroom of the *balwadi* building, and one by one they are encouraged to report bad behavior on the part of themselves, other children,

or the *balwadi* teachers. Predictably enough, in some ways this can digress into a sort of common schoolyard tattling, but incidents brought up in the meeting are for the most part taken seriously. The teachers record the complaints, and often some sort of punishment is meted out on the spot. Generally, punishment takes the form of being made to grasp one's ears with one's hands (a gesture meaning "I never do that" or "I won't do that again"), and then have to do a series of deep squats while keeping their hands in that position. Usually, the group counted out the number of squats, and there was much laughing as this occurred, often on the part of the child completing the punishment as well as those watching it. Not only children did this, but in the event that a child told that a teacher had become angry and hit him or her, the better-natured teachers sometimes performed this punishment as well, to the delight of the children. Most of the incidents reported in the Children's Meeting involved fights and petty thefts amongst themselves, although sometimes issues like cigarette smoking or *paan* chewing would be addressed, prompting health lectures on cancer and the other ill effects of tobacco and betel nut.

Children were also encouraged to turn in or write letters to Manju, and on the weekends when I visited the *Guria* headquarters in Ajeet and Manju's home, I would sometimes see Manju walking about reading the letters. She sometimes responded to the letters, and read sections of them (anonymously) to the teachers, so that they would know what was bothering the children, and be reminded that any poor behavior on their part as teachers would be reported to her. She took them very seriously; before I could even ask if it would be possible for me to read a sampling of them, she explained that they were something private between her and the children, and as such my seeing the letters would be too much of a violation of the relationship between them. Both the Children's Meeting,



and the letters, served to keep Ajeet and Manju apprised of what was happening at the *balwadi* and in the neighborhood, given that they themselves could no longer go regularly. I think that they also served to show the children that they were being paid attention to, and to continue the bond between Manju and the older children, in particular, who had worked very closely with her as their teacher prior to the 2005 raids. Manju, I know, felt the loss of being able to come and go from Shivdaspur regularly and work with the children very keenly.

For the first several months of my research in Shivdaspur, my impression of the *balwadi* was one of chaos. I had visited it during my previous periods of fieldwork, in August of 2005 and August of 2008, but on both occasions my visits were just for one day, and so I was not surprised by the excitement of the children, or their unruliness; I thought that this was due to the disruption caused by my presence. Going to the *balwadi* four to five times each week, starting in the fall of 2009, though, I was eventually dismayed to see that while the children were a little bit wilder on days when other volunteers visited, or when groups of American college students on gap-year programs were brought in for the day, they never did transform into quiet, studious pupils, regardless of who was there. Although on any given day you will find some variation on the basic structure described above, it was nearly four months into my fieldwork before I could put that basic schedule together, and my frustration, early on, was palpable in my fieldnotes:

What is it that the children are taught there? Unless I am missing something, they play, then line up and do clapping games (alternating who leads the games, giving different children a sense of leadership, about which those leading seem to be proud), followed by a meditation which is sometimes as simple as telling them to think about what they want to do, and sometimes a longer discussion of how one shouldn't do "dirty things" (today it was "angry things"). Sometimes the meditation segues into a naptime, and after this sometimes story time comes. After story time, if there is no special activity (a

clay workshop, decorating for Diwali, etc.), the kids play at random until it is time to go eat. [Fieldnotes, November 5, 2009]

This early assessment turned out to be extraordinarily unfair, however. As the year progressed, some sort of general structure appeared in the day. Additionally, it eventually became apparent to me that nearly all of the older children who attended the *balwadi* were literate in at least Hindi, some of them with a rudimentary knowledge of English reading as well. The children explained to me that they had learned to read and write in the *balwadi*, or in formal schools, but that their education was supplemented by help from teachers in the *balwadi* or at evening tuitions (discussed below).

Beyond their basic literacy, the academic content of what happens at the *balwadi* increased dramatically in the Spring, as exams for the children enrolled in formal schools approached. At this point, despite the increasingly punishing heat of the day, the number of children attending each afternoon nearly doubled, with the children bringing homework and study books, and extra teachers coming to help with the increased demand. Children's success at exams was loudly and publicly celebrated in the *balwadi*, with those who passed receiving special *talis* (applause) and the congratulations of their peers. The *balwadi* functioned, then, not only as an informal school but also as a sort of children's community center and support structure for academic endeavors. There are days when the academic intent is more clear, and the sense of community among the kids there is readily apparent:

When I get into the *balwadi* today, meditation is already done, and so I go into the downstairs classroom with the older kids and sit down to see what they are studying -- they are in small groups of five or six. Talib hands me a book, written in English, and asks me to teach it -- it's is pretty high English, though (high school level), with lots of unusual grammar, and I tell him that the English is difficult. He asks me to read, in English, and translate into Hindi, and so I do that with a passage about Sinbad, Talib carefully mouthing the words and following what I am reading. After a bit I get up and go upstairs to see Anu. She has separated out little areas on the walls by

drawing rectangles on them, and passed chalk out to the children, asking them to copy ABCD, etc., from a frayed poster hanging over the main blackboard, and so they work on this for a while. Then they are put in a circle, and taught counting, 1-100 in both Hindi and English, and then ABCD, after which they are allowed to play. I spend most of the play time teaching dance moves to Roshni, who says she has learned to dance from Anu, but not in the school, at home in the house. After a while, I go down to where Anu is standing (on the roof overlooking the pond), and we watch boys swim in the pond, using a large chunk of Styrofoam as a floatation device, laughing at their play, and gossiping about the smallness of American swimsuits. [Fieldnotes, February 16, 2010]

This describes the *balwadi* at its best: educational activities, with individualized attention for students, interspersed with social activities.

Anu, who turned nineteen just as my fieldwork concluded in June of 2010, had grown up in Shivdaspur, and would have been three years old when Ajeet founded *Guria* and began his work in Shivdaspur. She has grown up, then, with *Guria* and the *balwadi* as a presence in Shivdaspur, but is just on the cusp of a generation of young adults who can remember Shivdaspur before *Guria* had built its buildings, and when Ajeet was just starting to teach the children (and, at that time, their mothers as well), under a large banyan tree back in the Basti. In her memory, the presence of the *balwadi* has improved the sense of community for the children, and most especially for young women growing up in Shivdaspur. From one of our interviews:

M: Your childhood was in Shivdaspur?

A: Yes, my childhood was in Shivdaspur.

M: And, how was your childhood?

A: My childhood was... good. I used to go to school. Until I was 7 or 8, I didn't go to school, but then Ajeet-sir came, and he called us to school. And slowly, slowly we came from the house to go to school, and became literate. And when I was older, Guria arranged my admission into a government school.

M: How was Shivdaspur, when you were little, before *Guria*?

A: It wasn't good. I never came into this neighborhood. We used to live far away. People here did not study, or learn.

M: So people were un-educated?

A: Yes.

M: When you were little, and used to come with *Guria*, what did you do?

A: I used to study. I used to study. And we all used to play, we all used to have fun! [Here her speech becomes more rapid, and she laughs lightly as she speaks.] Ajeet-sir and Manju-ma'am would play with us, and provide opportunities for us to have fun.

M: Before *Guria*, did the kids in Shivdaspur play?

A: We played, but in the house. We used to just stay in the house.

M: You stayed in the house. And the boys, in Shivdaspur?

A: The boys used to play outside, but not the girls. [Personal Interview 2/15/2010]

Above, when Anu says that she "never came to this neighborhood," she is referring to the fact that her family lives in the Basti, instead of Shivdaspur Alley. Her father was a harmonium player, and her family is (according to Ajeet) part of the *murasin* community, people who traditionally provided musical accompaniment to courtesans and sex workers, but who have become increasingly involved in working as *dalals* as the musical component of activities in the red light areas has dwindled. Many of the families living in the Basti are also of *murasin* background, or are otherwise involved in the organizational structure of the red light area (pimping, brothel keeping, trafficking). Some are engaged in forms of sex work that are more prestigious than brothel-based sex work (working as entertainers in "dance parties," often contracted for weddings or other special events; or working with only a small group of clients). Because those who live in the Basti are engaged in more prestigious forms of work, there is a clearly delineated hierarchy between the two

neighborhoods, and without the presence of the *balwadi*, children from the *Basti* (particularly girls) would never have gone there.

This sort of mixing of the neighborhoods, caused by the location of the school, continues to decrease the social isolation of the children in the red light area, in that children whose families do not live in Shivdaspur Alley or Bhind Basti sometimes come to the school. Although these children do not attend regularly, and I cannot speak to how many of the children who came occasionally were not from Shivdaspur or the Basti, I do know that they sometimes attended and formed friendships with the children from the area. One day, as I was leaving Shivdaspur and passing through the market near Manduadih, I saw one of the children who sometimes came to the *balwadi*, a young boy (about ten years old), who mentioned that his mother had a shop in the market. I went with him to visit his mother's shop, and she insisted that they did not live in the red light area, drawing a map for me to indicate that they lived nearby, but not in either of the areas known for soliciting. We chatted about Shivdaspur and the school, and I asked her what she thought of the school. Her son interjected, here – "That school is fun!" and she shot a look containing daggers at him, exclaiming "They don't TEACH in that school!," and going on to criticize the validity of the *balwadi*, arguing that all the children do there is to play. As such, she encourages her son to go to a local government school instead, but he often runs off to the *balwadi*. She did, grudgingly, admit that the school was probably good for the children in Shivdaspur, whether it was a serious school or not. Regardless, children like her son were attracted there – a fact that initially surprised me, but highlighted the overall fun and games aspect of the *balwadi*.

Although outsiders are often concerned with the academic integrity of the *balwadi*, Ajeet and Manju are adamant that the school serves its purpose. Their understanding of its purpose, though, is not academic rigor but rather an enjoyable place for the children to come, where they are encouraged in artistic pursuits and learn “skills” such as meditation. When visitors – potential funders, study abroad groups, or (more rarely) members of the media – came to the *balwadi*, Manju would also attend and go to great pains to explain that while children generally cannot wait to go home from school, they have so much fun in this one that they have to be lined up and led out at the end of the day – otherwise they would stay longer. My observations unequivocally confirm this.

This sense of fun and community created by the *balwadi* is re-enforced by several activities that the NGO sponsors in Shivdaspur throughout the year. During the course of my fieldwork, there were eight such events: celebrations for *Diwali*, Gandhi’s Birthday, Republic Day, and Holi; special shows provided by a British circus troupe and an American music educator; and two day-long fieldtrips to Lakhania Dari waterfalls, 28km to the south of Varanasi. The holiday celebrations are held in either the *balwadi* or the larger Children’s Center, and involve days of preparatory decorating on the part of the children. Materials provided for preparations belie Ajeet’s belief that the children need to be exposed to creative forms of entertainment. In preparation for *Diwali*<sup>13</sup>, for example, the children made hundreds of tiny wax candles, shaping clay into candle-holders and, with the help of the teachers, hand-pouring the wax into them. They also built elaborate houses and dioramas of bricks, mud, and Styrofoam, created their own garlands from string, paste, and

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<sup>13</sup> Diwali is a multi-day holiday known as the “festival of lights” and celebrated by Hindus and Jains between October and December. Small oil lamps are lit to celebrate the occasion, and great of firecrackers and fireworks are set off as part of the festival.

colored paper, and painstakingly laid out mandalas on the courtyard floors with colored powder. Fireworks were provided for the evening, as well, and a few of the children's mothers ventured out for the *Diwali* celebration, during which children, parents and volunteers meandered back and forth between the two *Guria* buildings in Shivdaspur Alley, even as increasing numbers of women set up to solicit for the evening, with the own *Diwali* lights twinkling from the rooms in which they work.



**Figure 5 : Childrens' Diwali Decorations in Shivdaspur**



**Figure 6 : Children's Diwali Decorations in Shivdaspur.**

The buildings were also decorated for Republic Day and Gandhi's birthday, and elaborate battles with color were fought in the courtyard for *Holi*<sup>14</sup>. For Republic Day, a group of

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<sup>14</sup> Holi is a Hindu religious festival occurring in the spring, that is also known as the "festival of colors." The festival is intended to celebrate the burning of Holika, a demoness who was said to have the gift of being unable to be consumed by fire, King Hiranyakashipu, a man who had become nearly indestructible as a result of a boon from the gods, and thought of himself as god-like. According to the legend, Hiranyakashipu insisted that the people of his kingdom workshop him as a God, which they all did with the exception of his son, Prahlad, who faithfully worshipped Vishnu. Hiranyakashipu tried several times to kill Prahlad. One attempt involved asking him to sit on the lap of his sister, Holika, in the midst of a fire. Prahlad prayed to Vishnu for safety, and as a result he survived the fire while Holika was burned to death.

The festival itself is known as the "festival of colors" because it is celebrated by smearing friends and family members with powdered colors, either in a dry form or after they have been mixed with water. The festival is also known for its inversion of otherwise normal caste and gender boundaries, as well as boundaries surrounding the consumption of alcohol and *bhang* (marijuana).



dancing *dhobis*<sup>15</sup> came to provide entertainment by singing and dancing for the children. Although on Gandhi's birthday a concession was made to the sorts of passive entertainment that Ajeet wants to discourage, and a DVD player was rented so that the children could watch *Stuart Little*, for the most part these special occasions require the children to participate, often artistically, in the celebratory preparations. The circus troupe and music educator who donated their time to perform in Shivdaspur likewise required the children's participation in the acts. The fieldtrips to the waterfalls are, in a similar vein, meant to allow the children to experience nature outside the context of the city, with the primary activities on these trips being swimming/bathing in the waterfalls and, on the second occasion, a nature hike lead by Ajeet along a nearby hiking trail. The fieldtrips, too, require the full participation of the children in the preparations. Groups of children show up in the kitchen as early as 6:30am to help in rolling out the dough for the hundreds of *puri* that are made and packed to eat as a picnic later. The food preparation is good-natured, with children excitedly playing about the room in between taking their turns to roll out the *puri*. The field trips and special occasions, then, are part and parcel of the *balwadi* education: fun for the children, aimed at encouraging children's' interactions with Guria, and intended to provide outings that gave children a sense of connection to nature and the broader world. The inspiration for these field trips, as well as many of the other *balwadi* activities, seem to have grown organically from Ajeet and Manju's work in Shivdaspur, and their best attempts to encourage the sort of connections to self and

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<sup>15</sup> Dhobis are a caste grouping in India that provide laundry services. The group that came to the *balwadi* has also been performing as part of Guria's annual Concert of the Marginalized Artists Against Human Trafficking (discussed in Chapter 6). The troupe performs largely for love of the musical form, but some of their songs are about their struggles as a socially marginalized, low-caste group, lending their performance a political as well as artistic air.

community that they want to instill in the children.

It is through this sense of fun, community, and connection to a wider world that *Guria* as an organization is able to promote basic literacy among the children in Shivdaspur, as well as to funnel many of the children into formal primary and English medium schools in the area. However, the vision of mainstreamed education and social mobility through literacy, education is not the only purpose of the *balwadi*.

### **The Purpose of the *Balwadi***

When I started attending the *balwadi* regularly, as an excuse to go into Shivdaspur Alley for the purposes of my research, Ajeet asked that I find some way of contributing to it. He was quick to point out that he was not talking about money, but rather that I teach them something. And he had a further specification, beyond this – he didn't want for me to teach mathematics, or science, but rather something creative. Because the pursuit of money is understood as being at the root of the causes of prostitution in Shivdaspur, Ajeet does not want to use the *balwadi* to encourage only, or even primarily, profitable skills regardless of their moral or spiritual value, hence his focus on the creative over the marketable. The ideas that I came up with – yoga classes, dance routines, having the children work in teams to write and illustrate storybooks – largely failed to come to fruition due to the overall chaos of the *balwadi*, although because of my efforts, the children now know The Hokey Pokey and The Chicken Dance, and have heard most of the stories of Akbar and Birbal, as well as many Western fairy tales; one of them developed a particular fascination with the fairy tale "Snow White," and actually did write out and illustrate a version of it. Regardless

of the success of my projects, the content of that which Ajeet approved was, on the whole, more creative and spiritual than what we might call “practical.”

A consistent trope in the reform of sex workers in India (and elsewhere) has been economic reform; assuming that women enter sex work because they are impoverished, reformers have thought that providing a woman with another mode of livelihood would help to alleviate the problem, and prevent relapse into sex work. As such, providing the children of sex workers with skills that make them economically viable outside the red light area is a logical means through which to attempt reform for such children. This sort of reasoning is what was behind Ajeet’s founding of the *balwadi*. He initially thought that if he provided education to the women of Shivdaspur, they might leave the trade, and that certainly if their children were educated, the children themselves would not go into sex work:

My work in the red light area of Shivdaspur began [...] in ’94. And even here, two, three, four years went in just understanding. I thought, “I will go with education and this and that and I will change the world,” you know... [laughs] But it was not to be found, you see? I thought, what am I doing, educating them, and making them educated prostitutes... [Personal Interview, 5/18/2010]

The “educated prostitute” as symbol for how and why his role as an educator in the community was not enough to constitute satisfactory activism came up again and again in my interviews with Ajeet, always with a pejorative undertone or implication:

Actually, as I’ve told you earlier also, when you came for the first time: We no doubt began with the education of children, condom distribution, and a focus on health issues, but I realized that I keep doing that, and I keep producing *educated prostitutes*. [Personal Interview, 1/27/2010, emphasis added].

Of course I’ve got a lot of international support also, because we recognize the root of the problems with prostitution well: it was not HIV education or health, it was the criminal nexus that had to be targeted first, that would be

the precondition of any option being available to the women. As long as you don't fight that criminal nexus, you go on making *educated prostitutes*, that's what you do. [Personal Interview, 5/18/2010, emphasis added].

So [in the beginning] I sat there talking to them [the children], and playing. I also became very thick-skinned. The women trouble you, they come and poke you. But I knew what I was doing, and I kept coming. And after that, where we [now] have the evening tuitions, under that tree I got a little place, where I taught them for quite some time. This center came up maybe five years back, seven years back. This new building [where the children eat lunch] is a very recent phenomenon. The old building [where the *balwadi* is held] is also not very old. Before the buildings, for ten, twelve years I was there under that tree [teaching the children], that was the beginning of everything, but I STAYED there, staying there was a very big challenge, that was very important, you see, before I could do anything [against the criminal nexus]. To have a place in the community, I have to have people in my favor also, you see. And eventually I did have people in my favor, but I realized education was not the solution to the problem here. Education is a requirement, HIV is a problem, no doubt, but the major problem is of slavery, you see.

It takes lot of time to understand, this "science" is very difficult at times: What is happening? Who is controlling whom? Who is going where? Who is coming where? One day you see this man here, the other day there, this girl is here, the other day gone there, you know? And they don't tell you what is going on. You don't get a lecture explaining it. You have to understand on your own what is happening many times. It took some time to realize [but] I realized that education is not going to solve the problem. Education is fine, health is a problem, to me, these all should be as tools that we use in our activism. It's not that I run an NGO, keep an education center, and keep producing *educated prostitutes* – that's not my job, you see? To me, the education center, or the health center should be something to stop this menace. It should mean some change in the lives of the people, mean some smile on their faces. It's not that everything is very good and I'll go to them and they'll smile at me, I'll smile at them, I'll get my pictures taken with them, and I am happy as an NGO, while subtly, underneath everything, [the] same goes on. [Personal interview 1/15/2010, emphasis added]

Essentially, in Ajeet's experience, whether or not individuals are educated does not bear on whether or not they go into prostitution, nor does it keep them from being exploited as prostitutes. His pejorative use of the term "educated prostitute" seems to me to be an acknowledgement that literacy does not somehow remove women from exploitative

working conditions in brothels, and as such, educating them does not serve his purposes of ending that exploitation.

In this light, the *balwadi* becomes more of a strategy than a tool, and it is a cunning strategy at that. The *balwadi* is popular, and the education of children is unequivocally considered to be a good thing. In my role as volunteer teacher in the *balwadi*, my coming and going in Shivdaspur Alley was not questioned; as mentioned before, on days when the *balwadi* doors were locked individuals in the street would come to my aid, loudly insisting that someone opening the door, and often telling me what a good thing I was doing. This was a markedly different reaction the few times I ventured, without NGO escort, into Bhind Basti, where people were more likely to avert their eyes or to call out, in either accusation or concern, “Where are you *going*?!”

The children of Shivdaspur clearly love the *balwadi*, and the amount of joy that it brings to their lives is undeniable. Additionally, the value of the *balwadi* to the community is such that parents from the Basti allow their children to walk up to the solicitation area during the day, even though the area is marked, in their minds, as “dirty” and full of “bad people”. It was through the education of children that Ajeet was able to gain entrée into Shivdaspur as a social worker, and it was only through this entrée that he was able to come to an understanding of the sorts of exploitative labor, trafficking, and “slavery,” that occur there. In his own words, it took several years to even begin to understand Shivdaspur, and approximately a decade to have built the sort of trust and relationship with the community that allowed him to orchestrate the raids that he did (thereby betraying that trust, for some, but not all of the individuals who live and work in Shivdaspur). Without his purpose as educator, and without the *balwadi*, this would not have been possible, because he would

have had no business being in Shivdaspur in order to gather the information and knowledge of the community that allowed him to plan the raids.

The *balwadi* has also been allowed to stand, and operate, in the 5 years following the raids that *Guria* orchestrated against the brothels, in spite of repeated death threats against *Guria* leaders. Even in the midst of the most recent conflict, over Evening Tutions (which will be discussed at length below), the operation of the *balwadi* itself was never, to my knowledge, in question. Even as tensions rose between the NGO and the community in the Spring of 2010, children continued to turn up in high numbers. As I became increasingly aware of the depth of these tensions during the course of my research, it struck me as amazing that those who were against the NGO did not simply destroy the *balwadi* in the night, which would have destroyed the legitimacy and utility of the NGO's presence in the community. And yet they did not, and have not.

Because the *balwadi* legitimates the presence of the NGO in Shivdaspur – because it does something that is *useful* for the community as a whole – *Guria* has been able to stay in the area. This means that they are able to monitor, however tenuously and from the view on the street, the number of women working in Shivdaspur, as well as comings and goings in the community. The *balwadi* is also useful as a meeting ground for Ajeet, Manju, and women in Shivdaspur who have business with them that they could not otherwise conduct given the anti-*Guria* sentiments in the neighborhood. As often as once a month, sometimes more, individual women, or groups of older girls came to the *balwadi*. These were individuals who did not otherwise attend the *balwadi* (but some of whom did attend the Evening Tutions) on days that Manju told them she would be there, in order to discuss problems that they were having in the neighborhood: tensions with individual people, or

difficulties in having a water pump fixed by the municipality, for example. The *balwadi* as a meeting place allowed for the reasonable cover of checking on one's children, or on the progress of education in the community, when one was in fact going to discuss other business. It is, then, more than an education center, or a community center for children, but also a tenuous foothold in the community. The intensity of its meaning as a foothold in the community, and a platform from which the NGO's activism is conducted, is revealed further by the role of and controversy surrounding Evening Tutions, an educational program that *Guria* runs for older children in the evenings, in Bhind Basti on community-owned land.

### Evening Tutions

Evening Tutions is a nightly tutoring session run for free by *Guria* in the late afternoon. Although the teachers for Evening Tutions are the same as those who teach in the *balwadi* (with the exception of Anu, who attended Evening Tutions as a student during the time I was there), the location is different. While the *balwadi* is located in Shivdaspur Alley, Evening Tutions occur on a piece of government-owned land, the Panchayat Bhavan<sup>16</sup>, back in the heart of Bhind Basti. It is held in a clearing between buildings, with a large storeroom to the left of the clearing. A large banyan tree near a Shiv Temple is the primary feature in the clearing [See Figure 7, below]. This was the original site of *Guria's*

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<sup>16</sup> The Panchayat refers to village-level governance in India and is something of an invented tradition. Although the *Panchayat* was, historically, an indigenous political structure in which judicial decisions were made by a committee of "elders," it has been incorporated into the structure of the contemporary Indian state. Panchayat leaders are democratically elected. The *Panchayat* is responsible for infrastructure, economic development, recordkeeping, and provisioning of education within its jurisdiction. The *Panchayat Bhavan* is, literally, the place or house of the Panchayat.

activism within Shivdaspur, where Ajeet would go and sit as the women harassed him and he slowly built rapport, first with the children, and then later the adults.

The children who come to the Evening Tuitions site for tutoring are teenagers, although the younger children often come as well, playing gleeful games of tag on the sidelines, and swinging from the roots of the banyan tree. Those who are being tutored sit on mats, which are stored in the building on the left of the courtyard; as the sun sets, the area becomes thick with mosquitoes, and the sound of people slapping at mosquitoes on their arms, or their friends backs, is common. The teenagers sit in gender-segregated groups and work on homework of different subjects with teacher supervision. If there is electricity, the studying is lit by a lone light bulb, but if there is a power cut (as is common during this time of day), a bulb fueled by a gas cylinder provides the only light. There is a lot of giggling and some playing, but mostly the students focus on their work; even those who are not currently enrolled in some sort of formal school come with their own books – English storybooks, or mathematics texts, and ask for help as they need it. It is a lively, cozy, and studious event. After studying, it is concluded each evening by a short period of silent meditation, during which many of the young women quietly giggle and rock from side to side to jostle each other, but which a few of the young men take very seriously, sitting with perfectly straight backs, their faces the pictures of practiced serenity.





**Figure 7: The *Panchayat Bhavan*.**

I was only able to go to Evening Tutions three times. The plan, when I started to go, was for me to attend Evening Tutions two evenings a week to teach spoken English. Many of the children, and nearly all of the adolescents, know at least a phrase here and there, and I found, in the brief time that I was teaching, that some of them had memorized verb conjugations and vocabulary words, whereas some had only a much more rudimentary knowledge, depending on the quality of the schools they had attended and for how long. Regardless of their skill level, I found Evening Tutions to be much more organized than the *balwadi*.

After my third visit, as I was about to go with the teachers for my fourth Evening Tutions session, Manju found me with the teachers and said that Ajeet had decided that it was not safe for me to go on a regular basis. If I went there regularly, people in the Basti

would be able to predict my movements in the community, and it might be dangerous. Because the tuitions began in the late afternoon, and extended after the sun had set into what was clearly night, he thought that my presence in Shivdaspur at night might be controversial. He further did not feel that the three or four teachers who conducted the tutoring were a large enough entourage to assure my safety. Because of its location in the Basti, and on community land, instead of in Shivdaspur Alley on land owned by the NGO, Evening Tutions is the site of the most vulnerability for NGO workers in Shivdaspur. It was for these reasons that Manju, for example, was never present at Evening Tutions, and only rarely at the *balwadi*.

Discussing the fact that I was no longer coming to Evening Tutions with some of the older children the following week, I explained that Ajeet thought attending them might be dangerous for me because they happened at night. Although the children had initially been clamoring for an explanation as to why I had not come, none of them pressed this explanation. One explicitly agreed that it was unsafe to come into the Basti at night. I asked the children if they and their older siblings would be able to come to the *balwadi* during the day, so that we could continue with the tutoring, but the teen-aged girls agreed that it would not be possible. Their mothers, they said, did not generally like for them to come into the Alley, underscoring the need for the Tutions to take place in the Basti.

On March 26, 2010, Ajeet called me early in the morning – shortly before 8am, to tell me that the evening before a group of local *goondas* (thugs, petty criminals) had come to Evening Tutions. The teachers had been told that they were not allowed to teach in that spot anymore, and threatened with physical harm if they if they tried to do so. They also

warned that Ajeet Singh should not come to the area. The teachers left, and informed the local police about the incident, but the police were not reacting to the charges. I was told that the *balwadi* would be operating as usual, but that Evening Tuitions were up in the air for the time being; he anticipated being busy with this for the next week or so.

The tensions continued to escalate over the next few days. On March 29<sup>th</sup>, the *balwadi* teachers went to the *Panchayat Bhavan* prior to opening the *balwadi*, to find that the lock that secures the storeroom where they keep the mats and others supplies for Evening Tuitions had been broken off, and that their belongings had been placed outside of the storeroom. The *goondas* and the leaders of the *Panchayat* seemed adamant: the NGO would not be allowed to teach in the *Panchayat Bhavan* anymore. To the NGO, this represented a new type of threat against the organization and its actions in Shivdaspur.

From an interview with Ajeet:

M: And this isn't the first threat like this that you've had?

A: No, no, no.. We have small threats every day, but only two major threats.

M: So the two major threats were from...

A: From?

M: When did they happen?

A: Both major ones were after 2005.

M: How bad is this threat, compared to the ones you had after 2005?

A: Actually, this threat is a new sort of threat. There were threats where people called up on the phone maybe seventy to eighty times, threatening to kill us. [This was in 2005, directly after the NGO had led a series of raids on the brothels in Shivdaspur.] Then we had the threat where people came into the new building with guns and all. They wanted to kill us but they didn't find me...

M: When was that?

A: In 2008

M: They came into the Center with guns?

A: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

M: Oh.

A: So that was one type of threat. But this latest one is new in that it is a threat by the pimps living in Shivdaspur. Obviously, the pimps never liked me, but they never acted directly against me. The question [now] is these pimps are showing a very strong face, actually... Which is very remarkable. Generally, they kept pretty quiet, and the threats were coming from outside somewhere. But now [that] the women [have] left, all the pimps are frustrated.

M: So the threat in 2008, that wasn't by local pimps?

A: [silence]

M: Who came into the Center?

A: No, it wasn't an insider. Some outsider had come, maybe he was hired by someone in Shivdaspur, but he was not from the area. But here they have the guts now, where they're showing their faces and personally threatening us, because they are desperate to start up the brothels again as they used to be. [Personal Interview, April 3, 2010]

For Ajeet, the character of this threat was very different, in that it was exceptionally personal. Certainly, those who phoned in death threats to Ajeet and Manju in 2005, and whoever it was who came to the NGO's building in 2008 with a gun, would have been hired by or otherwise affiliated with the brothel owners in Shivdaspur, but in that instance the brothel owners were not *personally* attacking. Nor did they interfere with the operation of the NGO's teaching activities in the area: immediately following the 2005 raids, the *balwadi* reopened without incident against the *balwadi* itself (the threats against Ajeet and Manju are another story). This was also the first time that anyone had succeeded in taking physical action against the NGO:

They lock up the Evening Tuition, they take away the doors. This is too

offensive an action. What else do you want them to do? Only when they kill me, then will you understand? This is of great significance, till now we were getting threats, [but] this is the first physical action. [Personal Interview, Ajeet Singh, 4/3/2010]

Immediately after the incident on March 29<sup>th</sup>, in which the lock was removed from the storage room, the NGO began to solicit what sympathy and help they could from the community of Shivdaspur, directly through the children in the *balwadi*. I am not sure if Manju had intended to come to the *balwadi* that day or not, as the scheduling of her movements in Shivdaspur was kept carefully secret, such that I never knew which day she might be coming. She came, ostensibly to do a clay workshop with the children, but also to elicit their support. From my fieldnotes:

Manju has come to do a clay workshop, but also, it seems, to talk about / figure out what is to be done with Evening Tuitions. As she passes out the clay, tearing off hunks of it and lobbing them playfully towards each child, she begins to talk to them, and with the clay in their hands, everyone kneading and working it as she speaks, she says that she has got their letters, and some of their letters say that they (the children) are worried. What are they worried about?, she asks them, and an older girl says that they are worried about the *balwadi* -- about it having been closed and locked, the previous week [when the teachers had gone, suddenly, to the Nepali border for some sort of anti-trafficking work that they would not specify], and that now the Evening Tuitions are closed. Manju says that the *balwadi* will continue to be open, that they should not worry about that. Then she asks for a show of hands, as to who needs the evening tuitions. 14 individuals, all older, Anu included, raise their hands. Manju asks them to tell their parents, at home, that they need the evening tuitions. She seems stressed, and harried; she does not look happy. [Fieldnotes 3/29/2010]

As the days wound on, the threat did not abate. The *balwadi* assumed a tense character, initially with fewer children coming than usual, and the teachers assuming a questioning air with the children, asking why so few were coming. The children told the teachers that many of them were staying home because of the hot weather, and the topic was dropped. (Several weeks later, when the weather was hotter still but as tensions seemed to be easing, attendance at the *balwadi* was back to normal.)

The teachers explained to me that they were going to Evening Tuitions, and that there were children coming, but that things were clearly not at all settled with the community, and they did not know how long it would be before there would be another incident. In order to rally those sympathetic to the NGO and its mission in Shivdaspur, *Guria* itself called a “Public Panchayat,” distributing flyers in the area explaining that the pimps and local police were trying to reinstate the former brothel system of Shivdaspur, which had been closed through *Guria*’s actions, and to stop *Guria*’s educational activities in Shivdaspur.<sup>17</sup>

The public Panchayat, simply put, did not go well for *Guria*. There were speakers for *Guria*, who discussed in flowery rhetoric the benefits that the NGO had brought to the area

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<sup>17</sup> A rough translation of the flyer is as follows:

Public Panchayat  
Kashi Vidhyapith Block Headquarters, 3 April 2010, 10am

Friends,

For years in Shivdaspur, Manduadih’s red-light area, the illegal work of prostitution has been a black chapter in Kashi’s history. The local police and the overbearing pimps together were benefitting from the buying and selling of minor girls. Having launched a campaign, *Guria Sansthan* had rescued 60 minor girls from the tentacles of human trafficking. Because of civil litigation, and the organization’s struggle against human trafficking, the disreputable people’s riches were seized.

For a long time, the criminals of Shivdaspur remained in jail, and the immoral work was not done. For the police and the overbearing pimps, the red light area had been a big source of dark income. After its closing, once more the overbearing pimps and police are trying to forcefully cause its rebirth, and are trying to close *Guria Sansthan*’s education post for children.

Friends, on April 3, 2010, come to Kashi Vidhyapith Block Headquarters, to become involved with the planners of the public Panchayat, so that the profane purpose [of the pimps and police] may fail, and a civil brotherhood may be initiated.  
[signed]

The Area’s Social and Civil Workers, and Wise Leaders

through its closure of brothels. One local man, from the broader area of Shivdaspur, and not from Shivdaspur Alley or Bhind Basti, made an impassioned speech about the embarrassment of being from Shivdaspur. “When people ask me where I am from,” he nearly shouted, “I tell them Shivdaspur and then watch their faces change. ‘Isn’t Shivdaspur a big red-light district,’ they ask me?” He argued that the work that *Guria Sansthan* had done in the area was valuable: they had helped to close many of the brothels in the area, and had provided a venue for the education of the children in the area. Prostitution in its previous form – with more of the brothels open – must not be allowed to return to the area, he insisted, receiving pointed glares from many of the *dalals* I often saw in Shivdaspur Alley.

Following this young man’s defense of *Guria*, and his denouncement of prostitution, Manju made a speech in which she announced that she would die before she would let the brothels re-open in Shivdaspur. She argued that these crimes could not be allowed to continue, and that *Guria* wanted to begin a people’s movement against prostitution in the area. Manju’s speech was met with considerably clapping on the part of the perhaps fifteen to twenty people there in support of the NGO, including six or seven women who had been brought from outside to protest for the day who claimed to have no knowledge of the activities of the NGO .

Speeches in favor of *Guria* and its activities were followed by two in opposition of the NGO: one from the *Gram Pradhan*, the leader of the village *Panchayat*, and the second by an older woman from Shivdaspur (a local vegetable-seller, according to Manju), both of whom argued that it was time for *Guria* to stop its activism, as it had done no good for anyone in Shivdaspur. The women who had participated in *Guria*’s activism in 2005 had been

mistreated, they said. The *Gram Pradhan*, who had come with a large entourage of men and women from Shivdaspur Alley and Bhind Basti, gestured out to his audience at one point, stating “Here sit women, who in 2005 had to go to jail” as a result of *Guria*’s actions against prostitution in Shivdaspur, and yet, after having gone to jail no rehabilitation had been provided for them by the NGO. Additionally, for all of their educational initiatives, who had *Guria Sansthan* helped? I quote here from my translation of the *Gram Pradhan*’s speech:

Today, *Guria Sansthan*’s work is [still] happening in the red light area. Today, they [*Guria*] should tell the Panchayat if they know in whose house prostitution is happening [in Shivdaspur], and inform the appropriate officials. They should cooperate with the government in that way [literally: “They should keep that matter in the Panchayat.”]. But, I have another matter [to speak about].

In 1992, Ajeet Singh took a girl from my very own district’s red light area. [He does not specify what he means by “took.”]. Today, she is still doing sex work. [This appears to be an allusion to the ineffectiveness of *Guria*’s work.] I want to tell the Panchayat. I want to ask from *Guria Sansthan*’s people, who in five years have erected such expensive buildings [in Shivdaspur], how many of the village prostitutes’ children have been helped by *Guria*? [...] In the last five years, your place has been built.

Twenty years ago, wearing torn pajamas, Ajeet came into my village. At that time, he requested permission from the village’s *Pradhan*-ji to teach the village’s poor children on the *Panchayat*’s land [the site of the Evening Tuitions]. At this time, the *Pradhan*-ji is not present; he has died. Then, he had said to Ajeet, “Yes, go, teach.” Through teaching and teaching, Ajeet has erected very expensive buildings [in Shivdaspur], and he has cheated/deceived the village.

From the Panchayat, I want to give this challenge to *Madam*-ji [referring to *Manju*]. Today in the Jan Panchayat, she said that she would fight us, that she knows how to fight. Today I swear an oath. Prostitution will not be allowed to happen again in Shivdaspur, but the NGO [*sansthan*] will have to make its own arrangements. [...] The Panchayat place [the site of the evening tuitions] is mine, and after today I will not give it for teaching. [...] *Guria Sansthan*, the whole of India may help you, but my village is prepared to fight you.

In this speech, the *Gram Pradhan* bluntly states that the goals of *Guria Sansthan* were not about education and the end of prostitution in Shivdaspur. If that was the case, he argues, why is it that he knows of individual women whom Ajeet tried to help twenty years ago



who are still prostitutes, and why was some sort of rehabilitation not provided by the NGO for the sex workers arrested as a result of the 2005 raids?<sup>18</sup> Furthermore, what had the NGO done for the children of Shivdaspur, really, beyond building two very large, very expensive buildings? The reference to the buildings is an oblique insinuation that the NGO was more about the glorification of the organization itself, rather than education or the prevention of prostitution, a criticism that ties into the broader criticisms about NGO corruption and their use as self-employment strategies among the middle class described in Chapter 1. Drawing on this cynicism regarding NGOs, the *Gram Pradhan* issued the following challenge: If the NGO had such large, expensive buildings in the area, why did it need the *Panchayat Bhavan*? Something dishonest was occurring here, the *Pradhan* insinuated, and so *Guria* would be left out of the fight against prostitution in Shivdaspur by the government. The *Gram Pradhan* then said that he and the village *Panchayat* had other plans for the *Panchayat Bhavan* – namely, a government-funded education center for adults and children in the village – and so *Guria's* access to the land was a moot point, as education would be otherwise provided. If the NGO wanted to continue its educational activities, it could do so in either of its two buildings in Shivdaspur Alley. The meeting ended with the *Pradhan*, and the majority of the people at the meeting (those who had come from Shivdaspur) walking out on the Public *Panchayat*.

What are the Evening Tutions in the *Panchayat Bhavan* really about? The content of

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<sup>18</sup> It is important to note here that the 2005 raids refer to two things, as will become clear in the next chapter: firstly, they refer to the “rescue,” to use the NGO’s term, of 31 women and girls from brothels in Shivdaspur by *Guria Sansthan* and its associated volunteers, which targeted brothels in which Ajeet had been told under-aged girls were working; secondly, they refer to a larger series of raids conducted in all of the brothels of Shivdaspur the following day by the police, in which considerably more women were arrested. “Rehabilitation” following both sets of raids would have been the legal responsibility of the local government.

the flyer, and of the rally, was largely focused on prostitution and trafficking in Shivdaspur. Manju did not speak at the rally about the education of children and the children's need for tutoring in the evening; instead, she described the history of the closing of brothels in Shivdaspur, and her resolve that the brothels would return, literally, over her dead body. Ajeet, also, treated the conflict over Evening Tuitions not as a disruption to pedagogy, but as an affront to his position in Shivdaspur, which he had worked for years to create and maintain in service of precisely what had started to happen following *Guria's* 2005 raids on the brothels of Shivdaspur (discussed in detail in Ch. 3): the end of brothel-based prostitution in Shivdaspur. The switch from questions of education to questions of the fight against prostitution in Shivdaspur did not take anyone, NGO-affiliated or not, by surprise: the two are in fact that same thing, and not because education so effectively leads the educated away from engaging in sex work, but because the NGO itself is responsible for the decrease in prostitution in Shivdaspur since 2005. The *Pradhan* would argue that the NGO has not been effective at anything other than self-glorification, and that therefore it should not be allowed in the village. The NGO would – and did – argue that the *Pradhan* is in league with the brothel-keepers, and it is only because the NGO in fact *has* been effective at decreasing red-light activity in Shivdaspur that the *Pradhan* wants it out of the village. At the very least, the *Pradhan* wanted to remove the NGO from public land within the village: *Guria Sansthan* legally owns the land on which its two buildings sit, and therefore cannot be forced out of them.

As the conflict continued, and as it intensified – shortly after the Public Panchayat, Ajeet was informed of a threat on his life – I asked both Ajeet and Manju why, given the depth of the problem and the potential danger, they did not simply move the Evening

Tuitions to one of their buildings in Shivdaspur Alley, running them shortly after the afternoon meal, or even during it. This was, for them, clearly no solution. There was the practicality of whether or not the older girls would be allowed to come up to the Alley in the evenings. But much more so than that, it was because the NGO could not be perceived as being forced out of Shivdaspur – “going on the backfoot,” as Ajeet phrased it – because that would be to cede ground to the brothel keepers. Evening Tuitions, and even the *balwadi*, are not *only* about education, although the education is a beneficial and valued side effect of their existence. Rather, they are also about legitimate presence in Shivdaspur, from which *Guria* can wage a legal and ethical battle against brothel prostitution in India.

And, indeed, in a brilliant bit of *realpolitik*, they do just that. The education of children in Shivdaspur attracts considerable attention to the NGO: in the national and international media; in the form of grant money that is earmarked for the maintenance of the informal education system that *Guria* has set up that, through the funneling of children who come to the *balwadi* into formal schooling, produces measurable results in terms of literate, educated children; and in the form of regular volunteering on the part of foreigners in the *balwadi*. I was one such volunteer, but in the course of my fieldwork from 2009 to 2010, there were four other long-term volunteers, two associated with study-abroad and gap-year programs for American college students, and two who came to the organization to offer their services independently. Ajeet regularly asserted that the safety of foreign volunteers going into Shivdaspur was inviolate if they were associated with the *balwadi*: any harm that came to them would create a media and potentially legal scandal. Describing the reasons for the safety of his foreign volunteers, Ajeet says:

The police know everything, how many people [volunteers] come. Just a few days back we had 50 of the [study abroad students] come in that Diwali

celebration, you know [note twenty-five to thirty seems a more accurate estimate], and they [the police] were very worried about it, because they are worried [that] if something happens to the foreigners, they [the police] will be also in trouble. It will become an international issue, if any foreign student is disturbed, you see? So, they know, the police [are] smart, they know [what] they can't handle and [what] they can handle. So time and again they keep threatening the brothel keepers – “people come here, nothing should happen to them”—in a routine form. [Personal Interview, 1/15/2010]

Indeed, shortly after the Panchayat meeting, my rickshaw driver deemed it prudent for me to get permission from the police to continue going to the *balwadi*, so that we could avoid any trouble as the war over the *Panchayat Bhavan* waged on. The police were nothing but considerate of me, quickly granting permission, and requiring that I go to the *balwadi* that day with police escort to ensure my safety given the “criminal elements” in the area. Although the police officer with whom I spoke warned me several times that the area was unsafe, and would clearly rather that I had gone home instead of his having to escort me, there was nothing that he could do: the *balwadi* is respected both within and outside the neighborhood, tutoring children is a respected practice, and should the police have attempted to stop it, there might have been a public scandal.

As I left the field in June of 2010, things were beginning to settle down a bit regarding the *Panchayat Bhavan* conflict. Ajeet told me gleefully about a local Magistrate having come down to the Evening Tutions on the Panchayat lands and publicly dressed-down the *Gram Pradhan* over the scandal he was causing as people talked in the area, and responses to international human rights appeals over the treatment of Guria activists in this instance were coming into local governmental offices.<sup>19</sup> According to brief

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<sup>19</sup> The calls-to-action on behalf of human rights organization Frontline Defenders can be found at the following links, last accessed 12/31/2011: <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/node/2433>, <http://www.frontlinedefenders.org/node/1843>.

conversations with Ajeet following my fieldwork, and a story posted on Frontline Defenders, the battle over the Evening Tuitions was still waging into late 2010 but, despite continued harassment on the part of some elements of the community of Shivdaspur, children still attend the evening tuitions and *Guria* still teaches in the *Panchayat Bhavan*, a testament to the usefulness of the NGO's educational programs in providing space for them in Shivdaspur, in spite of other, more controversial activities that they engage in regarding prostitution in the area. It is these more controversial practices – specifically, the abolitionist practice of “rescue” – that I will address in the following chapter.

CHAPTER 3:  
THE POETICS AND POLITICS OF RESCUE: BROTHEL RAIDING AND BARE LIFE

**Shivdaspur, May, 2010**

*Manju, Amrita, and I are sitting in a large concrete room lined with pastel lockers in Guria's newer building, which was originally intended as a night crèche for the children of Shivdaspur, so that they could live outside the brothels but still near their mothers. The project is, in theory, still underway, but no children currently live there because of Guria's tense relationship to Shivdaspur; the lockers are being converted into storage areas for the library of children's books that Guria has recently purchased for the children to borrow. Amrita is clearly somewhat uncomfortable with being interviewed, largely because it seems that she does not know what to expect from me. She has consented to the interview as a favor to Manju. "Please tell me about your life," I say to Amrita, and she looks down at the floor. Manju tells me to ask something else, that if I phrase it so generally she won't tell me anything true, and so I ask a more focused question: "Kaha ki aap?," (Where are you from?), "How did you come to Shivdaspur?"*

*Amrita's posture stiffens – we are sitting in a triangle on white plastic chairs – and she looks towards me, and then quickly to Manju. Eyes locked on Manju the entire time, she says that she is from West Bengal. One day, when she was a child (she does not specify at what age), her mother gave her to another woman, who said that she was taking Amrita to the doctor's office. She was instead turned over to someone else, who sold her into "work" [she uses only the general designation "kaam"]. Eventually, she made her way to Shivdaspur. Despite her work, she married twice, but both men left her, and so she returned to working in Shivdaspur. As she talks about her husbands' leaving her, her eyes well up with tears. Now, she is too old for the work itself, and so instead is middleman or customer procurer for the younger women who solicit in Shivdaspur. Her sisters, in contrast, have all married men in the region where she was born, and while she wants to go home, she feels that the shame of the work she has done is too great, so she stays in Shivdaspur. Amrita does not want to go into more detail than this; having given the outlines of the story, she asks if the interview can be over, and pushes her plastic chair back to leave, sandals flapping against the concrete floor as she goes.*

**Statement given to the police on March 3, 2006, from Guria's records:**

*My name is Shivrانجani<sup>20</sup>. My father's name is Amit and my mother's Susheela. My house is near Kolkata's Santoshpur Station. After having been caught by the police and held for a week, I went to Sealdah [a major train station in Kolkata]. From working [kaam se], a woman [verb is illegible; from context, it could be "gave" or "introduced"] me to a pimp who brought me to Bhelupur [an area in Varanasi], and [he] sold me to the pimps [dalal] Rehmat and Afzal in the red light area of Shivdaspur. Then, on another day, the police caught us.*

**Bhind Basti, December 24, 2010**

*Durba used to work in Shivdaspur, but after the raids in 2005, she left along with most of the sex workers who had been sympathetic to Guria. The situation in Shivdaspur is changing now, though, and so she and her sister have come back. [...] Durba's husband told me that they have*

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<sup>20</sup> The names given for sex workers here, and throughout the dissertation, are pseudonyms.

one son, who is fifteen years old and studying in the 9th class; his studies are going very well. They then referred to his picture on the wall above my head, and I stood up and turned around to see a wall decorated with his school portraits: a lone-head shot of him that must be a few years old if he is now fifteen, as well as several years of class portraits for his English Medium school. These pictures were arrayed above a table covered with toiletry materials and decorative objects-- talcum powder and perfumes, combs, costume jewelry, a fabric rose in a glass case. To the left of this table was a long wall with the recessed concrete alcoves, the upper one on the left strung with garlands, and decked out with approximately eight pictures of deities, clearly from a matching set. I asked which deities they were, and Durba explained that there were many of them. "I am a prostitute [veshya], but the power of the goddess [shakti] is in my heart." She talked about the importance of prayer in her life, and then said that Sir-ji and Madam-ji [Ajeet and Manju] were her deities, that much benefit had come to her through them.

### **Shivdaspur, January 26, 2010**

Manju says that she used to be like a mother to the children, but now that she is not able to come to Shivdaspur regularly because of security concerns, she is hoping that Anu will eventually be able to step into that role in the balwadi for the organization. Manju stresses to me that the NGO needs to make this transition slowly and carefully with Anu, because although they know and trust her, she is ultimately from Shivdaspur; Manju stresses that this neighborhood is not like others, that the people here are tight-knit and keep each other's secrets. Anu, too, was a victim of prostitution, she says, for a few years after her father, who was a harmonium player and dalal, died. At that time, one of the brothels was trying to claim her. I interrupt here to ask if Anu ever worked, and Manju says no, she didn't -- it was just that the brothels were trying to make a claim on her. And so they [Guria] sponsored the entire family: [Anu's] mother is also working for Guria, and so they've kept them away from the brothel-keepers.

Each of these vignettes provides a portal into the ways in which prostitution has affected the lives of various women in Shivdaspur. Amrita did not choose to enter the profession, and keenly feels the loss of marital stability that she feels could have been hers, as it characterizes the lives of her sisters. She feels unable to return to her family as a result of the work that she has done. Chandni, in the legal statement, gives an ambiguous story regarding her role in coming to Shivdaspur. Her story is unclear, but as a result of involvement with the police and a *dalal*, she was sold to Rehmat Khan to work in Shivdaspur. For Durba, doing sex work has not prevented her from having a stable family life, although the "I am a prostitute, but..." portion of her statement about her spiritual life

indexes some sense that worship and sex work are perceived to be at odds. Anu, when her father died when she was twelve or thirteen, could very easily have become a sex worker without the intervention of Ajeet and Manju. Although here Anu's story is told from the perspective of Manju, Anu separately told me about the difficulty and worry (*paraeshaan*) of her life at the time of her father's death, when she did not know what she would do. Becoming educated through the *balwadi*, and through *Guria's* sponsorship of her formal education, and working for *Guria*, have helped to alleviate those worries. Characteristically, Anu did not mention sex work as an option had she not become educated, although the possibility surely looms large in an area where the dominant economic activity is sex work.

It is worth noting, in two of the vignettes, the importance of *Guria* in the lives of women in Shivdaspur. These were not the only instances in which Shivdasपुरi women spoke of the help and benefit that the NGO had brought to them, and it was not uncommon for women to say that Ajeet or Manju had been their *guru*, or teacher. It was also the actions of *Guria* that caused Durba, along with many other sex workers, to leave Shivdasपुर for several years.

The reason that Durba left, and that Manju cannot go to Shivdasपुर despite feeling that she was "like a mother" to the children there, and also the reason for the existence of Chandni's statement to the police in *Guria's* legal records, is what is currently the most dramatic facet of *Guria's* activism in Shivdasपुर: "rescue work," or the forced removal of sex workers from brothels, with subsequent prosecution of brothel keepers and *dalals* in order to bring about at the closure of those brothels. *Guria's* rescue work has been successful, by the NGO's standards: many brothels have been closed in Shivdasपुर, although this necessitated relocation in search of work for many of the sex workers in



Shivdaspur. Because of the disruption to the work and lives of sex workers, rescue operations as a response to sex work are heavily maligned in much contemporary feminist activism, as well as in ethnographic works about sex work, as will be discussed below. In the course of the discussion that follows, I ask the reader to keep these four vignettes in mind by asking: How might a “rescue” affect the lives of these women? How might it help or harm each? How do the security concerns caused by *Guria*’s rescue work affect the safety and livelihood of those involved in the sex trade in Shivdaspur, as well as the safety and livelihood of those working for the NGO?

In the autumn of 2005, the NGO *Guria*, in conjunction with a large number of volunteers, led a series of raids on the brothels of Shivdaspur. The raids mark a dramatic departure in the activism of *Guria Swayam Sevi Sansthan*: prior to taking this action, the NGO could be said to be doing activism in favor of the people of Shivdaspur, broadly construed. It was supporting and sponsoring the activism and protests of Shivdasपुरi women against harassment and brutality on the part of the police, as well as advocating for the attainment of basic civil rights: functioning electricity and water, and paved roads in the village<sup>21</sup>. Although Ajeet had spoken vocally about his desire to break the “procurer-pimp-police nexus” for years (*c.f.* Bhaumik 1999; Staff Reporter 1997, Vergha 2001), the raids mark a transition in his and the NGO’s activism, from tactics involving publicity, festivals, protests, and passive resistance to tactics involving violent, direct action against

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<sup>21</sup> A Benares Hindu University professor with whom I spoke recounted visiting Shivdaspur in the late 1990s, as part of her interest in *Guria Swayam Sevi Sansthan*. She described the very clear lack of access to basic civil services in the area, noting that paved roads and electrical wiring stopped at the edges of the village, leaving it without utilities; access to potable drinking water was still an issue that women came to the *balwadi* to speak with Manju about during my 2009-2010 fieldwork.

the power structure of Shivdaspur. Three years after these raids, when I visited the NGO in August of 2008, Ajeet could claim that Shivdaspur was child-prostitute free, and moving towards “exploitation-free status,” as a result of the raids. He was cautionary, though, when I inquired about the possibility of doing long-term field research with Guria: five years ago, he said, he would have told me to come and it would be no problem, but now there was tremendous tension between the NGO and the community. I was welcome to come and do the research, but he could not guarantee me the sort of access I might have had earlier. When I returned in 2009, this theme was repeated often, especially as I tried to push the limits of what interviews I would do, and what sort of access to Shivdaspur I could be allowed to have, given that I had used affiliation with the NGO to gain access to Shivdaspur. In explaining this, Ajeet said:

Before 2005, your research would have involved you marching from one end of Shivdaspur Alley to the other, sitting and having coffee and tea with brothel keepers, talking, that would have been the norm. But that is no longer possible. You can see, in Shivdaspur, there is some sort of suspense in the area, some sort of awe to it. The brothel keepers and madams are trying to speculate, whether the red light district will continue to operate, or whether the women will leave and no longer be in their control. I don’t want to expose the women, through your research. Shivdaspur is like a battlefield, or a chess game, and I don’t want to expose my moves: what I am going to do, which of the women are my friends, etc., because the women who are currently staying there are soft targets for the brothel keepers. The *dalals* and brothel keepers can target them out of frustration. That’s why I’ve selected a few women who you can talk to get a sense of things. Many are scared to come and talk openly because it is a very difficult situation [Personal Interview, 1/15/2010]

The full impact of the raids on *Guria*’s reputation in and relationship with Shivdaspur will be discussed at length below. For now, suffice it to say that the raids have not endeared Ajeet and the other *Guria* workers to many individuals currently living in Shivdaspur.

The raids *have*, however, made the NGO famous in Varanasi. Upon arriving in Varanasi in August of 2009, as I explained my research to various people in the city

(individuals who visited the household where I lived, strangers in cafes, waiters in restaurants), *Guria* and Ajeet Singh were always quickly brought up. In several cases, men with whom I was speaking informed me (sometimes tersely) that there was no more prostitution in Varanasi: Ajeet Singh had taken some BHU students on a raid in Shivdaspur, and together they had shut all of the brothels there down. Similarly, in late September of 2009, as I accompanied another researcher who had arrived in Varanasi to the FRO (Foreigner's Registration Office), we stopped in a chai-stall along the way. Two older men were already there, sipping from their clay cups of tea, and they asked what the two of us were doing in Varanasi. We both explained that we were doing research, and, trying to keep the conversation brief, gave the most simplistic explanations of our topics. I was studying prostitution, I said, and at this one of the men's eyes lit up. Ajeet Singh!, he exclaimed, and then embarked upon a very enthusiastic explanation of why I must contact Ajeet Singh, as Ajeet had helped to end prostitution in Varanasi by raiding the brothels. "He beat the pimps! He beat them with a stick!," he told me, and when I said that I already had plans to work with Ajeet and *Guria*, he nodded approvingly. My fellow researcher's description of her topic as "religion" also met with approval, but without such clear excitement. Likewise, previously during preliminary fieldwork in 2008, when I was having trouble placing a phone call to *Guria*'s offices, the man running the PCO (Public Call Office) enquired as to who I was calling. When I said that I needed to get in touch with the NGO, he made a few phone calls and then produced Ajeet's cell phone number, helped me to get in touch with him, and explained that *Guria* did very good work. The NGO is thus largely known about, and in good standing, in Varanasi, and more often than not, the reason cited for this good favor is the raids.

The raids were heavily covered by local newspapers, both Hindi and English-language (*Daenik Jagaaran* 2005; *Hindustan Daenik* 2005; Pathik 2005; Pioneer News Service 2005; Singh 2005; Times of India 2005a, 2005b, 2005c, 2005d, 2005e; Tripathi 2005, Yadav 2005) and their details are as follows: thirty-one women, seventeen of whom were minor girls, were removed from the brothels and transferred via bus to the near-by police station where FIRs (First Incident Report) and charge sheets were lodged against four pimps and brothel keepers for violations of the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act. Local newspaper reports are accompanied by photographs of understandably chaotic scenes: a crowd of more than fifty men are “helping” a woman, her face averted, her dupatta loosely tossed across her chest, into a bus:



**Figure 8: Rescued Woman Being Led Onto a Bus** (*Hindustan Daenik* 2005)

A middle-aged woman in a plain, white salwaar-suit leads a young girl by the hand, away from a crowd of onlookers, including a young police officer with his gun slung over his

shoulder:



**Figure 9: Female Constable with Rescued Girl** (India Today 2005)

Subsequent headlines question the efficacy and corruption of the police, citing counter-FIRs lodged by Shivdaspur residents against Ajeet Singh for molestation, trespass, and damage to personal property. Continued media coverage, and push for police action and legal intervention against brothel keepers in Shivdaspur by Guria, have resulted in charges being pressed against thirty-eight individuals involved in the prostitution of women in Shivaspur, including four convictions with attached jail sentences, and the subsequent closure of nine brothels in the area.

In August of 2005, when I first visited the main alley in Shivdaspur, it was lined with young women soliciting in tight jeans, many of whom were clearly underage; as of June 2010, it is now comparatively a sleepy rural hamlet – goats are tied to the padlocked doors

of brothels, and a few women, all clearly of-age, lounge in the doorways awaiting customers. Guria is still involved in the community of Shivdaspur, although its predominant interactions are with the children who come for education and play each afternoon in its children's center. Ajeet and his wife Manju rarely come to Shivdaspur, though, and when they do, they do so unannounced so that their movements cannot be predicted. The 2005 raids have resulted in tense NGO-community relations that Ajeet says are characterized by "a murderous silence," "a very cold, bloody silence," "a blood-filled silence," which is punctuated by incidents of violence or threats of violence – assassination attempts, harassing phone calls, and attacks on the property of the NGO, which wax and wane seemingly in relation to legal victories won against those involved in prostitution in Shivdaspur.

Brothel raids and rescue work have not received much praise in the rights-based formulations of sex worker activism in India. Much of the academic literature on sex worker activism organizations in India has focused on either sympathetic accounts of the remarkable work being done by organizations such as DMSC (*Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee*) and VAMP (*Veshya AIDS Mukabala Parishad*), both of which are large collectives of sex workers more-or-less unionized in efforts to reduce HIV/AIDS rates in red-light areas, and to promote the basic human dignity of sex workers as women and as laborers (*c.f.* Biradavolu *et al* 2009; Ghosh 2008; Newman 2003; Pal *et al* 1998; Shah 2007b; Tambe 2008), or on critiques of the corruption and ineffectuality of NGOs in India. The methodology of rights-based organizations sits comfortably with contemporary understandings of what progressive social movements look like: grass-roots, liberal, based in human-rights, feminist, pro-education and pro-labor discourses, and drawing on

techniques of civil disobedience and consciousness-raising that reverberate with both the Indian Nationalist and American Civil Rights Movements. Not-so with brothel-raiding, which conjures images of police brutality against the women of red-light areas at worst, and at best perhaps well-intentioned but paternalistic rescue operations designed to save women from degrading and disreputable (because sex-based) work<sup>22</sup>. There is no escaping the force involved in such tactics – the women and girls removed from Shivdasपुरi brothels in October of 2005 did not, to the best of my knowledge, volunteer to leave the brothels, and were subsequently transferred to the nearby Manduadih police station, following which they were moved to a local *niketan* (school) to be “reformed.” Such practices cut to the quick of questions of the agency and autonomy of women in prostitution.

As such, I was surprised to learn that *Guria* had engaged in rescue work so shortly after I first visited them in 2005, when they appeared to be a sex-worker activism organization much in the vein of DMSC, focusing on the education of sex workers and their children, fighting police exploitation in Shivdasपुर, and actively seeking to promote the singing and dancing activities of sex workers in an attempt to rebrand the women as *tawa’if* or *bhai-jis* (courtesans). The violence and paternalism that the raids represented ran counter to what I understood of the self-espoused feminist perspectives of NGO president Ajeet Singh – a man who is decidedly not anti-sex worker but rather seeking to establish Shivdasपुर as the first “exploitation-free red-light-area in India,” populated by independent women not beholden to pimps and brothel keepers, who prefers that people

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<sup>22</sup> For cogent arguments *against* raids and “rescue” operations see: Doezema (2010); Frederick (2005); Shan Women’s Action Network (2003); Sanghera (2005); Soderlund (2005).

call the women of Shivdaspur not “prostitutes” or “sex workers,” but rather, simply, “women.” I was therefore initially perplexed by the reasoning behind the raids, and wanted to understand the role of the raids in *Guria*’s activism, and how Ajeet felt about them five years later.

Thus, in this chapter I explore the utility and meaning ascribed to brothel raiding by *Guria* and by those who participated in the Shivdaspur raids in 2005, either actively as raiders/rescuers or passively as ideological supporters of the NGO, as well as how brothel raiding is alternately informed and condemned by a range of feminisms. Starting with a history of the 2005 Shivdaspur raids themselves, I then situate these raids within a range of discourses on feminism, activism, and the agency of women in prostitution. I argue that, from the perspective of the activists involved, the 2005 raids on brothels in Shivdaspur were successful as the first (and most dramatic) battle in an NGO-coordinated war on brothel-based prostitution, and that they are perceived as a violent but necessary means-to-an end of the radical transformation of Shivdaspur as a commercial sex district. I also argue that sex workers are conceptualized by the NGO as something akin to *bare life* (Agamben 1998), which allows for an ideological reconciliation of what can be perceived as harm caused to the very individuals that rescue operations are meant to help. In the course of my argument, I hope to illuminate the ideological process behind the goals and actions of a small group of activists and aid-workers, working in what they consider to be the service of sex workers in Shivdaspur, and operating within complex webs of violence, gender-and-caste-based discrimination, and organized crime.



## Brothel Raiding

*Charity organizations are prone to rescue us and put us in 'safe' homes, developmental organizations are likely to 'rehabilitate' us through meager income generation activities, and the police seem bent upon to regularly raid our quarters in the name of controlling 'immoral' trafficking. – DMSC, "Sex Workers' Manifesto.'*

Brothel raiding, or the practice of forcibly entering brothels for the purpose of arresting or rescuing and rehabilitating women in prostitution, is a practice which has been soundly critiqued by a variety of scholars of sex work (Agustin 2007; Bernstein 2007c; Chapkis 2003; Cheng 2010; DMSC 2005; Kempadoo and Doezema 1998; Sarode 2008; Sharma 2005), on the grounds that forcibly removing women from the sex industry undermines their autonomy to choose their own work, and rarely has positive outcomes for the individuals rescued. Brothel raiding has traditionally been the purview of the police, occurring when the police attempted to enforce anti-prostitution and anti-trafficking laws, in an attempt to “clean-up” red light areas. Interpreted cynically, they are also seen as an attempt to gain glory through enforcement of the moral high ground vis-à-vis prostitution, and extort bribe money from brothel-keepers and individual sex workers in the process.<sup>23</sup> Shivdaspur itself emerged as a red light area following a series of police raids conducted in the mid 1970s on Dal Mundi, Varanasi’s older red-light area, in the heart of the city. The raids established Dal Mundi as an area no longer “safe” for prostitution – in the sense that the police would no longer turn a blind eye to it there – and hence brothel keepers and their charges shifted to Shivdaspur, which was already known as a smaller red light area. This sort of “push-down pop-up” effect (Marshall and Thatun 2005) has been documented in Delhi, as well, when repeated raiding in the area of GB Road led many

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<sup>23</sup> See Sanghera (2005) and Sarode (2008) for brief discussions of this in the Indian context, Thrupkaew (2009) for an example from the Thai context.

brothels to move into private residences outside any known red-light area (Sanghera 2005).

Beyond their lack of efficacy at curtailing overall prostitution rates, Zheng argues that police raids and interactions with the “local police constitute [...] daily fear and terror” in the lives of Chinese sex workers, and result primarily in making sex workers “legally and socially vulnerable” (2009:70). In the case of the Chinese bar hostesses who are the subject of her ethnographic work, Zheng links police raids to exploitation of sex workers on the part of individual police officers, and, more systematically, to increased bar owner control over sex workers:

Because the police wield arbitrary power, hostesses find it obligatory to obey their sexual demands without monetary compensation. Local officials not only sexually and economically exploit hostesses but also keep ‘spy hostesses’ as their personal harem.

The antipornography campaign [which permits the police raids] also allows bar owners to severely regulate the hostesses who otherwise would operate in a more laissez-faire manner. Because the state’s antipornography policy is manipulated and usurped by local officials and bar owners for their own ends, leading to a violent working environment for the hostesses, the women do not disclose their real identities, which makes it more convenient for men to be violent toward them, sometimes even to the extreme of murder (2009:70).

Additionally, because of commonplace corruption amongst the governmental officials and police who orchestrate and implement the antipornography campaign, raids are often a source of income for such officials. Zheng describes how bar owners will be warned ahead of time of an impending “surprise” raid, allowing them to bribe the officials to skip over their bar in the raid; thus, only bar owners who do not bribe the police are actually raided. This places considerable control over the safety and stability of sex workers’ working environment in the hands of the person or persons running the establishment in which she works, leaving her legally vulnerable to the bar owner’s whims and political savvy. Thus,

police raids – far from formally policing prostitution from within the bounds of the law, or offering protection from exploitation to sex workers as is, theoretically, the legal intent of raids – help to create working environments in which sex workers are less safe and more vulnerable than they might otherwise be.

Discussing a remarkably similar system to that described by Zheng, Ajeet Singh routinely argued, in the course of interviews I conducted with him from 2008 to 2010, that brothel raiding on the part of the police in Shivdaspur was part of a complex nexus of power between the police, the pimps, and the brothel keepers which allowed for the continued subjugation of sex workers. The police, in these instances, are able to take a moralistic stance against the red light district and prove to the populace that they are committed to “cleaning up” the problem of prostitution, at the same time that they are able to make personal profits through bribery associated with arrest and bail bonds. Generally, this bribery takes the form of accepting money in exchange for not arresting sex workers, or informing brothels which have paid for such information about impending raids ahead of time. In cases in which women are arrested, given that the pimps and brothel keepers are often the only ones willing to bail out women and girls who have been arrested and charged with solicitation under the ITPA (Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act), the raid reinforces debt to a brothel keeper or pimp on the part of the woman herself, and so a cycle of financial and emotional dependency and debt bondage continues. *Guria*, of course, regards the raids that it conducted on Shivdaspuri brothels as categorically different, a point which will be addressed below.

Although certainly within the realm of common responses to prostitution

historically<sup>24</sup>, it is argued that brothel raids as “rescue” conducted by organizations other than the police (or by the police in conjunction with other organizations) became an increasingly common tactic in the 2000s, as late-Clinton and Bush-era anti-trafficking legislation and its concomitant direction of funding towards anti-trafficking organizations which take a strict anti-prostitution stance took effect (Bernstein 2007; Doezema 2010). It should be noted that the concepts of prostitution and trafficking are hopelessly (and somewhat uselessly) intertwined in the context of such legislation,<sup>25</sup> and that assumptions of force and victimhood permeate both concepts in ways that do not allow for the idea of prostitution as a chosen profession. The practice of rescue as a response to human trafficking overwhelmingly occurs in response to trafficking into prostitution (as opposed to trafficking into other forms of labor), although notable exceptions include the rescue of children from exploitative labor conditions, which may or may not include prostitution (Sanghera 2005). Although prostitution and trafficking are *not* synonymous, and the topic at hand is that of brothel raids/rescues as a response to prostitution (as opposed to trafficking), the murkiness between the two concepts will mean that trafficking will, at times, bleed into the discussion.

At the risk of oversimplifying, it is useful to recognize that responses to prostitution often take one of three paths: rights-based approaches, public-health approaches, and what can variably be called “report and rescue” (Hughes 2003) or “neoabolitionist” (Bernstein

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<sup>24</sup> Agustin (2007) has located raids, in the context of the rescue industry in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain and France, as reinforcing a continuum of practices that viewed incarceration as a reasonable response to prostitution, removing the prostitute from one institution of incarceration (the brothel) into others designed for punishment (the prison), treatment (the hospital) or rehabilitation (the shelter), but specifically not allowing the individual sex worker control.

<sup>25</sup> For a salient critique of the concept of trafficking see Doezema (2010).

2007c) approaches. Rights-based approaches, championed in the Indian context by organizations like DMSC, argue for accepting sex work as a form of labor, and from that platform fight for self-regulation of the sex industry, increased sex-worker's rights, and decreased social stigma for practitioners of the occupation, as well as their clients. Public-health approaches might best be conceptualized as damage-minimizing approaches; taking the stance that the public-health consequences of sex work are dire if untreated, these approaches focus on condom-distribution, sexual health education, and provision of health services to sex workers, in order to prevent the spread of sexually transmitted disease, most notably HIV/AIDS. Finally, there is the relatively hard-lined approach of "rescue," which is essentially brothel-raiding, often in conjunction with local police, in an attempt to remove individual women and children from work in brothels (which is, in these instances, characterized as "sexual slavery"). Rescue operations are ideally followed by prosecution of pimps, brothel keepers, and traffickers on the grounds of evidence collected during and after the rescue. It is important to note that individual NGOs and other aid organizations often employ a variety of techniques – DMSC, for example, works from both worker's-rights and public-health perspectives; *Guria*, in its history, has employed all three techniques at various times, although at the moment of writing it is predominantly concerned with "rescue" operations.

Those engaged in "rescue" operations conceive of what they are doing as just that: rescue. Ajeet Singh, for example, was quick to clarify that I should use the term "raids" to refer to such actions taken by police, whereas the "raids" that he had conducted were "rescue" operations:

What police do is not rescue. Don't use the word "rescue" for that, because the police don't understand "rescue." They don't even understand that these women are victims

and that they need to be rescued. (Personal Interview, 5/18/2010)

The basis for differentiating what on the surface appears to be the same action – forcibly entering a brothel and removing women and girls from the premises – is the understanding of those inside the brothel as *victims*. Whereas the raids conducted by the police, in which the women are taken to jail and charged with solicitation or some other violation of the ITPA, are about the arrest, detention, and punishment of *criminals* (and also about the extortion of money from said criminals), “rescues” such as those conducted by *Guria* are about saving *victims* from exploitation, injustice, and slavery. Beyond a perceived positive impact on the rescued victim, rescue is about producing documentary evidence that can be used to bring the judiciary system to bear in dismantling the current system of trafficking and forced prostitution in brothels by punishing traffickers, brothel keepers, and pimps. Raids and rescues are understood as perhaps the best (or only) way of accumulating such evidence, due to the illegal, and hence secretive and clandestine, nature of the crimes occurring. Evidence cannot be obtained in the open, and must therefore be forcefully acquired. Because “victims of [sex] trafficking are the most sought after and most tangible evidence of the practice” (Segrave *et al* 2009), the rescued individuals are therefore also proof of their own victimhood, and it is desired and often expected that they will participate willingly in the prosecution of their traffickers/pimps/brothel-keepers.

Other organizations employing “rescue” methodology in response to prostitution and/or sex trafficking – the International Justice Mission, STOP India, Traficord, and AFESIP (a Cambodian NGO founded by a former sex worker whose rescue operations have been heavily covered in the New York Times by journalist Nicholas Kristoff) are examples – likewise view their actions similarly to how *Guria* views its actions, and considerable

frustration is expressed when “rescued” individuals escape from shelters where they are held after their rescue, refuse to testify against pimps, brothel keepers, and traffickers, or return to brothel work. Critics of the rescue operations – while quick to point out that conditions in brothels can be deplorable and that some women do use the rescue as an opportunity to leave the sex trade – point, ironically, to the same suite of negative outcomes that Ajeet Singh lists as the consequences of brothel raids on the part of police (enumerated above). Although ideologically distinct, it is not clear that “raids” and “rescues” have different results for the sex workers involved.

Frederick (2005) argues that rescues are based on the assumptions that brothels are not workplaces but instead are inherently sites of violence and oppression, that rescue is both necessary and desired, and that the prostitute (by becoming a prostitute) has forfeited her right to privacy and confidentiality. The impacts on individual sex workers who are “rescued” are often negative, including loss of property and public exposure as sex workers (via newspaper photos and other media images). Shan Women’s Action Network, a Burmese sex-worker activist organization (working from a Rights perspective), found that women rescued from Thai brothels by the NGO Traficord perceived their rescue as incarceration (2003). They criticize Traficord for conducting the rescue/raid without the aid of interpreters who could explain what was happening to the women in question, and for not consulting those who they intended to “rescue” as to whether or not they wished to leave the brothel and help in the prosecution of their traffickers; they also note that the women reported losing money and belongings in the course of being rescued, and were not interested in economic rehabilitation afterwards.

A recent journalistic account (Thrupkaew 2009) argues more bluntly that rescues

actively harm sex workers. Focusing on the Thai and Cambodian contexts, Thrupkaew examines the work of the NGO *International Justice Mission*, arguing that IJM's tendency to work with law enforcement despite demonstrable corruption on the part of the policing and legal systems in which it is working, as well as its lack of focus on what happens to the girls and women that it takes out of brothels after the rescues, combine to make their work ineffectual and, perhaps, damaging. A cycle of debt bondage similar to that noted above leads the women who were "rescued" back into prostitution, perhaps with increased debt, which results in their recruiting other family members into the profession in an attempt to alleviate the amount of money they have to earn on their own. A case study of one red-light village raided by IJM revealed that while the rescue operations reduced the number of women, particularly underage girls, working in the village in the short term, in the long-term there was a rise in the number of underage women working there, although it is not definitively clear that the rescues themselves caused this increase.

An accumulation of evidence thus suggests that brothel raiding /rescue work is a perhaps ineffective and dramatic response to the perceived problems of prostitution – it rests on the assumption that the women and girls who are working in brothels are doing so expressly against their will, or because of an amalgamation of poverty and lack of options that amounts to structural force. This response to prostitution also assumes that the rescue/raids are taking place in a socio-legal context in which those who have violated the law can and will be brought to justice (whatever that might mean in the particular context), and where reform of individual sex workers is desirable, pragmatic, and possible. If these assumptions do not hold true, raids/rescues come to be more a sign of frustration on the part of the activists involved, as well as to index a belief that the women's lives cannot help



but be better outside of brothels.

Soderlund, echoing these perspectives, argues that for rescue operations to be theoretically viable, one must believe in “the construction of captivity and freedom as diametrically opposed states” (2005:65), and that freedom must be understood as outweighing any of the benefits to be found in the state of “captivity” in the brothel (wages that can be sent home to an impoverished family, for example). This particular captivity/freedom dichotomy is complicated further by its being grafted onto conceptions of gender in which “sex trafficking and prostitution [are understood] as the most egregious form of violence against women imaginable” (2005:70). Taking this a step farther, I would add that this reduces women to their sexual honor (or lack thereof), and that the notion that women in brothels are victimized in the worst way imaginable induces so much invective precisely because it taps into questions of gender-based honor. For South Asian women, sexual purity has been the foundation of their honor, and engaging in sexual activity outside of the narrowly defined context of marriage is an action that brings shame not only to a woman, but to her male kin as well. Sex work, with the repeated non-conjugal sexual relations that it entails, strips women who engage in it of this sort of honor. Conversely, particularly if she is raped or forced to engage in sex work, the inability of her male kin to prevent this from happening to her dishonors them<sup>26</sup>. In addition to the ways

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<sup>26</sup> Questions of the linkage between the sexual activity and sexual violation of women, and the honor of both the women in question and their male kin, arise routinely in South Asia around issues of communal or political violence. The history of the Partition of India and Pakistan is riddled with stories of Hindu and Muslim men raping women of the opposing community in what is understood as a dishonoring of the opposite community, as well as stories of women killing themselves in order to prevent being dishonored by sexual violence in the event that their male kin were unable to protect them. In a different historical context, military histories of Rajput kingdoms contain many instances of women

in which this is problematic in its portrayal of women as victims, it is also problematic in its portrayal of men, as it renders questions about male vulnerability unaskable – the security, income, and opportunities available to traffickers and pimps are not considered, although female brothel keepers here can be explained by their previously having been hardened by exposure to this system as they worked their way through it, from young, innocent victim of trafficking and prostitution to callous brothel keeper.

Raids, or rescue operations, are nonetheless an accepted anti-prostitution and anti-trafficking tactic endorsed by the Central Government of India, at least as a response to the trafficking and prostitution of minors. The Ministry of Women and Child Development provides a downloadable document with protocols for conducting “rescue operations” and handling victims “post-rescue,” aimed at State governments and participants in rescue teams<sup>27</sup>. The document’s (anonymous) author stresses the importance of “victim-friendly” policies for rescue, including the use of female police officers for dealing with the victims, and stressing that no male member of the rescue team should ever “physically touch the girls, women, or their belongings,” nor should any member of the team “use abusive language towards the girls and women” (p.2). It stresses that the dignity of “inmates” of the brothel (p.3) be respected at all times, by preserving their anonymity and by transferring the victims, post-rescue, to recognized “safe places” for rehabilitation rather than keeping them in prisons. Finally, the document indicates that those responsible for the trafficking and prostitution of the women and girls in question should be prosecuted,

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practicing *jauhar*, or self-immolation, when it was clear that the kingdom was about to fall to the enemy in battle, in order to avoid loss of honor later.

<sup>27</sup> See “Protocol for Pre-Rescue, Rescue, and Post-Rescue Operations of Child Victim of Trafficking for Commercial Sexual Exploitation,” at [www.wcd.nic.in/TraffickingProtocol.doc](http://www.wcd.nic.in/TraffickingProtocol.doc). (Last accessed 9/20/2010)

with minimal involvement of the victims themselves, and indicates the types of evidence that should be collected during the raid in order to successfully conduct such a trial. The document does not, however, direct its reader to any particular body, governmental or NGO, that can provide the resources required for such a rescue operation, rehabilitation, or trial; these are simply presumed to exist.

### **The 2005 Shivdaspur Rescue/Raids**

In contrast to many other organizations that do “rescue,” such as IJM and STOP, *Guria Sansthan* is not opposed to sex work, and is openly critical of moralistic stances taken against the profession as a whole. Ajeet Singh’s long-term goal for Shivdaspur is a sort of utopian vision of a red light district owned and operated by adult women who have chosen sex work as their profession. The “exploitation-free red light area,” as he terms it, is a decriminalized area in which sex can be bought and sold without police intervention, without violence being done to the individual women, and in which child prostitution does not occur. Ajeet vacillates between acknowledgement of the near-impossibility of realizing this vision in contemporary Varanasi, and a sort of radical vision that refuses to acknowledge the legitimacy of the current system of sex work in the city

The red light area is part of the Varanasi, part of Uttar Pradesh, part of India, where there is crime and corruption, where there is no gender-sensitivity, where there is no *anything* [that makes the activism of Guria easy or simple]. And in this context, I say I will create a red-light area of independent women ruling the place, can you imagine? But I *do* imagine it. There may not be a colony of independent women outside of the red light district, but I will create such a colony there. That is what I am thinking. If that is wild, then OK, I am thinking wild. (Interview, 1/15/2010)

The rescue that the NGO conducted in October of 2005 is not, in Ajeet’s view, incommensurate with this vision. In fact, they appear to have been born out of a sense of

frustration with working as an activist within the brothel-based system of Shivdaspur for twelve years, and finding that his originally chosen tactics of education, condom distribution, and political protest was not, in his view, undermining the system of violent exploitation that he had intended to fight. He found instead that his organization looked very successful from the outside – he and other Guria workers were able to come and go in Shivdaspur without incident and provide what information they wanted, but he was ultimately working with only those who were already powerful within Shivdaspur:

In the past, we had a lot of acceptance. We came and went in Shivdaspur as we wanted, we did condom distribution; the women would come from the brothels to have meetings with us. But then I realized, what am I really doing? Every day was the same, women were coming and having meetings with me, but I knew that there were four girls trapped in their brothel who would never come out to attend a meeting or do anything. (Personal Interview, 1/15/2010)

In Ajeet's view, more dramatic action was necessary to intervene in this structure and to reach the girls inside the brothels. And so he began gathering evidence of child prostitution and other violations of the ITPA while continuing his work as educator and activist within Shivdaspur.

Although I spoke with three people who were involved in the rescue (discussed below), these interviews were conducted four and a half years after the events themselves and often lacked the sort of details that would have been interesting and revealing. As such, my reconstruction of the events leading up to the rescue, the operation itself, and its immediate aftermath, are based on a report compiled by a Committee of Inquiry convened by the Uttar Pradesh People's Union for Civil Liberties (henceforth PUCL) shortly after the rescue, and published in January of 2006. The Committee collected statements regarding the rescue operation from Ajeet Singh; Prof. M.P. Singh of Benares Hindu University, who advised the students who worked in concert with *Guria*; 7 students from BHU; the

Shivdaspur Village *Pradhan* and the Manduadih district *Gram Pradhan*; four members of the Varanasi police force who were involved in the incident; the superintendant of the jail where the rescued girls were eventually held; the Chairman of the Varanasi Juvenile Welfare Board; fourteen of the rescued girls; and sixteen residents of Shivdaspur. As might be expected with such a large body of subjects, accounts of the rescues/raids, and interpretations of them shift as one reads through the statements; in some statements, for example, there are said to have been around 125 BHU students, in others nearly 400. However, the following sequence of events is standard across most of the statements:

The Shivdaspur rescues came about through a confluence of two events. The first is that for several months Ajeet had been receiving information about minor girls being trafficked into and out of Shivdaspur via a set of brothels in the village, the largest and most well-known of which was the brothel kept by Rehmat Khan and his wife, Tulsi. (A brothel run by Tulsi, Rehmat's now-widowed wife, is the last of the large brothels still operating in Shivdaspur, located to the left immediately after one enters Shivdaspur Alley.) The second event is that several Social Sciences students from BHU had been going to Shivdaspur as part of a project on Sex Workers and Human Rights. In the course of this project, shortly before the date of October 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2005, a rickshaw puller gave one of the students a note written in Bengali by a minor girl who was working in one of the brothels, stating that she was working against her will and wanted to go home. The student took the note to a law professor supervising the project, Dr. M.P. Singh, and he in turn suggested that the student inform Ajeet Singh. Ajeet, M.P. Singh, and the students planned a rescue operation – amassing approximately 125 student volunteers, as well as other individuals who were at that time working and volunteering with *Guria* – combining the proof garnered by the note

with other information about the trafficking of girls into Shivdaspur that Ajeet had received in the course of doing his regular work there.

What followed was a very carefully orchestrated spectacle: Confirmation that a group of girls had been brought into the area was received by Ajeet at 11am on October 25, 2005. At 2pm, Ajeet went to meet with the Varanasi Senior Superintendent of Police, Navneet Sikera, but was delayed in meeting him because the S.S.P. was at lunch; proof that ten to fifteen young girls were being kept in a brothel in Shivdaspur was then faxed to the S.S.P., and Ajeet continued waiting to meet with him until 3:45pm. At 4:05pm the S.S.P. issued an order for immediate action to the C.O. (Circle Officer, comparable to the District Superintendent of Police) of Manduadih Police Station. By 5pm, the police had not yet intervened in the brothels, although there was a crowd in Shivdaspur Alley composed of the students, other volunteers, and media representatives that Ajeet Singh had called; at least one brothel owner was seen moving girls out of the brothel, and as such the volunteers raided the brothels without the assistance of the police, starting shortly after 5pm. At approximately 5:30pm, while the volunteers were rescuing the girls, the police arrived and remained inactive. Subsequently, they refused to take any of the girls into custody, citing the fact that they did not have a female police officer present who could do so. Senior Superintendent of Police Navneet Sikera, in the statement that he gave to the PUCL, said that he had wanted to act on Ajeet's information about the minor girls being held in brothels in Shivdaspur as quickly as possible, but that the delay in police action was due only to this technicality:

The number of lady constables in the city is also insufficient, and they are scattered among different police stations in the city. Tell me practically as to how much time it would take to collect lady constables of the entire city to conduct raid at such a large scale? (PUCL 2006)

While the volunteers and Ajeet tried to convince the police to take the girls and women into custody, they were kept in *Guria's* building (the location of the *balwadi*). Santosh Singh, the Circle Officer from the Cantonment Police Station, says that during this time the girls were beating on the door of the building, and shouting from the inside. At some point, Ajeet climbed to the top of the building and threatened to jump from there if the police would not take the girls into custody and fill out the appropriate charges against the brothel keepers. Around 7pm, the students and volunteers formed a human chain to protect the girls from the crowd of police, onlookers, and media, as they transferred them to a bus that took them to the Manduadih Police Station, where by 9:30pm, First Incident Reports were indeed registered. A newspaper report (*Times of India* 2005) indicates that by this point many of the girls were “hysterical” and “began throwing files and whatever they could lay their hands on at the cameraman,” speaking to their distress in the situation.

Later that evening, there was looting in Shivdaspur, although it is unclear who engaged in these activities. The police claim that the students, as well as Ajeet Singh and other members of *Guria*, returned from the police station to loot the raided brothels, and to otherwise “misbehave” with the women in the area. The professor who supervised the students reports that they had all returned from Shivdaspur by 10pm, and a student who participated in the rescue operation insisted to the PUCL that

all of the students were emotionally involved. Sentiments of all the students were attached to this incident. How could we misbehave with them? For us, they are our missing, lost sisters. (PUCL 2006)

Charges of looting and rioting were brought (by the police and Shivdaspur residents) against the students, as well as against Ajeet Singh and his wife, Manju; in addition to the

charges of looting and rioting, Ajeet was also charged with rape. These charges were not ultimately pursued – there was no concrete evidence of them and in the end the facts as presented by the police regarding the looting did not stand up: no students had been arrested at the time, even though the police allege that they were present and witnessed the behavior. Further, media were present for the incident and much of it was telecast live on Sahara TV; there is absolutely no media-documented record of any misbehavior. Although the rape charges were removed, other petty charges remain open against Ajeet, even five years later. He said:

There were rape charges also. But they have withdrawn those charges. Now the charge sheet they have filed is for very petty things, like stealing, robbing the women of gold chains, things like that. They have withdrawn the rape cases because they knew they can't prove the charges. It's all fake so how can they prove it? [Personal Interview 1/27/2010]

In order to avoid further legal complications, and to escape harassment from pimps, both Ajeet and Manju went into hiding for several months following the rescue operation. The harassment, at least as Manju recounts it, was severe:

After the rescue they were continually harassing me... One day, they called me 84 times. At that time there was an American woman here. [She heard the calls] and she started crying, because they threatening me with such horrible things, and she could not bear it. She was shaking like a leaf after hearing them. He [the caller] was saying that he will pick me up, he will rape me, he will kill me, he will beat my husband and all of my family; all these things. Eighty-four phone calls, can you imagine, in one day? For a lady, it's very hard to listen. (Personal Interview 5/3/2010)

There are no complaints about the raids from the women involved in the rescue operations, and no suggestion that members of *Guria* or the student volunteers misbehaved with them in any way. The PUCL report includes a hodgepodge of statements collected from people encountered in the area by the committee, many of which are strongly, sometimes



effusively, in favor of Ajeet Singh (who is referred to as Sir Ji), and some of which identify the police as the source of the looting and disorder in Shivdaspur on the evening of the operation. For example, a woman identified as Farida says:

Ajit Sir Ji always used to explain to everyone that one should not keep minor girls, but Rehmat forced all of them to do this work. When they refused to follow, Sir Ji rescued only minor girls. Then some goonda elements came from outside late night and police also with them and SI was also present and they all indulged in rampage and it was not done by Sir Ji or the boys. We are all with Sir Ji (PUCL 2006)

Likewise, a man identified as Sanjay says:

I am with Sir Ji. Sir Ji has done a very good job. Those who were guilty got punished. Sir Ji also used to say that do not indulge in wrong things, but when mafia like Rehmat continued doing wrong thing, Sir Ji taught him a lesson. He often used to threaten to get us arrested by the police. Sir Ji rescued and brought only minor girls. Sir Ji has done a commendable job. I am with Sir Ji (PUCL 2006).

This man, apparently referencing Ajeet's threats to report the community to the police for its involvement in the prostitution of minor girls, is nonetheless "with Sir Ji," viewing the rescue as just recompense for illegal behavior (about which "Mafia like Rehmat" were warned), although his understanding of the particulars (the rescue involving only minor girls) is not commensurate with the details as given by *Guria*. To give one last example, there is the following brief statement from a man identified as Qayyum, indicating the near cult-of-personality that is attached to Ajeet Singh by some Shivdaspuris:

Ajit Sir cannot do this. ["This" referring, I believe, to the charges of looting and rape levied against Ajeet, although of course the statement itself is ambiguous.] I have Pan-Tea shop. I know Ajit since the time he started his work, i.e., for the last ten years. It is difficult to be a great man like Ajit Sir Ji (PUCL 2006).

There is only one statement, of the sixteen, that indicates any wrong-doing on the part of Ajeet, *Guria*, or the students, although this statement is not in line with all of the others, indicating that the rescue operation began at about 3pm and was over by 4pm, during which time his shop was looted. This individual says that “people were dragging, manhandling, [and] robbing women,” and also indicates that Rehmat Khan and his nephews were known throughout the neighborhood for the buying and selling of young girls.

In addition to these statements, there are many statements which recount the police raids (not rescues) which took place in Shivdaspur in the days after the rescue operation conducted by *Guria*. The police raids, given the name Operation Dry Out, were conducted on October 26, 27, and 28, 2005, and involved (according to the PUCL report) the arrest of “all the women, minor girls, brothel owners and others from the red light area.” The report indicates that the Senior Superintendent of Police, arriving at the scene of the *Guria* rescues, was sympathetic towards the female brothel keepers of Shivaspur that evening, only to turn around and arrest them the very next day. These raids, in effect, closed much of the public red light activity in Shivdaspur, making it temporarily very difficult for any woman (minor or adult) to work as a sex worker there, although the business has since tentatively recovered. Statements collected by the PUCL speak to the immediate impact of these raids. A sampling of such statements include:

On 25<sup>th</sup> in the early morning, people came and demolished my Paan Gumti (kiosks). They took away my five [sic] daughters named Purnima, Roshni, Puja, Sabra. [Man identified as Rajender]

I have a cycle repair shop. Today police took away my three nieces. Their names are Salma, Saheena, Chandni. They used to study in the school being run by *Gudia*. Their father Hapiz Barsati is a tailor. Do not know where police has taken them. I asked them not to do this whereupon they said that

they would get me booked for the offence of trafficking. [Man identified as Jumrati]

Police arrested by mother-in-law Kalawati Devi. My sister Neetu aged 22 years has also been taken away. My husband Azad drives auto. Brothers-in-law Sehzaad and Akram run tea shop and they have also been arrested. [Woman identified as Begul, wife of Azad]

I live on rent in the house of Gulab Ustad. Police has arrested my two sisters Barkha and my mother Neelam. I have two small children, hence I have been spared. [Woman identified as Shiv Kumari]

This series of raids additionally led to the death of Rehmat Khan, the man identified as the most influential and notorious *dalal* in Shivdaspur, in a police encounter on the outskirts of Shivdaspur on November 30, 2005 (Daenik Jagaaran 2005).

In the course of my research, I spoke with three people who had been personally involved in the rescue operation in Shivdaspur on October 25, 2005: Ajeet Singh and his wife, Manju, as well as a young Benares Hindu University student, who had participated as a volunteer. Both the BHU student and Manju provided a series of concrete details about the rescue operation, and the extent of its organization, which Manju likened to a “military campaign,” and the details of which the student confirmed. Coordination of volunteers was carefully planned, with volunteers instructed to park vehicles considerable distances away, at scattered locations, and to begin walking towards Shivdaspur at certain times, picking up *lathis* (staves) as weapons in places they were hidden along the way. The organization was necessary so that an unusual grouping of vehicles or people waiting around would not be noticed. The crowd of volunteers, which Ajeet remembers as being in the “thousands,” but which was actually around 125 people (as previously mentioned), all reached Shivdaspur at once and, after seeing that the police would not act, quickly stormed the brothels. There was considerable confusion and chaos. The student recalled, in particular, storming into

the brothel to find girls naked from the waist up, who were weeping from fear. His lingering impression of the entire operation was his sense that there was no community or sense of solidarity in Shivdaspur, as evidenced by the old women who sat placidly on the street while the men stormed the brothels. This is something that has troubled him since, he said, that the old women sat there and did nothing to stop the raid, as though they did not care what happened to the girls in question as they were taken from the brothels and transferred to the local police station.

For Manju, this rescue operation was simply one raid among others that she has done with *Guria*— although remarkable for its size, and for the lack of police cooperation, as the police actively tried to stop the raids. What stands out for her most is the sense of personal danger that comes with rescue work. She says, of rescues in general:

Rescue means that you put your life at stake. Because [when] we do a rescue in any house, or brothel, basically we are dealing with the traffickers. They might shoot you, they might stab you also, and so you have to be very alert and mentally very stable. You should be stable, otherwise you can become nervous and jittery, and you can trip. So you have to be very mentally prepared for the rescue, because at times you have to face the powers of the police also, you have to face the brothel keeper, pimp, trafficker, and also anyone else who might be at the bedside [of the girl you are rescuing]. (Personal Interview, 5/3/2010)

If you are not prepared, then the rescue can fail, and all of the trouble you went to and danger that you put yourself in will have been for nothing. Throughout the time that I was conducting fieldwork, Manju regularly asserted her willingness to die in the course of doing rescue work as an affirmation of her commitment to the cause of liberating girls and women from brothel prostitution. She implied that her willingness to forfeit her life in these instances was testimony to the horrible injustice of the system she is fighting. Ajeet

made similar vows regularly, although he was often more careful to contextualize rescue work within the framework of the overall goals of his organization.

Five years later, these rescues, and the subsequent police raids, still color the NGO's interaction with the neighborhood. I was told that during the NGO-sponsored *diwali* celebration, in which two groups of children competed to create the best *diwali* decorations, and which was attended by several women from Shivdaspur, as well as several groups of American study-abroad students, many of the women working went home, and pimps and brothel-keepers closed up shop because they thought the large presence of students signaled that the NGO was about to raid again. Likewise, while standing outside the largest remaining operational brothel early one morning in March, waiting for a bus to come collect all of the children for a picnic to a nearby waterfall, a young man and older woman came out and angrily shooed us off the doorstep. The NGO, and its associates, have proven themselves untrustworthy as far as the brothel keepers are concerned.

And the brothel keepers are not idly concerned. As previously mentioned, since the raids, numerous brothels have been closed following the arrests of their owners for violating the ITPA. These empty brothels surround the two buildings in which *Guria* still provides education and afternoon meals to children from Shivdaspur, and which serve as meeting grounds for the occasional women who come to ask for help, services, or advice from the NGO. Mostly, the empty buildings are blots on the landscape. Observing them from the *balwadi* each afternoon, the courtyard of one provided a place for cricket games, or for goats to wander, and there was one, unpadlocked room (or perhaps just an entryway) that I often saw pairs of adults disappear into for brief periods of time for purposes that I do not know. Their emptiness, though, lent an air of abandonment to the

area, and seemed to serve almost as reminders of the raids, although people never talked about them.

Furthermore, the raids resulted in the death of two *dalals*. The first took place in a police encounter that occurred in a later stage of Operation Dry Out, as the local police struck out at Shivdaspur to prove they were “doing something” about the problem of prostitution in Shivdaspur so dramatically exposed by the 2005 *Guria* rescue operation. The second *dalal* committed suicide after some of his properties were seized, and as he faced conviction on several charges of violations of the ITPA. In addition to the two who died, four more had been convicted of violation of the ITPA in the years since the raids. Technically (and it was some time before I was clear on this point), those convictions are not a result of the 2005 raids, but of information gathered prior to them. One might question the utility of the raids on those grounds, but instead the NGO, via Ajeet, seems to view all of this as part of a complex, holistic set of actions. It is certainly the case that Shivdaspur is dramatically different post-rescues/raids than it was before they occurred, although whether this will result in an “exploitation free red light area” or in the death of Shivdaspur as a commercial sex venue remains unknown.

Most critiques of brothel raiding and rescue focus on their impact on individual women and girls, and in this respect the Shivdaspur rescues appear to be consistent with anecdotal evidence about others. When asked what happened to the thirty-one women removed from Shivdasपुरi brothels on October 25, 2005, the NGO does not give specific answers, although Manju says that after the rescue:

We want the girls who are rescued to go back to their native places, to their native homes. After the rescue, they should go home, if their family members

will accept them. If they will not accept them, then they should be put in a good orphanage – not a government orphanage – and afterwards, we keep track of where the girls we have rescued are staying. (Personal Interview, 5/3/2010).

Ajeet never mentioned similar records of the girls, although he did mention that they keep track of them as witnesses for anti-trafficking cases, recounting the difficulties of producing the women and girls as witnesses in the trials that have resulted from the raids. It is said that often the brothel keepers bail the girls out, or otherwise “catch them up again” somehow, and that the women return to the same pimps and brothel keepers, although Ajeet also noted that if it was possible to find their families, the girls were returned to them. As of the People’s Union for Civil Liberties report in January of 2006, seven or eight of the children were said to have gone home. Although Ajeet mentioned specific cases to me, in which the parents had somehow lost their young daughters and were overjoyed and relieved that Guria had found them, in general it is worth questioning the efficacy of sending rescued prostitutes back to families that presumably played some part in their becoming prostitutes in the first place, or who might treat them poorly or shame them because of the work they have done. Whether the familial role was active, in the sense of turning a daughter over to a middleman who would help them find work, or more passive, in that neglect or abandonment led the girls to the brothels, if prostitution is something from which the girls need to be “rescued,” it must also be acknowledged that the same family system to which they are being returned is partially responsible for their entry into prostitution in the first place. The logic of rescue does not seem to be able to account for or resolve the fact that the girls in question are generally returned to familial, social or economic systems in which their turn to, or enslavement in, prostitution occurred in the first place.

Statements from fourteen of the thirty-one girls and women are given in the People's Union for Civil Liberty's report on the rescue operation and its aftermath. Because the intentionality and desires of the rescued girls and women are so often called forth as evidence of the uselessness (and even harm) of raids/rescue work, the fourteen statements are included in Appendix A, so that the reader may read the statements themselves. What follows is my analysis of the statements.

Many of the statements are similar, both in form and theme. They are terse and to the point, nearly all of them following one format: "This is my name, these are my parents' names (or husbands' name), our residential address is X; I came to Shivdaspur at this time, through these means, and I did X or Y type of work there (sometimes sex work, sometimes "singing and dancing" or housework); This is what I would like to happen now." Of the fourteen, nine mention regular beatings if they refused to work as sex workers, and that the work was done against their will and for little remuneration; three such examples are:

I use[d] to receive beating in case of not earning money by offering myself for sex. (Reena alias Sushma, Statement #4)

I do not like this work but this work has been got done by me forcibly [sic] and on refusal I receive beating. (Laxmi, Statement #1)

I live in the house of Rehmat. Here I was being asked to start entertaining visitors (flesh trade) and on my refusal I used to get beatings. I do not act on my own desire in this work. (Tehseen, Statement #3)

Three of the statements (#3, #4, and #6) mention that the girls were told that they had to repay large sums of money, both to the brothel keeper and to the police, in order to offset the costs of bringing them to Shivdaspur; nearly all of the girls mention some sort of deception in the way in which they were brought to Shivdaspur, whether that was through a man to whom they thought they were married, or through someone who promised work



in the city. In these respects, the statements are entirely consistent with larger narratives on trafficking, debt bondage, and sex work in the subcontinent. Many of the girls end their statements with the desire to 'go home':

"I want to go to my house as soon as possible" (Laxmi, Statement #1).

"I do not want to go back there. I want to go to my home (Sharoon Kathun, Statement #2)."

"I want to go to my house (Sulekha, Statement #8)."

"I want to go to the house of my elder sister who resides in Gorakhpur in case she wants to keep me (Gudia, Statement #9)."

"Send me to my home (Chameli, Statement #11)."

"I want my son and I want to go to my parents (Shabena, Statement #14)."

One statement, Chameli's (Statement #11) references the rescue in a positive light: "I came here five months ago. Boys came and rescued and did a good work. They (the boys) did not use any force on me." The girls' desires to go home are in line with Guria's goals for them, although again it is worth noting that their home life, such as it was, did not prevent their entry into prostitution in the first place.

Not all of the statements are of this nature, however, and of those that are, one expresses considerable confusion and concern about what will happen in the future: "We do not know what would happen? Where would we go from here?" (Gudia, Statement #9). Another (Rukhsana, #7), mentions only that she is from "Shivdaspur itself and do[es] dancing, singing." Yet another (Khursheena, #10) seems confused, and is perhaps a Shivdasपुरi resident who does not engage in sex work who was somehow caught up in the

rescue operation<sup>28</sup>:

I have been in Varanasi for a little over one year. Eight months have passed since my marriage to Jaidev, who drives a motor rickshaw. My house is in Shivdaspur. [...] On October 25<sup>th</sup> four persons forcibly took me from my house, and my clothes were torn. Our house is behind the school. I do not know Ajit Sir, *Gudia*. I am three months pregnant. My husband earns and looks after me.

These statements represent only fourteen of the thirty-one girls and women removed from Shivdaspur's brothels on October 25, 2005, and therefore cannot represent all of those directly affected by the rescue operation. Particularly, they cannot represent the women (as opposed to the minor girls) who were also "rescued," and who were released from police custody after appearing before the Magistrate. Whether they returned to the brothels or left Shivdaspur is unknown, as is whether they lost property, were harmed in police custody, or appreciated the chance to leave the brothels. As a whole, though, the statements pose a challenge for those doing rescue work, in that while the majority of the girls who gave statements indicated that they did not want to work in the brothels, were being forced to do so on pain of beating, and would prefer to go home, two others state nothing of the sort. Rather, they indicate that they would rather return to their houses/brothels in Shivdaspur. How to weigh the desires of what are, ultimately, a disparate group of individuals is difficult, although it is fairly obvious that those inclined to rescue (and perhaps many who are not) would say that removing a girl from forced work in

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<sup>28</sup> These statements are specifically supposed to be from the rescued girls, and not from the subsequent police raids in Operation Dry Out. Given that Guria raided what it new to be brothels, and not other households in Shivdaspur, it is also of course possible that she is simply not admitting to being a sex worker, and instead wants to go back to Shivdaspur and resume her work. I do not find it particularly useful to engage with the potential truth or untruth of these statements, as it is impossible to verify them one way or another. It is thus my intention to take them at face value, as at the very least, they represent what the girls felt was appropriate to say at the time.

a brothel trumps the difficulties that the same actions cause those who are choosing to work there. Regardless, it is not ultimately known what happened to any of these fourteen girls, nor to the other seventeen who were rescued but whose statements are not reported.

Beyond the impact to the thirty-one girls and women rescued, however, there is a larger impact on the other women who worked there. In August of 2005, two months before the rescue, I was told that Shivdaspur was home to approximately 500 sex workers; in 2008, the estimated number had dwindled to 180-200, and when I returned in 2010, the estimate was 150, although during the course of my fieldwork new women appeared on the street and stayed in the area. Five years after the rescue and subsequent police raids, Shivdaspur appeared to be dwindling or dying as a venue for commercial sex, making it likely that a “push-down-pop-up effect” has occurred: the majority of the women and girls who left Shivdaspur as a result of Operation Dry Out have most likely not left the sex trade.

The reason for this substantial drop in the number of women living and working in Shivdaspur is due to the closure of brothels, either by State force, or by brothel keepers simply refusing to rent rooms in the area to sex workers known to have done volunteer work with *Guria*.. The independent sex workers that *Guria* aimed to support were thus not able to find housing or work-space in Shivdaspur, and as a result left the area to work in other red light districts. On this point, Ajeet is repentant – this was an unforeseen consequence of his organizations actions, something that he admits he simply had not considered:

I could get them liberty, but I could not get them houses. We had not thought about such very simple things, like housing after the rescue, ahead of time. Frankly speaking, I did not calculate for such things. Maybe that is a mistake from my side. Many mistakes will come, and you learn in the process (Personal Interview 1/15/2010).

It has also meant that those remaining in Shivdaspur are either unsympathetic or unwilling to engage in volunteer work and protests with the NGO, and this has effectively curtailed any appearance that *Guria's* activism is drawn from the people of Shivdaspur.

Ajeet is quite blunt in his response to criticism on the grounds that the rescue operation negatively impacted individual women. He does not deny the truth of this, but points to the complexity of brothel prostitution as a problem that is interwoven with numerous other social problems. He cannot, and does not act in a vacuum, and as a result actions that are intended as good, positive, and helpful can have very negative impacts in some areas even as they produce change in others. Focusing on the individuals misses the forest for the trees:

People ask me the result in one dimension: "Where are the women? Where is that child?" But those women, and that child, have to survive, to function, to be rescued, to develop and evolve within this whole system, where the police don't function, where the court doesn't function, where it takes twenty years to get a judgment in one criminal case, where we as an NGO are facing a situation where we have to fight for our own security, you see? In this context, how will I give security to others? That is the context! Such complexity, you understand? It's not a question of one woman or one boy, one woman or one girl! No! People talk about it that way, but it doesn't happen that way, when you really get down to structural change, or social change, and that is what we have always believed [is the purpose of our work]. To me, social work is bringing change in the lives of the people, real structural change. That is my idea of social work. My idea of social work is not distributing condoms or sweaters. [Those sorts of things] can be tools -- they can be tools, and they should be tools for a bigger good, but it's not only that you get into charity mode and go and distribute and distribute, and then what? If you don't empower people, they don't struggle, they don't come up, their life doesn't change. So, this is very important. [...] Look -- involving civil society, I did it. As much as was required I was in the red light area to win over the women and have a better rapport with them, etc, I did it. Getting some international support, I did it. But...I don't get legal convictions against traffickers [without doing rescue work]. If all of these tactics combine, then they give you a result. You get my point? Don't look at it compartment-wise (Personal Interview 1/27/2010).

Ajeet thus views rescue work as one component of a large-scale, long-term battle against a

complex problem that is vast in its scope. At times, his frustration at the complexity of the problem was palpable, as when he described the history of strategic responses he and his organization had taken against prostitution. These responses cross cut the spectrum:

- (1) Ajeet's personal adoption of the children of prostitutes, with the objective of preventing the children from being exposed to sex work and eventually adopting the trade themselves. The children eventually returned to their mother.
- (2) Providing education to both sex workers and their children in the hopes that education would give them other employment options. This produced, in Ajeet's telling of it, "only educated prostitutes," who were now literate and perhaps in possession of secondary school diplomas, but still enslaved in the same system of brothel prostitution. Education did not lead directly to employment other than sex work.
- (3) Gandhian protests against police brutality and exploitation such as having the women of Shivdaspur form a human chain as a visual sign of protest. The protests garnered brief flashes of media attention, but ultimately business continued as usual.
- (4) Attempts to rebrand contemporary sex workers as *tawa'ifs* (courtesans). These attempts launched an annual concert showcasing the artistic talents of sex workers and other "marginalized artists," which is well-attended in Varanasi, but musical performances alone did not result in incomes comparable to those earned in sex work, not did foreign donors want to pay for the musical training of sex workers.

The rescues are thus just one of multiple of strategies that Guria has employed, but

certainly the one that appears to have been the tipping point leading to visible change in Shivdaspur. In this view, what matters most are the overall patterns, and not the individuals involved, which is not to say that the individuals involved do not matter at all.

Although Ajeet Singh is proud of his work when it comes to the weakening of the brothel system of prostitution in Shivdaspur, he is also clearly aware of the impact that it has had on the women who worked there before the rescue. He is clear that the women themselves have never been the target, but also, seems to regard the difficulties the rescue has caused them to be something akin to collateral damage:

When you fight, what happens? There are many people who suffer because of that. When there is a war between two countries, what happens? Maybe the society, maybe the animals, maybe the birds will suffer. In the bombardment, there is no distinction (Personal Interview, 1/27/2010).

In addition to their displacement as a result of the rescue, since 2005 two women who were informants for Guria, providing them with information on what was occurring in the village and within the brothels, have been killed in retaliation for their work with the NGO. Although both deaths were disguised as cooking fires (a common way to disguise the murder of a woman in the discourse that surrounds dowry killings in India), Ajeet remains adamant that he knows that they were killed as a result of their involvement with his organization. This, too, is regrettable – and Ajeet is not callous on this point. It cannot be stressed enough that Ajeet does not take any harm that has come to individual sex workers as a result of his organization's actions lightly. However, what is done is done, and there is no way of going back to pre-rescue community relations. As he sees it, any retreat on the part of the NGO, any attempt to negotiate with the brothel keepers to allow housing for the women who have already been displaced, would simply result in a collapse of the momentum that the organization has gained, and would ultimately bring back the days of

open brothels, increased trafficking into and through Shivdaspur, and child prostitution. As such, the impact on the women is regrettable, but simply a consequence of the war on prostitution and those who exploit women who work in prostitution. The rescue is thus not about the rescued. So what *is* it about?

Those involved in rescue work conceptualize the lives of women involved in brothel prostitution as something akin to “bare life” or “mere life,” as defined by Walter Benjamin (1996) and expanded upon by Giorgio Agamben (1998). At its basis, the concept distinguishes the simple fact of being alive from a life imbued with meaning, and more specifically rights, vis-à-vis the State. In other words, it privileges lives that are accorded juridical rights and protections from those which, for a wide variety of reasons – postcolonial statelessness, refugee status, interment in concentration camps, certain types of criminality – do not have access to the protections and rights of the State. As such, it privileges juridical evaluations of life above the myriad non-juridical means of evaluation which are possible: the webs of social meaning and praxis within which individuals live, for example. Agamben begins his discourse on “bare life” with Aristotelian distinctions between types of life. *Zoe*, or “the simple fact of living common to all living beings,” is posited as distinct from *bios*, or “the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group” (1998:1). The Greek thinkers upon whom Agamben draws excluded *zoe* by definition from the political sphere, and it is this distinction between the life imbued with political rights and that which is “simply alive” which Agamben uses as the cornerstone of his analysis of “bare life,” or “mere life,” a term which he borrows from literary critic Walter Benjamin.

In “Critique of Violence,” Benjamin explicates the arguments for the just use of

violence, both by and against the State. Simplified, violence is generally abhorred for its effects on the living, but justified (i.e., an exception is allowed for its just use) in order to preserve a certain standard of living. Grafted onto Agamben's explication of ancient Greek thoughts on types of life, violence is abhorred for its effects on *bios* but justified if it preserves *zoe*. Benjamin argues:

The proposition that existence stands higher than a just existence is false and ignominious, if existence is to mean nothing other than mere life. [...] It contains a mighty truth, however, if existence or, better, life (words whose ambiguity is readily dispelled, analogously to that of freedom, when they are referred to two distinct spheres), means the irreducible, total condition that is 'man'; if the proposition is intended to mean that the nonexistence of man is something more terrible than the (admittedly subordinate) not-yet-attained condition of the just man. [...] Man cannot, at any price, be said to coincide with the mere life in him, no more than with any other of his conditions and qualities, not even with the uniqueness of his bodily person. However sacred man is (or that life in him that is identically present in earthly life, death, and afterlife), there is no sacredness in his condition in his bodily life vulnerable to injury by his fellow man (1999:299).

Here, a judgment of value is made between the simple fact of being alive, and living in a way that is befitting of a human being, which Benjamin refers to as the "just man" or a "just existence."

Agamben uses the concept of "bare life" and its subordination to "just existence" or *zoe* as the basis for a critique of State sovereignty, and the exclusion of certain (indeed, many or perhaps most) individuals from access to rights and privileges vis-à-vis the State. Using as examples the figure of the refugee, who is reduced to "bare life" by lack of protection by a State, and the figure of *Homo sacer*, an ancient Roman legal category which contained convicts who (by law) could be killed but not murdered because they had been stripped of their legal rights, Agamben constructs a moral argument against the biopolitical division of individuals and peoples into those who are "merely alive" and those who live



lives imbued with rights and, therefore, meaning. The sorting of persons or groups of people as having “bare life” is thus a biopolitical and ideological act that determines how they are, and can be, treated.

To return to Shivdaspur and Guria, I argue that for those engaged in rescue work, the practice can only make sense, in light of the trauma it causes to some of the very women who are “rescued,” if the life of a woman within a brothel is either meaningless within its current context, or so horrible that it cannot possibly become worse as a result of being rescued; indeed, the term “rescue” itself belies this impossibility. The buying-and-selling of human beings that is believed to constitute the realm of trafficking and prostitution is described by Ajeet as degrading and devaluing the lives of the women of Shivdaspur to the point where they lack not only the most basic of human rights, but also to the point where they are unable to do anything more than survive the day to work again the next. In a conversation about the care of their children, for example, Ajeet argues that they are so exhausted by their lives that they cannot be blamed for not properly caring for their sons and daughters. I quote from this conversation at length to illustrate the ways in which the sex workers of Shivdaspur *on aggregate* are considered to live lives beyond the pale of what is appropriate for a human being (i.e., in contradiction to the *bios* of a woman as Ajeet understands it):

Ajeet: [...] the business hours and the profession is such that there is little time to care for the children, basically. [...] And, actually, there are many, many complexities. Society never follows a rule as such, every human being is so different... It is generalized talk actually. But specific to the area, no doubt, it is there. [The lack of care for children.]

M: I understand, I was just thinking when I look at the kids, some of them seem well cared for, and some don't.

A: It's not only the money part, it's also the attitude of the mother.

M: Well, I was thinking of... Talib's family. There's a little boy, Talib, and he has an older sister, who's maybe ten or eleven, and another older sister who is fifteen or sixteen who I don't see very often, and then there's an infant, and he's toddling age. I was watching the infant, in the Center the other day, and he's a very happy baby. He's extremely well cared for. I see his siblings caring for him all the time...

A: That's another good point you have taken up. The sisters and mothers or maybe the brothel keepers take the child away, they take care of it. So it can be anyway. Maybe more than the mothers, her brothers, sisters take care of, you know... So that is a point, yes, it has happened many times. Because actually you have to understand... She is the machine.

M: OK?

A: Her body is the machine, you see. Like the machine is not separate and the mechanic is not separate, you know. The mechanic and the machine both are one. And in that way, if you understand, the woman is so exhausted... She is the machine also and the mechanic also, and so her life requires tremendous energy. She gets sick and ill at times. Most of the women going beyond 30 are saying very abrupt and sad types of things. And 99% become drunkards or drug addicts. There are many drug addicts there just in front of our centers. [...] They keep changing places, but mostly you find them on the right side of the *balwadi*, all three or four of them are big drug addicts. You can see in their bodies that they have lost everything, actually. So that is another position that they take. They become addicts of some or other type, and that is also very harmful for them. They don't look sane to me. By the time they are 30-35, the way they talk, the way they behave... It's a different behavior. I am not a psychiatrist, but I can make out, that it is not normal, because we used to talk every day. (Personal Interview, 2/24/2010)

In Ajeet's experience and understanding, the sex worker is placed in a position in which she is not to be held accountable for the care (or lack thereof) of her children because she has been exhausted by her role as "machine and mechanic both," struggling to hold herself together in the context of continual onslaughts against herself as a meaningful person, and often reduced to drug or alcohol dependency. His accounting here is sympathetic – in other, similar discussions, he cautioned against judging the women for their behavior because of the grueling inhumanity of the situation in which they find themselves. He was

also routinely clear about the fact that most of the sex workers he has known in his nearly twenty years in Shivdaspur have not met happy ends, tending to wind up drunken or drug-addicted, or simply disappearing from Shivdaspur Alley without his knowing what had happened to them or where they had gone. While he can point to individuals who have survived the system of brothel prostitution – indeed, it is these women who he hopes will inhabit Shivdaspur when it is transformed into the exploitation-free red-light area – in his experience the odds are against a woman making it through a career as a prostitute without losing her health or sanity. If we return for a moment to think of *bios*—“the form or way of living proper to an individual or a group”—what is being decided when one decides to engage in rescue work is that to live and work in a brothel, in the condition of slavery which brothel-based prostitution is understood to be, is not a form or way of living that is proper to a woman. Therefore, she must be rescued, and in the process of that rescue be brought into the system of juridical meaning that removes her from the theoretical position of constituting “bare life.” Once removed from the brothel, she can give testimony that establishes her as a “victim,” and then be legally treated as such, meaning that she will no longer have to work in a brothel and will either be returned to a family which will care for her, or be “rehabilitated” by the State, meaning that her upkeep and education will be provided for her for a period of time. Unfortunately, the State apparatus that is supposed to provide these services to victims is understood to be fundamentally broken and corrupted. In Varanasi, rumors abounded that such State-run rehabilitation centers simply sold their wards back into prostitution, and of course mounds of scorn were heaped upon the families that allowed their daughters to become prostitutes, either intentionally or through ignorance. Guria’s efforts in its rescue work are to force, through vigilance and an

insistence on moral authority, the rusted, corroded arms of the corrupt Indian State to extend the rights and protections that it is supposed to give to its citizens. Prior to rescue, in their daily lives in the brothels, women experience routine degradations and assaults on their dignity as human beings that access to the already extant (as written into the law, if not in practice) juridical protections of the Indian State.

Ajeet is not the only person who described sex workers and prostituted women to me as living lives unfit for human beings, although he was the only person to do it so poetically.<sup>29</sup> His wife Manju voiced similar concerns, and the viewpoint of anyone to whom I spoke who did not consider sex workers to be immoral or responsible for their own condition viewed them as helpless victims of trafficking and brothel prostitution. Similarly, sex workers are often held to have their human rights violated on a regular basis. The PUCL report on the Shivdaspur raids describes the violation of their human rights repeatedly, citing their trafficking, their working conditions, the treatment by police and their placement in jail rather than in an adequate reform center as constituting such violations. The report does not include the rescue as one such violation, because to do so would be to acknowledge the potential for harm through the rescue itself.

The presumption that any harm caused by the rescue is in service of a much greater good explains the bafflement of those who “rescue” women from brothels to find that the rescued women seek to escape from their subsequent “liberation,” as well as Ajeet’s assertion that what happens to the rescued individuals is not the point of the rescue. It also helps to explain the fervor required to engage in rescue: what is at stake is the

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<sup>29</sup> Nor is Ajeet the only person to use mechanistic metaphors in relation to sex work – feminist scholar Sheila Jeffreys describes the global sex trade as “The Industrial Vagina” (2009).

transformation of a woman from bare life to a life imbued with meaning and rights, a restoration from slavery into a form of life that cannot be bought and sold. The degree to which they can be regarded as “only alive” is also evidenced by the charges of false-consciousness and brainwashing with which Ajeet explains any action or narrative on the part of sex workers that runs counter to his desire to rescue them. From his perspective, their voices and narratives, in their current state, are not to be believed.<sup>30</sup>

In what state, or in what form of life, would sex workers have to live in order for them to be believable and more than “only alive”? Remember that Ajeet is not opposed to sex work in the utopian abstract. His objection to sex work is not that it is immoral to exchange sex for money, nor to engage in non-conjugal sexual intercourse, but rather that brothel-based prostitution in its current iteration is exploitative to the extreme: it is slavery. The ultimate objective of Guria’s activism is not a simple end to this slavery, though, but an end to slavery and the subsequent creation of an “exploitation free red light area” in which independent women engage in sex work.

To bring this about, Ajeet believes that the current structure of the red light area must be dismantled before anything new can grow in its place, because all traces of slavery and of “bare life” must be destroyed. Playing devil’s advocate against this utopian vision, I once advocated to Ajeet that there might be some aspects of the current structure of the red light area that were of utility to sex workers. For example, weren’t *dalals* useful to sex workers, in that they provided protection against customers, and the convenient cover of someone

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<sup>30</sup> The assertion that the women are not to be believed is not necessarily untrue. Women who I interviewed sometimes directly contradicted their own statements during the course of the same interview. Often, the details of life and work in Shivdaspur shifted depending on whom one was speaking to, and when. As such, Ajeet does not mean to disparage these women in making such a statement.

whom they might refer to as their husband should the need for such a cover arise? Our conversation follows:

A: A red light area *can* go on without the whole traditional stereotype, the pimps and traffickers. Women *can* independently survive. They almost all are independent now, the ones who came and talked to you. At least whatever little they have, they are having their own savings, you see.

M: And what if, once they are free from this structure they want to work with a pimp?

A: See, that... um... I don't decide anything in advance. I don't decide structures. Until now, the role of pimps and brothel keepers [has been] bad. Brothel keepers should never be [there], because they are keeping [forcing the women to be there]. They should not be there; no woman will want [them]. But yes, the question of having a pimp: women might voluntarily want to have one. [...] There could be a situation where a woman might like to have a helper, protection from customers, or whatever it is, [and] if it is [at] a mutual level, it is ok. Again, who am I to impose it? But the way the structure has worked until now is that the brothel keepers, the traffickers, the pimps, have been exploiters. So we have to fight that, you see.

But! Don't call him a pimp [in the case where the woman wants him to be there], because that will confuse people! He could be her boyfriend, in the real sense, a friend in the real sense! "Pimp" [has] a negative connotation, pimp and brothel keeper and trafficker, they should not be there, I say. But she is entitled to have a friend, who facilitates the business.

M: OK, so after the rescue operation... [Ajeet interrupts]

A: And one more thing. These women, [their] independence is attached to availing all the citizenship rights, all the civil and human rights, and when she has all these things, she has reached all these things, I think she should be able to do it [sex work] independently also. Because when I am talking of independent women, you see, they are independent but, this independence has an outreach into the whole facilities for any common man. She [must be able to] avail of all the rights, all the civil, human, whatever rights you are talking of, any of those that are available. Because the moment she's castigated, the moment you lock her up [i.e., once sex work is criminalized, and the woman loses access to human and civil rights], then the need arises [for] all those things [i.e., *dalals*, brothel keepers, traffickers]. When she's a free bird with all the liberties and access to all the programs, ration card, widow card, pension card, then it's a different thing altogether. To have a man friend is a different thing altogether [than] to have a pimp, OK? And so, I look at it that way, I want my women [to be that way – independent, in possession of rights], one day I think it should be, it's

already begun, it's already beginning actually, a few women are really independent, they are going and coming [without interference of a brothel keeper or pimp].

Thus, in order for the “exploitation free red light area” to come about, radical shifts in power and the situation on the ground in red light areas must occur. First, sex workers must work independently, or at least must be their own “employers.” Nobody – not a brothel keeper, not a *dalal*, not a trafficker – but the woman herself must decide that she will do sex work. Furthermore, beyond working independently, sex workers must be in full possession of their civil and human rights: they must have knowledge of and access to services that are provided by the State (food ration cards, pensions, public schools for their children). Such access is difficult for sex workers in Shivdaspur to achieve, according to Ajeet and Manju, because although social services are provided by the state, sex workers have either not known how to access them or have been prevented from accessing them by brothel keepers, *dalals*, or traffickers because allowing the women to do so would decrease their dependence on those same brothel keepers, *dalals* and traffickers. This is to say nothing of the more general difficulty of accessing such services given the highly corrupt nature of the distribution system (Gupta 2005).

Only when sex workers are possessed of all of the rights owed to them as citizens will other considerations be able to come into play, such as whether or not they might like to have a “friend” or “boyfriend” who “helps” them in their work. The “exploitation free red light area,” then, is one in which power has been leveled by rights. Once sex workers have cast off their status as “bare life,” they have become citizens whose decisions to engage in sex work, to have a male “helper,” to tell narratives about their lives that are truthful and not tinged with the mentality of a slave, will be credible. The number of factors that would

need to change to bring this sort of red-light area about is daunting: social attitudes towards the immorality of sex work, the social acceptability of single or married women having multiple sexual partners, the legal status of soliciting, the corruption of the police force, and the profitability of exploiting the sexual labor of others, to give just a few examples. Until the exploitation-free red light area is brought about, however, Guria will consider brothel-based prostitution to be unacceptable because it puts the women involved in it in the position of having bare lives.

In arguing that those who engage in brothel raids conceptualize the women they rescue as embodying “bare life,” I do not argue that the women do, in fact, have bare lives. It is also vitally important to note that Ajeet Singh and Guria do not conceptualize sex workers as *only* having bare life. The activists associated with Guria are well aware of the social realities and familial relationships of sex workers, i.e., of the extra-juridical aspects of their lives. However, in this aspect of Guria’s activism – i.e., conducting rescue work and attempting to close the brothels in Shivdaspur – the importance of rescuing women from brothels and giving them access to their legal rights not to be prostituted by others supersedes all else. As such, the evaluation of sex workers’ lives in juridical terms is given more importance than evaluating their lives in social or familial terms.

From the juridical perspective, sex workers in Shivdaspur are certainly outside the framework of any clear access to claiming their own human or civil rights, however broadly defined. Women from Shivdaspur with whom I spoke mentioned beatings at the hands of brothel keepers and police, difficulty accessing basic infrastructure such as electricity and potable water despite their availability nearby, and being returned by police to brothels from which they had run away. One middle-aged sex-worker supporting two unruly young



children characterized herself to me as “helpless,” particularly when there were no customers. Written legal statements from women recovered from brothels in Shivdaspur indicate that they were often turned over to a woman or man by their parents who subsequently placed them in brothels, although sometimes, as well, the decision to go into prostitution was her own. Despite the fact that they do meet the condition of being horribly politically disenfranchised, though, they are also more than “simply alive,” and in being more than that they cease to have only “bare life.” Jean Comaroff has written of AIDS patients in Africa who, although they could be considered bare life, in reality are not quite so limited. African AIDS patients are often described as enduring unspeakable suffering and, due to the corruption and failure of their governments, dying meaninglessly of a disease which has become manageable and treatable in other parts of the world, but they are nonetheless socially engaged with other AIDS patients, and engaged as citizens in activism on behalf of their community. Despite their categorization by others as epitomizing bare life, they “assert[...] a stubborn connection to social meaningful existence” (2007:209). Indeed, any assertion to non-juridical evaluation of human lives makes the starkness of the category described by “bare life” appear to be untenable.

In contrast to Guria’s focus on their lack of access to the protections of the State, women in Shivdaspur locate meaning and value in their lives in situations outside their relationships to political power and rights<sup>31</sup>. The women from Shivdaspur with whom I spoke also told me very happily about their children, about the houses they were saving

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<sup>31</sup> A short ethnographic vignette: The teachers in the *balwadi*, likewise, were found of speaking of human rights, and one day gave a lecture to the children who were in attendance that day on the Rights of the Child, as defined by the United Nations. Although a few of the older boys attentively took notes, one of the older girls raised her hand when asked if anyone had questions, to query: “How much will you teach today, Sir-Ji?”

money to build, about their husbands<sup>32</sup>, about food that they liked to eat while celebrating festivals – in fact, it was with these sort of details that they told me about their lives, often glossing over or ignoring direct questions about sex work. Their desire not to talk about sex work is many things: a protective action given that speaking about it implicates them (and their brothel keepers and *dalals*) in illegal activity, a polite decision to avoid what is generally a socially unacceptable topic of conversation, an indication of shame at their profession, perhaps. It is also an acknowledgement that their subjectivities cannot be reduced to their work anymore than anyone else's, and that there are ways in which they can define and characterize themselves that are not about exploitation, disenfranchisement, and helplessness. No woman ever mentioned the raids, or said anything critical of Ajeet or Manju, for whom the women I met seemed to have considerable affection and esteem. I sensed, however, that this affection and esteem was not the result of the organization's rescue work, but was instead based on the ongoing acts of individual aid, affection, and friendship extended by Ajeet, Manju, and other NGO workers towards these women, as well as other aspects of Guria's activism, such as the services provided to their children through the balwadi, or the help they received in accessing medical care for themselves or their children.

Let us return, now, to the women in the vignettes at the beginning of this chapter. How might such women benefit from or be harmed by a rescue operation? For Anjali, who was trafficked into sex work as a child, perhaps a rescue early on could have helped her leave the trade and return to her family. However, her family appears to have turned her over to a "trafficker" – her narrative does not indicate that she was kidnapped – and has not

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<sup>32</sup> The majority of women with whom I spoke mentioned being married, or otherwise presented themselves as married. (See Chapter 4.)

asked her to come home despite still being in contact with her. As such, in her case a return home may not have meant a simple or happy ending to her engagement with sex work. At this stage in her life, working as a middleman between customers and sex workers, a “rescue” operation might mean fewer sex workers to attract customers. Given that she profits from the prostitution of others, and hence is in clear violation of the ITPA, a rescue operation might result in her arrest, and subsequent legal proceedings against her, if she was caught up in the rescue operation. There was a time when it is possible that being “rescued” would have helped her to lead a life different from the one that she has, which she considers sorrowful and painful. Given the broader circumstances in which she found herself, though, that outcome is not assured. Although Chandni’s exact background is not clear, we can reasonably imagine similar outcomes for her.

For Durba, the rescue operations that Guria conducted resulted in Shivdaspur being an inhospitable climate in which to engage in sex work, for years after the operation. The rescue led to raids on the part of the police, which led to the arrests of sex workers. It also resulted in the brothel keepers of Shivdaspur turning against the NGO and the women who were affiliated with and sympathetic to it, which included Durba. For some such women, discussed above, this resulted in murders disguised as “kitchen fires,” whereas for others, it meant that brothel keepers would no longer allow them to work out of or rent rooms in their brothels. They had to relocate, which entailed a disruption in their work and earnings as they resettled elsewhere. This situation five years later, had started to resolve itself in that those brothel keepers have been arrested, prosecuted, and jailed, and as such there was newly open space in Shivdaspur from which sex workers like Durba could operate. The rescue was disruptive then, although it is possible that Shivdaspur will be conducive to

independent sex workers at some point in the future.

For Anu, who is simultaneously from Shivdaspur and part of Guria, a rescue operation pits her employer against her community, and makes her potentially suspect in the eyes of both. Guria moved slowly in adopting her as a primary teacher, because the organization was aware of the depth of cooperation amongst those who live in Shivdaspur in keeping the area conducive to sex work as it has historically operated. At the same time her affiliation with the NGO caused tensions between her and her community in Shivdaspur. Shortly after the *Jan Panchayat* described in the previous chapter, a large group of Shivdasपुरi women who were in league with the *Gram Pradhan* went to her house and threatened to beat her up unless she stopped working for Guria. She refused, and the crowd dissipated, but she was greatly frightened by the event. Guria is her clearest path to working as a social worker, which she says she would rather do than marry. She does not want to become a sex worker, as she views the work as “dirty,” and confided to me that she was scared to have sex, as she was afraid that it would be so painful she would die. While the rescue operations help the publicity and funding of her employer, and thus obliquely benefit her, they also put her in a very delicate and difficult situation vis-à-vis the sex worker community in which she has grown up, and in which she still lives.

Of these women, none personally seems to have had much to gain from rescue operations, although it is certainly true that, should the “exploitation free red light area” eventually come to pass as a long-term result of the rescue operations, women like them will be the beneficiaries. In the mean time, perhaps they and women like them might not be harmed so directly, as Ajeet acknowledges that they *have been* harmed by the rescues, if the value of their lives were not evaluated so heavily on the grounds of their perceived lack

of freedom and rights, *i.e.*, if they were not perceived as bare life. In a utilitarian irony that obliterates rescue as a means to the end of the exploitation free red light area, conceptualizing them differently would mean not engaging in rescue. Conceptualizing them as they presented themselves to me – as wives, mothers, daughters, and students instead of, or in addition to, sex workers or the children of sex workers – would entail working with the current system of brothel prostitution in Shivdaspur (*i.e.*, with *dalals* and brothel keepers) rather than working to raze that current system to the ground<sup>33</sup>.

In contrast to Ajeet's rescue narratives, I was once told a story about a group of BHU students who abandoned an attempt at rescuing individual women from the brothels of Shivdaspur. They had been inspired by *Guria* to attempt their own independent act of heroism. After storming the brothel and demanding to be allowed to leave with the women; the women themselves stopped the rescue by refusing to go, challenging the students – "If we leave here, will *you* marry us?" Lacking either the ability or the desire to convert the sex workers into wives, and no other solution being apparent, the students thought it best to leave the women in the brothels. Now, this story – a piece of idle gossip that I was told by a current BHU student – is indicative of a sort of impotence, and hence a shrugging off of the problem at stake: the quality of life of women in brothels. But it also acknowledges the women in question as cognizant of, and being allowed some say in, the conditions and meaning of their lives.

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<sup>33</sup> Sex workers self-presentations, as well as the power systems that inform them, are discussed at length in Chapter 6.

CHAPTER 4  
*PATI, PATNI, AUR TAWA'IF* [HUSBAND, WIFE, AND PROSTITUTE]: MARRIAGE AND SEX  
WORK IN NORTH INDIA

The anecdote that closes the previous chapter was told to me by a friend of the college students who attempted to “rescue” women from the brothels in Shivdaspur, and in the storyteller’s viewpoint, the option of marriage appears as an ironic retort to the logic of rescue. In his interpretation, the question “If we leave here, will *you* marry us?” is hurled as an criticism at their would-be rescuers by the women, and this barb effectively and instantly shuts down the interaction. Its effectiveness of the criticism lies in what appears to be its common sense: the women, because they have engaged in sex work, are no longer potential marriage partners for these young, middle-class college students. If they cannot be married, and thereby claim legitimacy as married women and be folded into the affinal relationships of wife, daughter-in-law, and sister-in-law, then they would do better to stay as they are, earning money in the brothel. This contrast between wife and sex worker is accepted, in the anecdote, and also serves to give the story some of its bite: it shames the optimistic, starry-eyed rescuers with its acknowledgement that while the women can be removed from the brothel, they cannot be somehow transported outside of wider cultural logics that bind up the status of women (and their associated men) in female honor based on notions of sexual purity. In contrast to activists participating in rescue operations, who would ideally transform prostitutes into female subjects imbued with rights and respect, the college students in this anecdote fatalistically accept what seems to them to be the simple truth that there is no currently extant place to which they can remove the women, where they can do the single most legitimating thing available to their gender: marry.

Their perception aside, marriages do occur in Shivdaspur. One occurred early on in my fieldwork, in Bhind Basti, an occasion that kept most of the children and the local teachers busy and away from the *balwadi* for two days as they helped with the preparation and took part in the celebration. On other occasions, a child would mention that a match had been decided upon and that a wedding would occur in their household within the next year. Many of the young women I spoke to on days when older women and girls came to Guria's community centers for a festival or other occasions mentioned that they were married, or referred to their husbands, and all of the older girls and younger women indicated that they expected to be married at some point. It was an anticipation about which they enjoyed speaking, often initiating the topic by asking, time after time, when my marriage would be. My assertion that several astrologers had predicated my marriage in the year 2012 was met with approval, and there was much scandalized tongue-wagging over the fact that it would be a love-marriage. "Yes, but this is how the marriages are in America," the young women who had spoken with me before would explain to the others. Beyond the self-assertions of these women, and the gossip of children, Anu confirmed for me several times that marriage occurs in Shivdaspur, and Ajeet reiterated her confirmations, noting that *Guria* had at times in the past sponsored marriages within the village. He did not, however, acknowledge the legitimacy of marriage in Shivdaspur.

In this chapter, I consider the middle-class criticisms of marriage in Shivdaspur that were espoused by Ajeet Singh, Guria, and my other middle-class Benarsi interlocuters, as well as the reasoning behind Ajeet Singh's skepticism regarding marriage as a solution to prostitution, in light of broader ideas about marriage in India. As a counterpoint to these criticisms, I present the assertions and critiques of marriage of women from Shivdaspur.

While *Guria Sansthan* regards the marriages of women in Shivdaspur as an illegitimate cloak that hides the true nature of the village as a red light area, and the fundamental identity of the women and men within it as sex workers and *dalals* (“pimps”) as negating the possibility of legitimate familial unions, the women of Shivdaspur regard marriage as a source of honor and legitimacy as women, although they are not uncritical of the roles that they do and will play as wives.

Furthermore, beyond the realities of marriage in Shivdaspur, there is the fact that the majority of women whom I saw soliciting did so while wearing *sindur*, the red (although sometimes pink or orange) cosmetic applied to the parting of women’s hair that signifies their married status. Regardless of whether their wearing of *sindur* reflects their status as married women (and here Ajeet, Manju, and Anu all concur that it is representative of “fashion” only), the women use *sindur* to “market” themselves as wives in the course of seeking customers. I argue that this practice is related to a more complex association between prostitution and marriage than is commonly recognized by the dismissal of the notion that the *sindur* references marriage in this context that I encountered in Varanasi, expanding on historical literature on sex work and prostitution that suggests that the idea of marriage and domesticity is perhaps not as far removed from the red light district and the transactions occurring there than is commonly believed by the Indian middle class.

### ***Guria’s Position on Marriage***

In August of 2008, as I was conducting preliminary field research in Varanasi, Ajeet Singh brought up the topic of marriage in Shivdaspur. This was during a lengthy interview



during which we were discussed the basics of *Guria's* activities in Shivdaspur, sweltering under a single, slow ceiling fan in the NGO headquarters' dusty, cluttered "legal room" (so-named because of the metal barrister bookcases filled with legal reference texts). The conversation came around to the NGO's endeavors to prevent second-generation prostitution, and Ajeet told me that up to that point, eighty-three children from Shivdaspur had been "rehabilitated," mentioning that this number was very important to him because it represented long-term change in the lives of these individuals. By "rehabilitated," he meant that they were living outside of the red light area, and were working in occupations other than pimping, brothel-keeping, or sex work. For boys, this often meant that they had been enrolled in computer courses and were subsequently doing some sort of IT work, although one or two had opened barber shops, and several were working as rickshaw pullers, the NGO having helped to pay for the purchase of the rickshaws. For girls, one had been enrolled in nursing school in Delhi, and another (Anu, as it turns out) was teaching with the NGO and otherwise working for *Guria*; twenty-four girls had been married. At this point, he stopped to explain that he did not regard marriage as an "occupation" for these girls, nor did he necessarily regard it as a solution to the larger problem of prostitution, as marriage still involved a large degree of dependency on men. It was something that the NGO was happy to facilitate and support, however, if a girl had an opportunity to marry, as a means of preventing her entry into sex work.

By the time we next talked about marriage in the context of prostitution, in 2010, Ajeet's stance on it seemed to have hardened – the NGO had continued to sponsor marriages when girls had the opportunity, and the number of sponsored girls had risen to

over 30, although he no longer seemed to be keeping close track. Whether or not a girl or woman was married (or marriageable) was seen to be beside the point. He says:

Frankly speaking, *Guria* has not thought of marriages as a solution to the problem of prostitution. I think that empowering women, encouraging them to get jobs and settle down on their own, independently, is the solution. Then, marriage can be a woman's personal priority, and she can decide whom to marry, or whom not to marry (Personal Interview, 2/24/2010).

In contrast to this vision of independent women supporting themselves and deciding on their own marriage partners, the weddings that *Guria* had sponsored had been arranged between families in Shivdaspur. In his experience, these weddings had little to no impact on whether a woman or girl ever worked as a sex worker. Beyond the fate of the individual woman in question, as well, there would eventually be the problem of what would happen to her daughters if the family continued to live in Shivdaspur, as the profession of sex-work often became a "family affair" after a generation or two of living in the village. He also noted that there were families of *bediya*<sup>34</sup> and *nat*<sup>35</sup> background who had moved to the area, finding a sort of "heaven in the red light district" due to their caste history of involvement in sex work.

The "system" of marriage in Shivdaspur, as Ajeet, Manju and Anu, explain it is as follows. Of the children born in red light areas to sex workers (or to *dalals* or brothel keepers and owners), an attempt is generally made to find brides for the boys. The boys and men of Shivdaspur often adopt pimping, brothel keeping, and trafficking as a

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<sup>34</sup> The *bediya* are a North Indian scheduled caste whose occupation has traditionally been sex work done by sisters and daughters of the caste. See Agrawal (2007) for a historical and ethnographic account.

<sup>35</sup> The *nat* are a North Indian scheduled caste grouping of historically nomadic performers and entertainers, associated marginally with sex work because of their association with dance.

profession; like anyone else, they want to marry. There is the problem of where to find a suitable girl, however, because “no one from civil society is going to marry a prostitute’s child” (Ajeet Singh, personal interview, 2/24/2010), and so the girl comes from one of the other families in Shivdaspur. Which girls within the village will marry appears to be in part decided with some reference to their earning potential as sex workers. Anu gave me the example of one family who had five daughters, three of whom were beautiful (*khubsurat*), while the other two were dark-complected (*gehra*). The three pretty ones would work, she said, whereas the two darker girls would marry, because no one would pay them much were they to engage in sex work. Ajeet likewise mentioned that a girl who was “worthless or useless” in terms of sex work would be married, although he did not necessarily think that their worth was determined by the shade of their skin.

The fact that marriage does or does not occur here is of no significance, however, in Ajeet’s understanding because while being married might provide a temporary “respite” for one girl, a woman’s status as married or unmarried has little to no bearing on her being exploited as a sex worker. While a woman who is married to a local *dalal* or to the son of a sex worker might not solicit in Shivdaspur Alley, “if they get a good customer, there is no hard and fast rule” that the wife is off-limits to sex work. Furthermore, he noted that wife-abandonment in Shivdaspur was very common, and that the wife, once her husband had left, would turn to sex work to support herself and her household. In his estimation, even if a woman married into a Shivdasपुरi family and never worked as a sex worker herself, at least some of the daughters of this woman would go into sex work as part of the family trade. Finally, in some cases marriage becomes a form of trafficking, a means of “tricking” a

girl into sex work by marrying her and then pimping her out, or selling her into another brothel once a man has a woman in his control as his “wife.”

Marriage as an institution, then, is not incommensurate with sex work – regardless of whether a woman has a husband in Shivdaspur, it is possible that she will choose or be coerced into working, although it does seem that some women are expected to engage in sex work without having first married. In terms of Guria’s activism, then, marriage is not a useful tool in fighting brothel-based prostitution. It is worth noting that, for Ajeet (and he is certainly not the only person in India to make this argument) marriage as an institution, particularly a family-based institution in which parents decide on matches, is part of a larger system of exploitation of women in India, and a means of preventing their freedom and independence. As the longer quote above indicates, what he would like is to see women earning for themselves (though preferably not as sex workers), establishing their independence, and then deciding on their own whether or not to marry. As such, it is not the marriage of prostitutes alone that he is dismissive of, but rather arranged marriage as part of patriarchal attitudes towards women in India.

However, while engaged in field research, I often did find that Ajeet and other *Guria* workers scoffed more particularly at the idea of weddings and marriages in Shivdaspur (as did other Benarsis with whom I spoke about my research from time to time). It was taken as given that the presence of sex work as a means of earning a wage disqualified a woman for the full status of “wife”; I would also argue that being by profession a *dalal* made one suspect as a husband, as well, and that this suspicion spread outwards through the family, tainting every possible familial relationship of those involved in sex work. Both Ajeet and Manju argued that the women’s neglect of their children was due to the fact that their work

completely exhausted them, and so even if they had good intentions, they were incapable of caring for their children<sup>36</sup>; Ajeet maintained that despite the sometimes apparent neglect, the women of Shivdaspur fiercely love their children, whereas Manju argued that even this love had been stripped away from them by the nature of their work. When I explained to my landlord Anu's example of the five daughters, three of whom became sex workers and two of whom married, his reaction was one of disgust for the father who would make his child into a sex worker.

Red light communities are not the only ones that face suspicion when it comes to the legitimacy of their marriages in India. Less dramatically, the marriages and families of actors and actresses, such as Tamil Special Drama artists are likewise considered suspect because of a generalized association of acting with the potential for prostitution, as well as a sense that families of Special Drama artists at least symbolically violate the incest taboo when a father and a daughter play the role of lovers on stage, for example (Seizer 2004). It is precisely this sense of the blurring of familial roles that serves to discredit the marriages and familial lives of sex workers, in Shivdaspur and elsewhere.

The emotive state of these relationships (wife/husband; father/child) does little to ameliorate their invalidation by the presence of a sex worker or *dalal* in the relationship. While, as with anywhere else, all relationships between people in Shivdaspur are not necessarily loving or affectionate, it should come as no surprise that those living and

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<sup>36</sup> The neglect of children in Shivdaspur was variable, and in some cases I would argue nonexistent. Some of the children who arrived at Guria's nursery school for afternoon lessons clearly had not been bathed, had their hair combed, or changed clothes in several days, and some complained regularly of hunger. Others were neatly dressed with well-oiled hair, and came bearing evidence of regular gifts given by someone in the neighborhood—a new shirt or dress, hair ornaments, a bag of marbles or beads, or pocket money with which to buy snacks from local shops on the way to the *balwadi*.

working in red-light areas are engaged in loving relationships: I often saw *dalals* behaving with great affection for children, teaching young boys to fly kites on the rooftop, or setting up a portable *charpoy* (a foldable cot) in the shade of one of the brothels on a blisteringly hot September day for several little girls and encouraging them to sit there, returning from a local shop a few minutes later with popsicles, and then lazing away the afternoon with them. The small acts of kindness are not necessarily indicative of the same sort of love and affection that my landlord expresses towards his son, although the only reason for reading them as anything less than that is the fact that the men are *dalals*, and the fact that those children will most likely eventually be involved in the sex trade in one way or another.

Similarly in December of 2009, I visited the home of two sex workers – sisters from Nepal – who had built their own house in Shivdaspur, and lived there with the older sister’s husband, their teenage son, and their pet dog. The affection between this woman and her husband was extraordinarily clear to me, and he introduced himself to me as her husband (*pati*). As we spent a small part of the afternoon drinking *chai* (tea) and eating *namkeen* (salty snacks), they chatted about their lives, sitting next to each other on the bed and occasionally holding hands. They had been married for eighteen years, have a son in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade, and live together off of her earnings (she is still actively working), with her husband contributing a small pension from the time that he worked in the military to the household. Both he and his wife are HIV positive – he showed me their lab results, and spoke about how they were taking care of each other and their health since they received their diagnoses.

Later, when Ajeet and I were discussing whether or not the women who I saw soliciting in Shivdaspur, wearing *sindur*, were married, he said emphatically no, explaining

that even if a woman had a man of some sort, their relationship was characterized by business; perhaps he was her *dalal*, or perhaps a customer. At this point, I enquired about this couple, indicating that they had been together for a considerable period of time, had a child together, clearly intended to stay together and care for each other's health, and seemed to feel affectionately towards one another as well – why can we not refer to this as a marriage? What follows is a transcript of our conversation:

Ajeet: You have to realize that there are nuances to these situations. Even today, she is active in the business. And who is this man? He is a man who was in the army, though now he is retired, and he has been visiting her [as a customer] since he was in the Army. And it is true that they are in love now, OK...

M: Yes, that's why I ask, because I could see it, between them...

Ajeet: Actually, it's always very complex. You have to realize that it's not always black-and-white when you are talking about human beings. It is not that she's not a prostitute. And at the same time, it's not that he's not a customer. He is a customer, and she is a prostitute, but they fell in love, and they are together now. After retiring, he came and to stay with her, and now they live together. So, no doubt that they are in love, but that is also a special case. These women can fall in love also. (Ajeet Singh, Personal Interview, 1/15/2010)

While Ajeet will readily acknowledge that these two are in love, he will not call them husband and wife, but rather refers to them as prostitute and customer. He later argued that theirs is an exceptional case, although he admits that it is not uncommon for a customer to assume a caregiver role in a sex worker's life. At the same time that he argues that "it's not always in black and white when you are talking of human beings," and that "these women can fall in love also," he does not allow for that love to change the fundamentally commoditized nature of the relationship as one between a prostitute and a customer even as, surely, the financial transactions between these two individuals have ceased to be individually commoditized (i.e., he contributes his pension to the household rather than paying per sex act, and both of them together "eat" the money that she earns).

Although now they are “together,” Ajeet insists that she is still a prostitute, and he is still a customer. As in the story about the students failing to rescue the sex workers from the brothel, there is no social or emotional alchemy that can transform a prostitute into a wife.

At this point, it is necessary to step back and take a brief detour through what marriage itself is, anthropologically. To start at a very basic place, the popular anthropological reader *Conformity and Conflict* (Spradley and McCurdy 2006: 449), uses the 1951 *Notes and Queries in Anthropology* definition: “Marriage [is] the socially recognized union between a man and a woman that accords legitimate birth status rights to their children.” Obviously, this definition of marriage is problematic on a number of points, for example: polygamy, and same-sex marriage. The idea that the legitimacy of children is what is at stake in marriage has been challenged, as well (Bell 1997), but despite the myriad anthropological exceptions and political arguments as to what should or should not be considered marriage, at its core is the idea that marriage is a socially legitimated relationship.

Socially legitimated marriage in North India has most commonly taken the form of a union arranged by the family members of the bride and groom, and caste endogamy and village exogamy have historically been the ideal in this context, with the married couple living as part of the groom’s extended family. In South India, the ideal is somewhat different: the union is still arranged, and caste endogamy is still of vital importance, but village exogamy is not the rule. While acknowledging these forms of marriage as local ideals, it should also be noted that there are multitudes of exceptions to this rule in practice (Harlan and Courtright 1995), not the least of which is the perceived increase of “love



marriages” (Chowdhry 2007) in both urban and rural settings. Marriage in this context, however, is emphatically not regarded as the outcome of love between two individuals; *love marriage* (always said, in my experience, in English, regardless of whether or not that is the language in which the conversation is taking place) is still regarded as potentially foolish and risky at best, and a serious threat to social order at worst (discussed below). Thus, my appeals to the clearly apparent love between the sex worker and her husband-customer alone could not establish a socially sanctioned marriage in this context.

Indeed, there are few, if any appeals that could legitimate the marriage of a prostitute in North India. It is often argued by scholars that “prostitute” and “wife” are understood as diametrically opposed categories<sup>37</sup>. Chowdhry (2007), in a study of love marriages in contemporary Haryana, supports this opposition, indicating that any woman who has lost her claim to wife status (through, perhaps, disavowal of a marriage not deemed appropriate by family and customary law as exercised by village *panchayats*, or councils) is open to being reduced to the status of a prostitute; a widow, “in popular perception [...] is in a position to take decisions about her sexual life, just like a prostitute” (2007:209). The dominant model of marriage described by Chowdhry, which conforms to that described above (arranged by family; caste endogamous but usually village exogamous; patrilocal), is about reproduction of the family and hence social order and not about individual desires, sexual or romantic. The sexual purity of the bride, as well as her subsequent behavior as a modest and respectable wife, is important in reproducing and guarding this order. As a result women and girls in these contexts are carefully guarded and their movements in

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<sup>37</sup> See Agrawal’s (2008) discussion of the very strict maintenance of this opposition in a *bediya* sex work community, in which the sons of sex worker households marry and their wives do not engage in sex work, but any daughters of the marriage eventually do.

public are relatively restricted. A sex worker, in contrast, can obviously make no claims to the sexual purity perceived to be necessary to become a wife, and the public mobility and public sexuality of the sex worker is generally regarded as a threat to the sort of social order that marriage maintains (Banerjee 2000; Mufti 2000).

The social order will not be reproduced through the marriages of prostitutes, because even if they are arranged and caste- endogamous between husband and wife, they will produce children whose status is questionable, given that the honor of the wife (and, by extension, her husband) is regularly breached through the nature of her work and the paternity of her children will be largely unknown. Thus, there is very limited social recognition for the marriage in which a wife is a prostitute, nor can any marriage legitimate her children in the eyes of those who uphold conservative, middle class standards of marriage.

Although Ajeet Singh and *Guria* are skeptical of marriage and its association with patriarchy more generally, they largely reiterate this larger set of Indian cultural assumptions about sex workers and marriage. And, of course, these assumptions transcend the social world of marriage and prostitution in North India. Although in some contexts it is difficult to distinguish sex work and dating (Bernstein 2007b; Cheng 2010), it is nonetheless the case that those unfamiliar with such contexts presume an empirically false, sharp distinction between women who marry, and women who engage in sex work. For example, the sociobiological economists Edlund and Korn (2002) have no compunction about hypothesizing the relatively high financial remuneration received by sex workers in general, as compared to other forms of low-status, female, and “unskilled” labor, as being compensation for their ruined status as potential wives (because it is assumed that wives

should be sexually pure) and the selling of their fertility on the open market, rather than in the marriage market. This example is not used in support of Edlund and Korn's hypothesis, but rather to show the relatively common-place but faulty assumption that sex workers cannot be wives. However, despite this seeming breach in the logic of marriage, marriage continues to be a salient feature of the lives of sex workers themselves. Within the social world of Shivdaspur, marriages *are* socially legitimated, even as they are not perhaps regarded as stable, or unequivocally desired by Shivdasपुरi women.

### **Shivdasपुरi Women's Position on Marriage**

Regardless of whether or not anyone wants to recognize or socially legitimate the marriages of sex workers, there is considerable evidence that sex workers *do* marry, or at the very least make appeals to married status. In addition to the established (and recognized, if not legitimated, by *Guria*) fact that women in Shivdasपुर marry, surveys of sex workers have found that 29% of sex workers in Ecuador are married, as are 20% of Mexican sex workers (Arunachalam and Shah 2008). In Andhra Pradesh, India, 45.5% of 5008 sex workers surveyed indicated that they were currently married, and 90.7% indicated that they were either currently married or had been married at some point in their lives, leaving only 9.3% reporting that they were not and never had been married (Dandona *et al* 2006).<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Sex workers surveyed by Dandona *et al* were between the ages of 16 and 64. Bhat and Halli (1999) report a never-married rate of 0.7% in 1991 for Indian women of an unspecified age range. While Indian sex-workers tend to not marry at a rate that is much higher than that of Indian women in general, it is also possible that sex workers who reported having never married to Dandona *et al* were in younger age ranges and would marry at some point in time. Additionally, because married status is self-reported, it is of course possible (and perhaps likely) that sex workers report having been married even if it

Published autobiographical narratives of the lives of Indian sex workers (Durbar 2006; Jameela 2008) describe them as women who marry. Nalini Jameela's account of her life mentions a series of romantic entanglements, one of which resulted in marriage and then widowhood, at which point she took up sex work as a means of supporting herself and her children; however, her account of marriage does not end there but continues through intermittent periods of marriage and sex work, which at times overlap. The three narratives provided by sex-worker activist organization Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee in issue 8 of the journal that they publish likewise provide accounts of women moving from marriage to sex work, and vice versa (DMSC 2006). In addition to marriage, long-term, fixed partnerships of a more informal nature appear to be common (Dutta 2010).

In addition to Shivdaspur, marriage was common in two other communities in Varanasi where sex work was a regular means of earning money. I was able to visit these communities occasionally through social workers who were working with them – one a community of migrant laborers who lived in the Varanasi Junction train station, and another a community of migrant workers and beggars living near Assi Ghat. In the train station in particular, all of the sex workers were married at the time of their first menstrual period to men also living in the train station. When I visited the train station with one social worker, I met many couples. I spent one afternoon talking to a man in his late 40s or early 50s, who was squatting outside the train station with his wife and two young daughters, the older of whom had started doing sex work recently (according to the social worker); he talked about their move from Patna, Bihar recently in search of work, and mentioned

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is not true – but what is unquestionable is that many sex workers present themselves as married, or as having been married.

repeatedly that now that he was an old man, his only goal was to arrange marriages for these two girls, after which he and his wife “could sit easily,” knowing that all was taken care of.

As was the case in this conversation, I often wondered at the continual resurgence of marriage and husbands as a topic of conversation with women and girls in Shivdaspur. Initially, naively following Manju’s advice that I not take statements referring to husbands seriously, I considered it a sort of appeal to normalcy and thereby request for respect, i.e., that in presenting themselves to me as married they presented themselves as women like any others in India (which, of course, they are). I also considered that it was a way of denying or refusing to discuss sex work, which many women did early on in my fieldwork. However, as the pretext to marriage continued well past the point at which women in Shivdaspur were denying that Shivdaspur was a red light area, it became clear that marriage was a salient feature of the lives of Shivdaspuris, regardless of whether or not those living outside the red light area acknowledged it or thought it important.

The young women of marriageable age with whom I spoke in Shivdaspur were of mixed opinion on the matter – a state of affairs common to many young women in India. On the one hand, impending marriage was an exciting thing to talk about, and on the other, they did not seem excited at the prospect of marrying. Time and again, these young women spoke with reticence about the fact that, once married, they would be expected to observe *purdah*, meaning that for the most part they would no longer leave the house, where they would constantly have to wash dishes and care for children; when they did leave the house, they would have to wear a heavy black *burqua*, of the sort that left only their face visible. Indeed, there was one such young woman, whose husband was from Shivdaspur but was

currently living in Bangalore where he was working as a cloth-dyer, who had gone to school through *Guria* and still came to many of the *Guria* functions (holiday celebrations and health lectures, mostly). She would arrive in her *burqua* and shed it once she was inside one of the *Guria* buildings. The other young women regarded her as lucky to still be able to come to these functions, explaining that they expected not to be able to do anything “fun” once they were, like her, married. Some women also expressed a desire to continue with their education, which would end once they got married; Anu, facing increasing pressure from her mother to marry (a suitable boy having been found in a village near Lakhania Deri Waterfalls, about 55km southeast of Varanasi), regularly feared for her plans to go to college and become a social worker, as she knew of no potential marriage partner who would appreciate her education or allow her to do social work once she was married.

The potential instability of marriage in Shivdaspur was occasionally discussed, as well. One day, I was talking to a group of Anu’s friends about weddings (they had, as usual, brought the topic up), when one of them said, sadly, that her marriage would not happen. Another girl jumped in to tease her, saying “your marriage has *happened!*” (“aapki shaadi *ho gyi!*”), and she explained that this was true, but that it hadn’t gone well – four years ago (when she was fourteen) she was married to a local boy, who stayed with her for four or five days after the wedding and then left for Bombay for work. She had never heard from him since, nor did he send her any money, and so she had moved back into her father’s household where she was perceived as a burden. Divorce was not an option, she said, and would do her no good even if it were, because she would not be able to find a second husband. This marriage had, in a sense, ruined her life: she was not currently accorded the status of wife in that she was not supported by her husband, and it had destroyed her

chances of making another marriage.

A few months after this conversation took place her husband suddenly returned from Bombay and announced that he would be taking her with him when he went back to Bombay, where he was employed as a furniture-maker. This caused considerable uproar among the young women of the community, who did not want her to leave Shivdaspur, and were wary of her husband's character and intentions. I never saw the young woman again, but her sister told me that after several days of tense discussion, it had been decided that she would move to her in-laws place in a village a few hours away. I asked why the young woman didn't want to go to Bombay, and her sister became evasive, explaining that of course she wanted to go to Bombay to be with her husband, but that she was afraid of the city and wanted to stay close to her natal family. The *sasural* (in-laws' place) was decided upon because of its relative proximity to Shivdaspur, but also because moving there would bestow upon the young woman clear status as a wife, and hence give her *izzat* (status, or respect). While it was sad that she was leaving Shivdaspur, this solution was regarded as the best that could be expected. Despite the critique of marriage as the end of fun and education, and the beginning of household labor, to be a wife was a source of honor; in other cases, such as the woman discussed above who was living with her customer-husband, they might also be sources of companionship.

Although marriage was discussed as though it were a given by many of the young women who came to the community spaces *Guria* has created in Shivdaspur, there was also some indication that not everyone in Shivdaspur would marry. First, there are Anu's assertions that, while nearly every woman living in Bhind Basti was married, not all of the women who lived in Shivdaspur Alley, where women openly solicit, marry – some are

married, she said, some are not, without any sense of what percentage were married or unmarried. Secondly, one of the young women made a small slip while I was talking to a group of them after we had finished playing Holi. I was sitting with a group of five-six young women, some of whom I knew quite well at that point, and one of whom I had only met once before – she was tall and very pretty, and clearly of marriageable age. From my fieldnotes:

[The young women] were teaching me lines of poetry, and laughing at my mispronunciation words with the retroflex “r” sound. And then they turn to asking me about marriage – “Yes, my marriage will be a love marriage,” I say (like the fact that I “eat pig,” this is a topic no one ever tires of); “Yes, it is OK that I am twenty-eight and unmarried, in America this happens.”

“And your marriages,” I ask?

“Arranged marriage,” says Maya (in English);

“But here, marriage [English word] doesn’t happen,” says Niku (the one I did not know well, in Hindi, except for the word “marriage”), “Only – [here she makes a gesture of applying sindur].”

Maya smacks her, hard, on the arm, says quickly and quietly (in Hindi): “*Shaadi hae. Hum shaadi karangae.*” (There is marriage. We will marry.) [Fieldnotes, 3 March 2010]

In this slip, Niku referenced the fact that (as others had already told me about the community), some of the women from Shivdaspur marry, and others are expected to take up sex work. Although it is possible that she was referring to some more informal form of marriage that involved only the application of *sindur*<sup>39</sup>, it seems considerably more likely to me that she was mimicking the cosmetic preparations of women getting ready to solicit,

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<sup>39</sup> Informal forms of marriage that do not require a full marriage ceremony are common in South Asia. Bennett (1983:71) describes two such forms of marriage in Nepal, practiced when a man takes a second wife or marries a woman who has been previously married, in which case the ceremony may be limited to simply bringing the woman into the house, having her place a garland around her husband’s neck, or changing her clothing. Lal (2005) notes the acceptance, in the context of Early Mughal India, of *mut’a*, or “temporary marriage,” which is contracted for a fixed period of time. Perhaps the application of *sindur* can be viewed in this light – more on this below.



nearly all of whom wore the cosmetic, which signifies wifehood, as they awaited customers.

What is additionally interesting here is the vehemence with which Maya rebuked Niku, as it was clear to me – then, and from the day I met her – that Maya wanted me, and other volunteers who came through *Guria's* community centers, to think well of both the children and of Shivdaspur, more generally. Her response also begs a number of questions, to which I do not have any hard and fast answers. Is marriage for these young women as much of a given as their conversations with me suggested? If so, do the women who marry work regularly as sex workers, or only occasionally, or (despite Ajeet's portrayal of the community and its men as "pimps by nature") not at all? Of the women who I saw regularly soliciting in Shivdaspur Alley, how many are, in fact, married? What qualifies as "marriage" in the context of Shivdaspur? I suspect that the situation on the ground is considerably more flexible than a rigid ideological opposition between prostitutes and wives can allow.

The respected Brahmanical ideal of the sort of stable, arranged marriage that allows for the reproduction of the family and the social order does not necessarily apply to the women of Shivdaspur, just as it would not apply in many other non-Sanskritized communities in India: firstly, because many of them are dalits, or very low-status Muslims; and secondly, because the presence of sex work in the community already pushes them so far past the pale of respectability that their marriages are often regarded with skepticism by outsiders. However, it is apparent that what we might call locally socially-legitimated marriage is important to the community itself – sons and daughters are married, sometimes to people who grew up in Shivdaspur, but also at times to people from surrounding villages, as was the case for a proposal of marriage that Anu received, and for the young woman whose husband returned from Mumbai and took her to his parents'

village, an important example since it is village exogamous.

As is the case in many *dalit* women's' renderings of marriage, it is possible that husbands come and go throughout one's life, lending social legitimacy to a woman when they are there, and taking it with them when they go. This was certainly the case for a "retired" sex worker with whom I spoke (she now worked as a kind of go-between for the younger workers) who had been married, she said, twice in her life but that both men eventually left her, indicating her poor fate in this life. One of the literal human casualties of *Guria's* activism, a pimp who killed himself due to legal pressures caused by the lawsuits that *Guria* brought against him, left behind a wife who was still working in 2010 as the Madam of the largest brothel in Shivdaspur Alley; Ajeet noted that this sort of marriage – between a *dalal* and a brother-keeper (usually a woman who had worked her way up through the brothel system over the years) gave "a good punch" to the business and so such partnerships were common. In contrast to elite and middle class skepticism regarding the validity of marriages in the red light area, it is important to recognize that outside of the rigidly-constructed Brahminical notion of marriage, there are more flexible unions – some for limited periods of time, some for business partnership, and some perhaps for the occasional "love marriage."

Early one morning, I saw a young man leave the largest brothel in the Alley, kissing a woman, who was dressed and ready for soliciting, and her baby, goodbye; he lingered with the woman and her child, tickling the baby to make it laugh, and as the man walked away the woman stood holding the baby up, dangling him for the man to see until he was out of sight. They were the very picture of a young couple, albeit considerably more liberal in their physical affections than I regularly saw in Varanasi. He was not going far – just to

settle down in a *paan* shop several doors down, and was clearly a local man. Now, the physical affection speaks nothing of a socially legitimate marriage in this context, but there is, again, nothing that *could* legitimate their relationship from elitist perspectives given that, as he settled into the *paan* shop, she settled onto a small wooden stool to await customers, a neatly applied line of bright red *sindur* in the part of her hair.

### ***Sindur, Marriage, and the Red Light Area as a Commodified Domestic Space***

Historian Ashwini Tambe (2006) argues that despite the tendencies of feminist theorists to locate sex workers and red light areas outside of the area of domesticity, brothels can and should be viewed as domestic spaces, and that the brothels of Bombay can potentially be re-imagined as familial units. Drawing primarily on official anti-trafficking reports from Bombay in the 1920s and 1930s, Tambe finds that brothel workers often used fictive kinship terms to refer to each other, and that one or more family members often served as entrée to sex work as a profession. She argues, further, that brothels should be understood not just as commercial spaces but also as domestic spaces, on the grounds that sex workers not only work but also live and raise families within these spaces. Finally, she compares her findings for the Bombay context with Louise White's (1990) account of Colonial Era Nairobi, in which sex workers sold not only sex acts but also "the comforts of home," including meals and bathing water, to migrant male workers who frequented their brothels.

Tambe began her research into the historical connections between brothels and domestic life after being surprised, while walking through a contemporary red light area in Bombay, to see sex workers soliciting in housecoats – long, cotton nightgowns that reveal

little, if anything, of the wearer's figure due to their very loose fit. Her surprise was a result of the fact that the housecoat is a domestic garment, worn in the house (i.e., private, rather than public space). She wondered, thus, "What possible appeal did the housecoat have for clients – other than signaling, obliquely, the night? By wearing housecoats in front of potential clients, were brothel workers signaling domesticity, even wifehood?" (2006:220). Sex workers in Shivdaspur also wore housecoats (locally called *maxis*), sometimes while soliciting, but more often while running daily errands in the alley or in the *basti*, just as women in the more middle-class neighborhood where I lived sometimes wore their *maxis* outside to small local shops, to pick up eggs or spice packets. Despite its occasional wearing in limited public contexts (i.e., only within the immediate neighborhood), the *maxi* is a private garment that is worn largely in the home, and as such Tambe's observation is apt.<sup>40</sup>

*Maxis* do not, however, index marital status. More strongly indicative of wifehood is the cosmetic *sindur*, a bright red powder that is worn in the parting of the hair by married Hindu women whose husbands are still alive. If Tambe was initially confused by the presence of the housecoat in a sex workers' choice of costume for solicitation, the regular, almost ubiquitous presence of *sindur* in the hair partings of women soliciting in Shivdaspur was equally confusing to me because of its strong association with the married status of the wearer. Because of its association with married (and hence, presumably, sexually active)

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<sup>40</sup> Apt as it is, it is also potentially making a mountain out of a molehill. Perhaps the woman could not be bothered to change into different clothing, and perhaps she has found that her customers do not particularly care what she is wearing when they encounter her; perhaps she is not even actively soliciting, but rather passively viewing the street. While her analysis of symbols (housecoat, prostitute) is appropriate, I also think it speaks more broadly to the ways in which sex workers are often viewed as being without home or household contexts, a fact that Tambe's broader argument goes on to illuminate.

Hindu women, and the ubiquity of married status among South Asian women, *sindur* can be viewed as part of the standard, or dominant, suite of cosmetics associated with womanhood in this region and as such as a potent beauty symbol. It is, however, *strongly* indicative of wifedom; despite its potency as a beauty symbol, it is not something that is casually worn by unmarried women. Just as it is of course very simple to wear a ring on the ring-finger of one's left hand to signal that one is married in many Western contexts, even if one is in fact single, there is nothing that would make it difficult for an Indian woman to wear *sindur* if she is unmarried, except that, like false marriage bands, it is generally not done.

What was striking to me, beyond the initial questions that it provoked regarding the marital status of sex workers, is the fact that the image of a married, Hindu woman is the one that sex workers wish to present *to their customers* as they solicit. Indeed, when I asked Anu about the women's wearing of *sindur*, she indicated that it was less likely to be indicative of a woman's marital status than of her scrupulous following of fashion and what was attractive to customers: "If they don't wear it, how will they find work?," she asked me, explaining that the *sindur* was part of their necessary costume as sex workers soliciting customers.

The wearing of *sindur* by sex workers in Shivdaspur can be interpreted in light of Anu's statements about cosmetic practices: in wearing *sindur* they are selling not just sex but an image of wifedom, a sort of commodified domesticity.<sup>41</sup> It also, perhaps, suggests

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<sup>41</sup> It might also suggest a sort of sexual fetishization of the wife, although this runs contrary to many of the psychological tropes regarding sexuality within marriage, in which it often seems that a husband's desire is directed at women *other* than his wife (*c.f.* Kakar 1990). However, the increased popularity of the notion of "companionate marriage" (SPELLING??Sreenivas 2008) and "love marriage" might reflect changing attitudes towards

that customers are less interested in hiring a prostitute than in hiring a (however temporary) wife. Although this will not be the case for all, or perhaps even a majority of customers, if we consider the varied, often informal and sometimes even literally temporary forms of marriage in the subcontinent, as well as the fact that red light areas are domestic spaces (Tambe 2006) in which temporary domesticity is also sold (c.f. White 1990), the wearing of *sindur* by sex workers does index the sale of a sort of domesticity. Finally, it suggests that, despite the fact that there are slightly more Muslims than Hindus living and working in Shivdaspur, it is to Hindu standards of beauty, femininity, and wifehood that women who solicit wearing *sindur* are appealing.

Ajeet's take on the wearing of *sindur* by women as they solicit is that it represents their desire to look attractive and be viewed and accepted as Indian women. He says:

The majority of them wear *sindur*. It is difficult to explain. My interpretation, from talking to them, is that wearing *sindur* is their idea of beautifying themselves. Because wearing the *bindi* and *sindur* are so synonymous with being an Indian woman [and with married status], and they want to look beautiful like they are any other Indian women, they wear them. This is only my interpretation. I could be wrong, but it is what I have come to understand over the years. When they are told to "be ready for business in the evening," they apply the *bindi* and *sindur* along with their other cosmetics. As I see it, it is just their idea of beautification. Don't misinterpret it as their being married. (Personal Interview, 18 May 2010)

He also argues that in some cases they wear *sindur* in order to appear as wives to their pimps:

They were the *bindi* and the *sindur* because it makes them look like wives to their pimps, because this gives them the emotional support and status of being

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the sexuality of wives, and an increasing desire to view wives as enjoyable sexual partners, which is how sex workers and courtesans have historically been viewed. As such, sex workers wearing *sindur* might be a sign that wives are more commonly accepted as objects of pleasurable sexuality. Unfortunately, at this time there is no historical data that describes when sex workers began wearing *sindur*, or whether or not their wearing it was common in the past.

married women. They sometimes refer to their pimps as husbands, or *mera admi* [my man]. They don't call him their *dalal* [pimp], they'd rather call him their *admi* [man], even though that *admi* beats her every day, and takes away all of her money. Still, they would rather call him their "man" than their "pimp." (Personal Interview, 18 May 2010)

He also, finally, notes that while the majority of the women in Shivdaspur are Muslim, they too wear *sindur*, which further indicates that here the powder is an abstract symbol of wifehood and beauty, given that for Muslim women it ought not to have any religious significance. Instead, it is a sign of their wanting to be viewed as women – beautiful women, with the support of a man, whether he is their husband, their *admi*, or their *dalal*. As such, the *sindur* it is an appeal to be recognized as a woman with domestic legitimacy.

### **Marriage Beyond the Red Light Area**

Despite the seemingly sharp ideological distinction drawn between sex workers and socially legitimated wives, marriage itself is a flexible and fluid institution in practice, as is sex work. Indeed, in other times and contexts, such sharp distinctions between wives and prostitutes have not been and are not drawn. Sociologist Elizabeth Bernstein describes the forms that sexual commerce has taken in different economies, noting the different implications that engaging in sexual commerce has had on the identities and private lives of sex workers:

What historians typically refer to as 'premodern' forms of sexual commerce were self-organized, occasional exchanges in which women traded sexual favors during limited periods of hardship. Premodern<sup>42</sup> prostitution was

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<sup>42</sup> Bernstein notes that "The terms *modern* and *premodern* facilitate the comprehension of social realities that are in fact much messier than this simple categorization permits. Prototypically premodern forms of sexual barter never disappeared entirely but exist to this day as the dominant mode of commercial sexual exchange in many impoverished communities throughout the world, and in the sex-for-drugs barter economy of the inner

small in scale, frequently premised on barter, and generally took place within the participants' own homes and communities. Only with the onset of modern-industrial capitalism did large numbers of women find themselves sequestered in a space that was physically and socially separate [i.e., the red light district], thereby affixing them with the permanently stigmatizing identity of 'prostitute' (2007b:188).

Thus, outside of "modern," industrial forms of prostitution, women who engage in sexual commerce would not be so easily identifiable as such, and may therefore not be so readily separable from categories of women who could be considered more marriageable than are sex workers who operate in more visible contexts, such as red light areas like Shivdaspur. Bernstein argues (2007a; 2007b) that "modern" forms of sex work associated with industrial economies helped to produce the identity "prostitute," and with it the notion of sexual commerce as "work," necessitating a sharp separation of sex workers' professional and private selves in order to prevent selling intimacy or their "self":

In modern prostitution, what was typically sold and bought was an expedient and emotionally contained exchange of cash for sexual release. To survive in the trade, prostitutes learned to develop strategies to distance themselves from their labor, to treat their commercial sexual activity as work (2007b:191)

Just as modern-industrial economies encourage that configuration, Bernstein argues that the post-industrial economies of late, globalized capitalism are encouraging commoditization of intimacy and hence a blurring of precisely that which is separated out in "modern" forms of sexual commerce. Indeed, the increasing commodification of intimacy associated with domestic and reproductive labor in the contemporary capitalist period has been documented by Constable (2009). While intimacy has *never* been entirely absent from sexual commerce, demand is increasing for forms of sex work that mimic

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city. The terms, nevertheless, capture something important in terms of large-scale social change" (2007b:188).



intimate relationships without requiring the continued commitment and responsibility that those relationships entail. Citing studies from the customers' point of view that indicate that Johns are often not interested only in purely transactional sexual encounters, but also in intimacy and romantic entanglement with sex workers, and noting that the increasing time-demands of employment in post-industrial economies make "traditional" romantic relationships difficult to maintain, Bernstein argues that

One of the most sought-after features in the prostitution encounter has thus become the "girlfriend experience," or GFE. Ads for escorts in print media and online now routinely feature this in their advertisements, and there are entire Web pages where people who specialize in this service can advertise. Here is a description of what a GFE session might consist of, an account that was posted to an Internet chat forum by one sexual client: 'A typical non-GFE session with an escort includes one or more of the basic acts required for the customer to reach a climax at least one time, and little else. A GFE type session, on the other hand, might proceed much more like a non-paid encounter between two lovers' (2007a:126).

As Bernstein's study of sexual commerce in the West indicates, intimacy and prostitution are not inherently at odds, despite the common suspicion that they are.

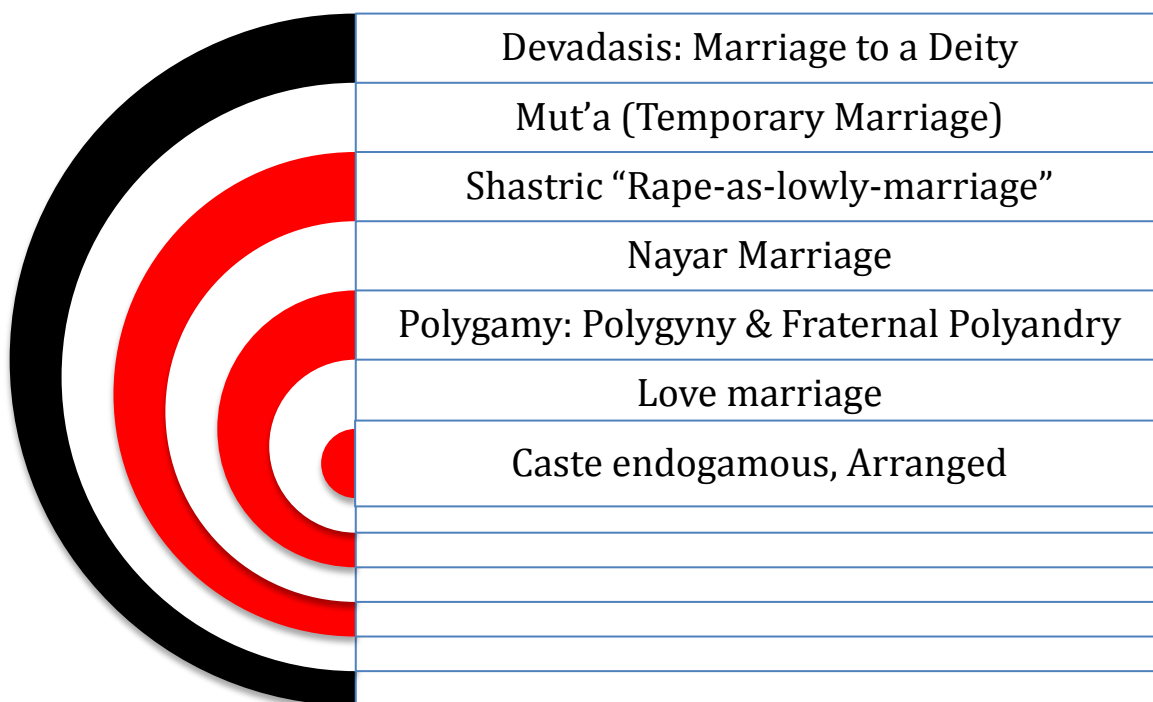
While Bernstein's one-to-one linkage of the varying conceptualizations of intimacy and sex work with economic systems is illuminating, as she herself notes (2007b:188), her linkage of different types of sexual commerce with different economic systems is more simplistic than the reality on the ground can accommodate. What is useful for the question of why the marriages of sex workers in India are rejected (or scoffed at) by those outside their communities is the possibility for the deep entanglement of intimacy with work in sexual commerce. While intimacy has not historically been considered an important factor in the arrangement of marriages in South Asia, Sreenivas (2008) argues that the conjugal relationship between husband and wife has, since the Colonial period, become an increasingly important consideration in familial and household life and hence in

considerations of marriage, even as the extended family still figures prominently in marriages. There is, thus, a slippage between the idealized notion of the arranged, caste-endogamous marriage that is intended to preserve and replicate the extended family and social order, and the intimate grounds on which this preservation and replication is built: the conjugal pair. In forming conjugal pairs, which sex workers undoubtedly *do* (as do their daughters and sons), they slip into a component of contemporary South Asian marriage. It is then that such unions encounter, and are rejected by, larger and more orthodox and elite conceptualizations of marriage.

As has been shown, some sex workers in Shivdaspur do marry, and many more appeal to married status regularly – verbally, though their accounts of their lives, in calling their *dalal* their “man” or “husband” instead of their pimp; visually, in the application of *sindur* before awaiting clients. They do this in spite of the widespread notion that they cannot marry, that their marriages will be illegitimate, and that, as previously noted, they are conceptualized (at least in the Indian context), as antithetical to the wife. I will close this chapter with an exploration of this assumed antithesis, and finally a rethinking of it at the ideological or “cultural” level, while highlighting the discrepancy between these ideologies of proper marriage and the role of sex workers, and the realities routinely encountered by individual women in Varanasi.

Many disparate sorts of relationships have been called “marriage” at varying times and places in South Asia, making the institution much more fluid than is commonly thought. I conceptualize these relationships as a sort of target, concentric circles radiating outwards from the “bull’s-eye” of the arranged, caste-endogamous union [See Figure 1],

which is, without doubt, the most powerful marriage ideal.



**Figure 10: The South Asian Marriage "Target"**

This most standard, orthodox form of marriage is not all that exists. Moving outside of the initial, aimed-for circle, "love marriage" is considered dangerous, potentially, and foolish, but it can still in some cases be reconciled with orthodox marriage. Provided the boy and girl who fall in love are of roughly the same caste, the marriage can even be made to appear to be arranged, and conventionally legitimated, as is the case for several young couples I knew of in Varanasi. One layer out from one-man-and-one-woman, is polygyny within Muslim, Hindu and Adivasi communities; Muslim men are still legally allowed to marry more than one woman, although the laws are now different for Hindus. Beyond polygyny is fraternal polyandry, in which brothers marry the same woman in order (it is often said) to control population and keep parcels of family land intact– a marriage practice

on the decline, but accepted in Nepal (Goldstein 1987) and “publicly ridiculed and abhorred” but yet sometimes quietly practiced by Hindus living in the Indian Himalayas (Berreman 1972:171). Moving farther still from the center, and outside of the realm of patriline and patrilocality is the marriage system historically practiced by Nayars in Central Kerala: a man and woman were married, after which the woman could take up sexual relations within any man of her caste grouping that she pleased, regardless of whether or not he was her “husband”; children became part of the mothers’ matriline; the husband had no responsibilities to the wife after the initial four days of marriage, during which time they cohabitated, and the wife’s only responsibility to her husband was that she, and all of her children, would observe death-pollution for him after his demise (Gough 1959).

The *Shastras*, Hindu religious texts (in this case, specifically, the *Laws of Manu*, the *Artha-shastra*, and the *Kama-sutra*) list as many as eight forms of marriage. Reproduced in the order in which they are ranked in *Manu*, they are:

- “(1) A man gives his daughter to a good man he has summoned.
- (2) He gives her, in the course of a sacrifice, to the officiating priest.
- (3) He gives her after receiving from the bridegroom a cow and a bull.
- (4) He gives her by saying, ‘May the two of you fulfill your dharma together.’
- (5) A man takes the girl because he wants her and gives as much wealth as he can to her relatives and to the girl herself.
- (6) The girl and her lover join in sexual union, out of desire.
- (7) A man forcibly carries off a girl out of her house, screaming and weeping, after he has killed, wounded, and broken.
- (8) The lowest and most evil of marriages takes place when a man secretly has sex with a girl who is asleep, drunk, or out of her mind.” (*Manu* 3.20.21-36, quoted from Doniger 2009)

While the last two are lowly and despicable forms of marriage, they are *recognized* as forms of marriage, even if they are not necessarily condoned:

The inclusion of rape in all three lists might be taken as evidence that a wide divergence of customs was actually tolerated in India at that time, although [...] Vatsyayana [the credited author of the *Kama-sutra*] explicitly state[s] the

fact that something is mentioned in a text is not proof that people should (or do) actually do it. That is, where Manu tells you not to do it and then how to do it, the *Kama-sutra* tells you how to do it and then not to do it. But both instances are evidence that the *shastras* acknowledge the *validity, if not the virtue*, of practices they do not like. (Doniger 2009:331, emphasis added).

In a very specific, historical context, then, rape can be understood as marriage, albeit an undesirable one.

On the Muslim side of the historical- outlier-forms-of-marriage coin, there is *mut'a*, or temporary marriage. Emperor Akbar (1542-1605) is said to have been troubled by how many wives he was allowed to have by law. While the consensus of Shaykhs and lawyers alike seemed to be that he could have only the four wives allowed by the Quran, it was pointed out to Akbar that “by *mut'a* a man might marry any number of wives he pleased,” *mut'a* being “temporary marriage” for “pleasure,” a controversial but, in some Muslim legal circles – and certainly as they applied to Akbar – legitimate form of marriage (Lal 2005:172-173). Oldenberg (1990) notes that dancing girls or courtesans plying their trade in the courts of the kingdom of Oudh were all connected to the *nawab* (prince) through *mut'a* marriages, thus according them legitimate connections with the dynasty. Here we have a form of marriage that incorporates women whom we would now understand as engaged in sexual commerce, extending social legitimacy and contractual security to the women involved in it. *Mut'a* has been practiced in contemporary Iran (Haeri 1992), exciting controversy because the securities it offers are only temporary, allowing it to be used to eliminate religious objection to mens' relationships with sex workers.

Moving still farther out are the *devadasis* -- literally, “slaves to god -- or *nityasumagali* -- “ever-auspicious woman” (Kersenboom-Story 1987), who are dedicated to temples and considered to be married to the deity who resides therein. Because the courts that

supported the temples historically patronized them, *devadasis* were in some cases relatively high status courtesans (c.f. Marglin 1985), and have always been associated with sex work of various degrees of respectability. Although dedication of women as *devadasis* is now illegal, it is still practiced (Orchard 2007), if sometimes reviled (Pande 2008). *Devadasis* are “ever-auspicious” as women because, being married to a deity who unlike a man cannot die they are incapable of entering into the inauspicious state of widowhood.

The *devadasi*, however, is on the far, far fringe of a rather expansive list of socially legitimated relationships that have, in various times and places in South Asia, been called “marriage”; barring the association of the *devadasi* with sex work, though, the idea of a woman married to a deity would not be unthinkable in the context of South Asian women’s religious practices (Khandelwal, Hausner and Gold 2007). Indeed, historically these marriages, and *devadasis* themselves, were socially legitimate. Contemporarily, however, the *devadasi* tradition is conflated with prostitution, and as such most contemporary Indians would not extend legitimacy to this sort of marriage because of the presence of a “prostitute” in the union. Regardless of *devadasis* conceptualization of themselves as married to deities, the *devadasis* system is currently most often understood as a form of gender-based exploitation, and as a religious cloak for prostitution (Orchard 2007; Soneji 2012).

Although these forms of marriage are drawn from an admittedly wide range of South Asian communities over a wide swath of time, they are all in some contexts socially, religiously and/or legally legitimated. The forms of marriage discussed above that involved sex workers – i.e., the *devadasi* and *tawa’if* traditions – are not currently acknowledged, but they are accepted as socially valid forms of marriage historically: no one

denies that these traditions were once valid forms of marriage. Given this remarkably varied array of forms of marriage understood as legitimate, some of which did include courtesans who exchanged sex for payment, even if obliquely, why is it that contemporary, brothel-based sex workers are denied marriage, in ideology if not in practice?

One conventional answer to this question is that her children cannot be assumed to be legitimate because she has sex with multiple partners. Additionally, the prostitute is understood as the binary opposite of the wife because of the assumed sexual purity of women who are considered marriageable. Because she has had multiple sexual partners she is considered impure and she is thus a threat to the “social order” that is maintained by arranged marriage between a man and a sexually pure woman. Within a set of cultural logics in which wives and “marriageable women” are pure, nearly to the point of being desexualized (Bennett 1983; Kakar 1990), the prostitute, sex worker, or mistress (*rakhel*, in Hindi) is not only the antithesis of the wife but also the sexualized compliment to the desexualized wife. Beyond being the class of women to whom sexuality is attributed, I have heard it argued by my educated, middle-class Indian interlocuters that the sex worker—by sacrificing her own honor, purity, and marriageability—makes it possible for other women to *maintain* their honor and purity, and thereby find a husband. This argument is based on the notion that male sexuality is essentially uncontrollable, or is somehow of a nature that it is beyond the ability of most men to control, such that exposure to women leads inexorably to desire, and action upon that desire. This is, essentially, the logic of *purdah* (c.f. de Souza 2004), whether practiced by keeping women in the private sphere or demanding high standards of modest dress for women in public, such as the *burqua* that the young women of Shivdaspur dreaded donning. This argument takes this logic one step

further, though, in the assumption that the maintenance of pure, honorable women requires a class of women with whom this uncontrollable male sexuality must be expressed. The sex worker, then, protects the purity of women who are *not* sex workers, by providing an outlet for male sexuality.

This is not an India-specific argument. It appears that this was a common conceptualization of the role of prostitutes in Medieval France (Rossiaud 1988), in which wives and daughters were seen as protected from the sexuality of men by the presence of brothels as a place where sexual urges could be satisfied without resort to rape, or affairs with another man's wife. During the Allied Occupation of Japan, US and Japanese government officials cooperated to create "Recreation and Amusement Associations" – essentially, licensed brothels that would prevent occupying soldiers from harming the female population of Japan at large. A Tokyo Metropolitan Police official argued that the Japanese "fear[ed] the Americans [would] molest our women—our wives and daughters and sisters. We need[ed] a shock absorber" (Takamae and Rickets 2003:68). Additionally, this is a contemporaneous argument made in the South Asian context; Nicholas Kristoff and Sheryl WuDunn (2009), in their investigations of sex trafficking, encountered a Nepalese border official who argued that trafficking from Nepal would be impossible to stop because young Indian men need to be able to visit prostitutes in order to protect the chastity of young Indian women at large.

In August of 2008, as I was conducting preliminary research on *Guria* and Shivdaspur, I came home to my hotel room one night and clicked on the TV, hoping to find some silly movie to watch after a long day of fieldwork. Flipping through the channels, I



instead found a round-table discussion being broadcast on NDTV<sup>43</sup>, a 24-hour news channel, in which a group of activists, academics, and lawyers were debating the merits of legalizing prostitution, in the context of a debate on a proposed update to the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act which would have completely decriminalized the actions of sex workers, but criminalized the actions of their customers. (The proposed update to the law eventually failed.) The discussion was well under way, and long past the introduction of the participants, but in the midst of broad arguments for and against sex work and the forms it might take, one woman made a particularly impassioned argument that not only should the entire business be decriminalized, but that Indian women should celebrate sex workers as national heroines, because without them all women would be subject to increased incidence of rape and harassment; sex workers should be thanked, she argued, for their sacrifice on the part of other women. The debate quickly moved on, but no one bothered to refute the logic.

To the extent that the red light area can be understood as a sort of safety valve whose presence allows for the purity of women outside its boundaries, the sex worker is a vital part of the *maintenance* of the system of social order proscribed by arranged, caste-endogamous marriage, rather than a threat to it. The sex worker is not so much the *opposite* of a wife, but instead the ideological compliment to her, in a system that demands the purity of wives, sisters and daughters. It is a subtle distinction, but one that seems to me to be vital, as it more adequately explains the vociferousness of the denial of the marriages of prostitutes. The sex worker *herself* is not a threat to marriage, but the *married*

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<sup>43</sup> Although I do not have full citation information for this debate, my notes indicate that it aired on NDTV on the evening of August 3<sup>rd</sup>, and featured journalist Shohini Ghosh as one of the commentators.

sex worker *is* a threat to the notion that wives are pure; the two, ideologically, cannot occupy the same role even though, in practice, they do.

Likewise, couching sex work in narratives of marriage or family makes the exchange of sexual services for money slippery and hard to see. To return to the example of the married sex-worker and her loving customer-husband, with whom she had been living for 17 years, Ajeet argued that one must not be fooled by the fact that they are committed, or in love, because she is still working as a prostitute. Similarly, one should not think that the Shivdasपुरi girls whose marriages have been arranged and supported by *Guria Sansthan* are safe from becoming sex workers, because they are not. The legal documents regarding trafficking investigated by Tambe (2006) evade discussion of prostitution by describing brothels as households; likewise, the legal statements of women in prostitution supplied to me by *Guria*, which had been collected as evidence for the anti-trafficking suits being brought against Shivdasपुरi pimps and brothel keepers, are sometimes vague on precisely the same points, referring to adoption, familial life, and education that has been provided by brothel keepers. Ajeet Singh notes, with frustration, the difficulties that portrayals of brothel-based relationships as familial ones cause in prosecuting anti-trafficking cases. He says:

In many cases, after they have been removed from brothels, girls say something like “But I want to go back there [to the brothel]! I did not know that she is a brothel keeper, she is my *mausi* [aunt],” or something of that nature. But, if you do a DNA test, you will find that they are not actually related. The police do not understand the complexity of these situations, and they don’t have time to look into it more deeply, so they will say “Oh, the girl says that this woman is her aunt, why can’t we send the girl back to her?” So, it [claims to kinship] isn’t that straight. [Personal Interview, 24 February 2010]

Certainly, this argument is true – one cannot take statements of kinship at face value. But

why would a kinship relationship negate a charge of pimping an underage girl?

Many of the wives that I spoke to, outside of the context of Shivdaspur, were interested in what I was seeing in Shivdaspur. One reason was a sort of prurient fascination—didn't I find that "those women" were unkind, and unpleasant to talk to? Wasn't I afraid of them? But another reason, articulated by women with whom I had longer-standing relationships and some rapport, was a very deep sense of empathy for their vulnerability. One woman, a Hindi tutor with whom I studied in Varanasi in 2008, felt that the shame heaped upon sex workers was unjust, as surely their work was done from "compulsion" or "helplessness." She had a fatalistic attitude towards sex work: on the one hand, it was unthinkable that she would ever engage in it, and on the other, she said that she was always aware that if she were somehow to suddenly lose the support of her husband and in-laws, as well as her father and brothers, she "did not know what would happen." One young woman I knew, who had made a scandalous love-marriage that had turned out well, after a very tumultuous initial period involving clandestine escape from her father's house and elopement to Mumbai, was acutely aware of the fact that, had her husband not been a kind man who genuinely loved her, from a good family that was happy to accept her without dowry, she could easily have been abandoned by both him and her father at any moment once she left her natal home.

While at the same time that there was much shock and dismay at the idea of prostitutes having husbands, or soliciting while wearing *sindur*, among the women in the Brahmanical household in which I lived, at other times the grandmother in the household would ask me to find out small pieces of very practical information about sex workers: What name did they put down for the father of their children when enrolling them in

school? How did they maintain a household without a man? The day-to-day practicalities of running a household without a man's name attached to it seemed insurmountable to her.

Thus, while acknowledging the ways in which narratives of family can be cynically twisted to attempt to hide the presence of a sex worker, a pimp, or both in any given relationship between individuals in Shivdaspur, it must also be acknowledged that such relationships do clearly exist, for such practical purposes as school enrollments, and for the security—however tenuous—of there being someone to whom you can refer to as “my husband” or “my man,” even if he is also your *dalal*. Despite their location outside of the sphere of the married woman, sex workers are involved in, subscribe to, and support the same set of cultural logics regarding gender, marriage, and womanhood as their counterparts outside the red light area. It is not as though once one has crossed some imaginary line in the dusty road leading into Shivdaspur, *sindur* disappears and one enters a world of Indian women without the need and desire for men who can provide social, emotional, and financial support. It is the case, however, that they can be denied that support; but then, in practice if not in theory, so can wives who are not sex workers.

CHAPTER 5  
“IF WE CALL THEM PROSTITUTES, THEN THEY WILL FEEL BAD”: THE COURTESAN IN SEX  
WORKER ACTIVISM

On a balmy evening in November of 2009, I stood with Ajeet Singh on the banks of the Ganges, helping to emcee that evening’s performance of Guria’s annual concert series, “Pearls of Love,” which bears the unwieldy subtitle “The Concert of the Marginalized Artists Against Human Trafficking.” At this point, I had been in Varanasi doing participant observation with *Guria* for three months, and I had been watching the concert from the sidelines for several evenings. In between performances by women who sang mostly in the *thumri*<sup>44</sup>, *ghazal*<sup>45</sup>, and *sher*<sup>46</sup> idioms, Ajeet would enthusiastically explain, in Hindi, that these “marginalized artists” were singing at this concert to raise awareness of the crime of human trafficking, the second-largest crime in the world, and something that we must work to eradicate. In a seeming non-sequitur, he would then proclaim that we must help preserve the art forms of these performers, so that India does not lose its folk musical traditions, at a time when true music such as this is vanishing from the world. He would then hand the microphone to me, and I would do my best to match his tone and wording in English; although he speaks fluent English, he thought the foreign tourists in the audience

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<sup>44</sup> *Thumri* is “the least constrained form of classical music, typically used to finish a performance. Originally a romantic vocal genre, it is now also performed by instrumentalists” (Neuman 1990:276). Also sometimes called a semi-classical or light-classical South Asian genre, it was associated with the courtesans of the Lucknawi court in the 1800s, and has since come to be associated with the Benarsi *gharana* (house, or school, of music).

<sup>45</sup> *Ghazal* is “a [form of] light classical song based on Urdu poetic forms of the same name” (Neuman 1990: 272). *Ghazals* tend to focus, lyrically, on romantic love and the pain and suffering that it causes.

<sup>46</sup> *Sher* refers to Urdu poetry, written as couplets. While *ghazals* are a type of *sher*, *sher* does not focus exclusively on love. Some of the *sher* performed at “Pearls of Love,” for example, were about social justice and hunger, or the parent-child relationship.

might have difficulty understanding his accent. The artists, for their part, seemed patiently to wait for us to stop speaking: they simply wanted to perform, which they did with great vigor and excitement.

Having already seen many of the performers on previous evenings, I turned my attention away from the concert itself and began to ask Ajeet questions about the concert as the women sang. Quite frankly, I was confused. This concert as a site of activism was what initially piqued my interest in the NGO. My understanding was that the concert was founded in the late 1990s to promote the considerable artistic talents of women in prostitution, to show the Indian public that these women were more than “just sex workers” and thereby to increase respect for them by expanding public understanding of what women who are sex workers do, beyond exchanging sexual services for money. And yet the concert, as I observed, carefully and *explicitly* made no mention that the talented performers were sex workers. How, then, did this improve public perception of sex workers?

Ajeet explained this in terms of pragmatics: Yes, that was the point of the concert, and he used to make mention of the women’s identity, but identification of the women as sex workers often resulted in heckling on the part of the audience. To avoid heckling, he moved the concert from the hotels and auditoriums that had previously served as its venues to a rented boat that floats on the river, thereby curtailing the heckling. However, he then had to contend with *Hindutva*<sup>47</sup>-based public outrage over sex workers performing

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<sup>47</sup> *Hindutva*, or “Hinduness,” refers to Hindi Nationalism, and the Hindu Nationalist movement’s attempts to protect Hindu culture and political supremacy in India. The Ganges being sacred within the Hindu tradition and sex workers being deemed impure, sex workers performing on the Ganges is interpreted by some Hindus as an affront to the religion.

on the sacred Durba, and in close proximity to Varanasi's most prominent Hindu temple, the *Kashi Vishwanath Mandir*. Beyond these considerations, though, there was something more important: "If we say that they are prostitutes, then they will feel bad," a sentiment that makes considerable sense (i.e., the women do not want to assume a stigmatized identity) but obliterates the notion of making "sex worker" a respected social category. Thus, excepting the references to "human trafficking," the identity of the performers and the nature of Guria's work was unmentioned during "Pearls of Love," which afforded the courtesans a much-welcomed opportunity to perform without stigma, as other classical musicians do; but in doing so, the concert did not improve perception of sex workers.

Despite Guria's reluctance to confuse courtesans with sex workers, the courtesan has played an important role in the NGO's activism. Prior to engaging in "rescue work," Guria's engagement with courtesans and the Pearls of Love concert series was perhaps the most visible facet of its activism, judging from the amount of press coverage it received. The concert, and Guria's work with *tawa'ifs* (courtesans), has additionally garnered academic attention (Maciszewski 2007). Ethnomusicologist Amelia Maciszewski writes that Guria

is dedicated to enabling members of various clans and castes of *tawa'if* (as well as prostitutes) to reclaim their liminality as artists, once acknowledged by patrons of India's traditional arts for their artistic contributions. This liminality enabled them to traverse social boundaries and enter into mainstream, if not elite, performance spaces, a power all but lost to this community during the twentieth century (2007:121).

The concert series Pearls of Love works actively towards the goal of helping courtesans reclaim their liminality by bringing courtesans out of the red light area and into the mainstream:

On these festival stages participants find liminal spaces that provide

opportunities for them to transcend their low socioeconomic status and perform as 'legitimate' artists hired for their creative skill (and not their sexual availability). Here the women present the best of their repertoire as they strive to make their music and dance both acceptable to the mainstream and, ultimately, commercially viable (Maciszewski 2007:122).

However, in providing a showcase for the artistic merits of sex workers as "marginalized artists," the concert highlights their identity as artists and ignores their identity as sex workers, a position with which the *tawa'if* who perform in Pearls of Love are clearly comfortable, but which I argue serves to further marginalize sex workers as a whole, even as it elevates courtesans. Thus, in this chapter, I describe the contemporary scholarly and popular understandings of who the *tawa'if* is, and how she relates to contemporary scholarly and popular understandings of the sex worker. I argue that the *tawa'if* is defined in scholarly, and to some extent popular, discourses about sex work as an acceptable and culturally valued form of sex work, whereas the contemporary sex worker (or prostitute) is defined as unacceptable and abandoned by elitist notions of cultural value. The *tawa'if* is thus a useful rallying point for Guria's assertions that it is not opposed to sex work *per se*, but rather only as it is currently practiced.

In her seminal article, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow," Veena Talwar Oldenburg (1990) argues that the courtesan, or *tawa'if*, households of Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh, embody resistance to dominant gender norms in India through the day-to-day ways in which their residents live their lives. Drawing on both historical data and ethnographic interviews with *tawa'ifs*, Oldenburg reveals how the matriarchal, and sometimes Sapphic, nature of these communities allows the women living in them to be "independent and consciously involved in the covert subversion of the male-



dominated world” (1990:2). Although she notes that kidnapping and what we might term trafficking (having been sold by their parents in order to pay off debts) account for the entrance of some into *tawa’if* households, the majority of the thirty women that she interviewed became *tawa’if* by choice, following some sort of disruption to their lives as respectable wives and daughters. Widowhood, abuse, rape, unfaithful husbands, and dissatisfaction with other forms of low-wage work are cited as their reasons for leaving the world of female respectability. They were “refugees from the *sharif*, or respectable world” (1990:6).

The article celebrates the agency and independence of women who have decided to live a lifestyle in which they are not dependent on men, and provides a useful counterpoint or counter-interpretation to what, historically, had been a considerably more negative image of the *tawa’if*. While in pre-colonial India courtesans were afforded more educational and social freedom than other women, but were considered morally suspect, and in the 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century, courtesans were regarded as tragic figures revealing the indifference of (masculine) Indian society to the plight of women, the courtesan currently stands as a nostalgic figure that represents the lack and depravity of the lives of contemporary sex workers. Oldenburg’s celebratory account of the courtesans of Lucknow has been followed and complemented by multiple accounts, scholarly, journalistic, and activist that likewise commemorate and lament the loss of the *tawa’if* in Indian culture. These written accounts occur in conjunction with a more favorable (and likewise often romantic) impression of courtesans than of contemporary sex workers. Because the courtesan is a socially acceptable type of sex worker, associated with a generalized nostalgia for India’s past, the figure of the courtesan is potentially useful sex in worker

activism. The courtesan is historical proof that sex workers *can* be more socially accepted than they are today, or at least not quite so reviled, and therefore they are proof that sex workers could, in theory, be less marginalized than they are today. The overlap between sex worker and courtesan communities could thus help to ease public scorn for sex workers by holding the courtesan up as a sort of “model sex worker.”

However, historical courtesans and contemporary sex workers are constructed as diametrically opposed rather than points on a continuum by Indian media, contemporary scholarship, and the activists associated with Guria. Put plainly, if the *tawa'if* lived/lives a lifestyle of resistance, the sex worker lives a life of subjugation, stigma and slavery, at least in many of the dominant representations (and certainly in *Guria's* representations of the subjects of their activism in Shivdaspur). The meanings attributed to courtesans and to sex workers/women in prostitution are constituted in diametric relationship to one another, even as historically and contemporarily *tawa'if* and sex workers – as identities, as communities, and as ideas – are in fact complexly intertwined. Because neither concept is historically static, the meanings currently attributed to each identity are a sort of battleground for how women who exchange sex and sexualized services for money are conceptualized and subsequently treated.

### **Who is the *tawa'if*?**

The Hindi/Urdu word *tawa'if* is translated into English as “courtesan” (Oldenburg 1990; Maciszewski 2006; Qureshi 2006; Pinch 2004; Spear and Maduri 2004), in contrast to words that have been translated as “prostitute,” and are generally now rendered in English as “sex worker”: *veshya*, *randi*, or *dhandewali aurat* (literally, “working woman”).

The English word “courtesan” is slightly less laden, but of course not disconnected from prostitution or sex work entirely. Rather, it refers to “the social phenomenon whereby women engage in relatively exclusive exchanges of artistic graces, elevated conversation, and sexual favors with male patrons” (Gordon and Feldman 2006:5). Courtesans engage in the exchange of sexual favors for money, but the clarity of these transactions is obfuscated by the relatively high social status of both the courtesan and her clients, as well as the fact that courtesans also provide artistic and social services as singers, dancers, poets, and hostesses. Although courtesanry is a cross-cultural and trans-historic phenomenon, I have found that it is easiest to convey the concept of the *tawa’if* to those not familiar with the term by referring to the Japanese *geisha*, which seems to communicate with a minimum of confusion the notion of a woman who is highly educated, trained in an artistic skill, and who exchanges sexual services for money in an indirect way, and who is thus not relegated to the low-status of “prostitute.”

*Tawa’if* is an Urdu term for such a woman, generally referring to women who were affiliated with Mughal Courts, although courtesanry is associated with Hindu courts as well, and courtesanry as a tradition in India long predates Mughal rule of India (*c.f.* Chandra 1973); Sanskrit and Hindi synonyms for the Urdu *tawa’if* include *ganika* and *bai-ji*<sup>48</sup>. Prior to Mughal rule in India, courtesans were found in Hindu, Buddhist and Jain courts, and were divided into secular courtesans and *devadasis*, or courtesans who additionally served religious functions in Hindu temples. Although Post argues that “for many generations, [*devadasis*] danced and sang only in conjunction with religious functions of a specific Hindu temple to which they were attached” (1987:99), most other accounts of *devadasi* activities

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<sup>48</sup> Note that the term denoting “courtesan” is *bai*, whereas the *-ji* attached to the word is an honorific term of respect.

describe them as performing in the secular context of the royal court, as well as engaging in patronage-based sexual relationships with members of the court (Marglin 1985; Kersenboom-Story 1987; Srinivasan 2006). Secular courtesans, or *ganika*, are generally described as “keepers of culture” (Srinivasan 2006:162) in pre-colonial India, as well as woman of considerable learning, artistic skill, and freedom relative to other South Indian women in these time periods (Chandra 1973). Both the *Artashastra*, a text dating to the second century AD which describes political organization and the running of the Indian polity, and the later *Kamasutra*, which dates to the fourth or fifth century AD and describes how to conduct amorous relationships, focus considerably on the place of the *ganika* in their respective topics. In the *Artashastra*, the role of the courtesan was to stimulate the minds and imaginations of others and to provide erudite entertainment, a role that the text encourages the State to promote and financially support. The *Kamasutra* describes the remarkable array of skills that courtesans are expected to master. Roughly contemporaneous works of drama from the first few centuries AD feature courtesans speaking in Sanskrit, a sign of their considerable education in relation to nearly all other characters, who speak in dialect (Srinivasan 2006:162-164).

While their learning and skill is celebrated and admired, their comparative freedom placed them at the apex of a hierarchy of morally suspect women associated with what we now term sex work:

Were all courtesans in India cultivated? Of course not. There were courtesans and prostitutes, as Abbe Dubois noted, and throughout Indian history specific Sanskrit terms were used to highlight distinctions between them. The exceptionally civilized public woman, proficient in arts and endowed with winsome qualities, is called a *ganika*. A *vesya*, or specifically a woman called a *rupajiva*, is a prostitute ranked below the *ganika*, whose artistic talents she does not possess. A very low-grade prostitute (a “whore”) is a *pumscali*, and a prostitute who is a slave is a *dasi*, such as a *kumbhadasi*, a

“pots-and-pans” prostitute consigned to the most menial of tasks. A temple dancer, or religious courtesan, is called a *devadasi* (Srinivasan 2006:162).

Thus, although the courtesan was always appreciated for her education and artistic skill, it is important to note that she was ranked within a category of women who were in some ways reviled even as they were respected, because of their association with the vices of sexuality and alcohol. Objects of erotic passion and love, the courtesan’s reciprocation of such emotion was not to be trusted, because she was expected to know how to play-act such affects. Jennifer Post quotes at length from Ilango Adigal’s second-century play, *Shilappadikaram* (*The Ankle Bracelet*), in a passage that makes respect for the courtesan’s skill, but suspicion of and disdain for her motives, plain:

A dancing girl in love once performed the prelude, with a red mark on her brow and flowers in her hair. [...] Then this girl with the long dark eyes showed us an inviting variation, coming forward but shyly withdrawing again, her moonlike face oppressed by the weight of her hair, heavier than the rain clouds. [...] She next revealed a character-dance. Her piercing eyes were sharp as spears, she could well see that after our quarrel I was desperate and forlorn. Feeling weary, at the hour of low tide, she appeared disguised as her own servant girl, comforting me with words sweeter than a parrot’s. [...] Intoxicated by desire, she danced the brief, lewd dance of lust. Her frail body could not bear ornaments; she danced on the steps of my home to the rhythm of her swaying belt, the music of her ankle bells. She knew I desired her but would not embrace me. She performed the dance of indignation. [...] When a messenger placed at her feet a letter telling her of my love, she feigned to misunderstand it. Then she danced the theme of anguish, crying out to the four winds the pain caused by our parting and the unbearable love that draws her toward me. [...] Next, wearing a wreath that drew swarms of bees to her, she performed the dance of despair. She told her misery to all passers-by. She pretended to faint, and more than once did lose consciousness. Those unto whose arms she fell recalled her to her senses and tried to comfort her. But for all, this girl, adorned with jewels, whom I once loved, such dances are a daily performance. *She is only a dancing girl* (Ilango Adigal, in Post 1987:101-102, emphasis added).

Thus, while courtesans were highly respected in Pre-colonial India, they were still a category of women set apart from morally respectable women. It was considered possible

to transgress the boundary between courtesan and wife, in that courtesans who had long-standing relationships with one patron were sometimes regarded as married. However, courtesans were understood primarily as companions, confidantes, and lovers, with whom men's relationships were characterized by leisure, pleasure, and affection, even if it was expected that the courtesan feigned enjoyment of her customers. This understanding placed them in a different category of women than wives, with whom husbands were expected to have conjugal and familial relations characterized by duty (Kakar 1990; Srinivasan 2006). Courtesans thus historically occupied a feminine gender role that was valued but nonetheless still distinct from the more dominant feminine gender role of wife and mother. Furthermore, the courtesan's art of feigning romantic interest in men whom they were not personally interested was a valuable skill, insofar as their career was concerned, but meant that they were often considered to be personally untrustworthy. Thus, the fact that they were a socially recognized, legitimated and valued group of women in South Asian society is vitally important to contemporary understandings of courtesanship, but this fact should not be allowed to obscure the fact that such women, by virtue of the skills that made them valuable to courtly society, were considered morally and emotionally suspect.

Courtesans in the period of Mughal rule appear to have occupied a similar role to courtesans prior to Mughal invasion, with the notable exception that the *devadasi* tradition was pushed into South India as political power and patronage of courtesans shifted to Muslim courts. It is the Mughal-era courtesan, the *tawa'if*, who is the primary reference point for contemporary popular and scholarly knowledge of South Asian courtesans. The *tawa'if* appears repeatedly as a topic of interest in academic and popular literature, in

addition to being a pervasive trope in Bollywood films (Caldwell 2010), at least in part because of the anomalous, liminal nature of her life as an independent South Asian woman. Although Oldenburg (1990) provides the most radical explication of the *tawa'if* as a gender rebel, glowing accounts of the importance of courtesans other than the *tawa'if* in South Asian society long predate her work, stretching from the literature I have just described, to colonial British accounts of the luxurious freedom of the *tawa'if* as compared with the drudgery of expatriate wifedom (such narratives are collected in Jagpal 2009). The reasons for this fascination are enumerated below, and are meant to explain what and who a *tawa'if* was; this enumeration is also meant to describe the sorts of meaning that are ascribed to the *tawa'if*, both by the data sources upon which this scholarship draws, and also by this scholarship itself.

Historically, Mughal and early-colonial era *tawa'ifs* are regarded as some of the most powerful and wealthy women in South Asia (Oldenburg 1990; Nevile 1996; Patnaik 1985; Pinch 2004; Sharar 1975). For Oldenburg (1990), they came to light in the Lucknawi civic tax ledgers of 1858-1877, where they are highly visible not just for the anomaly of women appearing as earners in the tax records, but also for having had some of the highest incomes in the city. The income of the *tawa'if* was gleaned from a variety of entertainment, artistic and what we might call both social and sexual services, which they provided to the members of various courts, initially, and later to the burgeoning urban elite, following the collapse of South Asian courtly life. Additional income came from relationships of individual patronage, which were often also sexual relationships, placing the *tawa'if* in the realm of sex work. However – and this fact is crucial to the construction of the meaning of the *tawa'if* – patronage relationships are said to have been few in number, with Post(1987)

suggesting that each *tawa'if* had only one or two such (sexual) relationships in a lifetime. Thus, although *tawa'ifs* exchanged sexual services for money, they did so in a highly selective fashion, and as part of a broader set of services linked to their artistic abilities.

Although they were wealthy consorts of the elite and as such women of considerable power, *tawa'ifs* were not women of high social status. Although there are examples of Brahmin women entering the *tawa'if* profession in order to pursue musical careers (*c.f.*, Oldenburg 1990:6)<sup>49</sup>, and one of the most famous *tawa'ifs* at the turn of the twentieth century was from a Western background (Farrell 1993), *tawa'ifs* generally came from lower-status castes (Chatterjee 1992; Farrell 1993; Oldenburg 1990; Pinch 2004; Post 1987), the performance of music or dance being a low-status (if not low-paying) occupation (Neuman 1990). Despite this, *tawa'ifs* were able to transcend their technically low status to access and influence elite social spheres (Brown 2007; Maciszewski 2007; Pinch 2004), making them the possessors of what is generally considered a rare and valuable liminality or the ability to occupy multiple social spheres at once. As communities of women with substantial control over their finances and life decisions, they are considered to have subverted South Asian patriarchy to an extent that was and is highly unusual (Oldenburg 1990).

In addition, *tawa'if* were masters of several varieties of South Asian performing arts (e.g., *thumri*, *ghazal*, *kathak*) and were regarded as fashionable trendsetters. Although

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<sup>49</sup> Although she does not specify the age of this individual, Oldenburg's research was conducted in the mid-1970s, in a *tawa'if* household spanning three generations; it is likely that this was an older individual even at that time, as pursuit of classical music or dance, particularly non-professionally, has been increasingly de-stigmatized since roughly the 1930s. It is unlikely that contemporary Brahmin woman would feel the need to join a *tawa'if* household, if she could find one, in order to learn to sing or dance; she would rather do this as part of her general education, without fear of stigma.



tawa'ifs were never quite as "respectable" as married women, they were "a distinguished feature of developed urban society" in pre-Colonial South Asia, who "did not merely serve the baser needs of society but were also a symbol of culture" (Chandra 1973:v). *Tawa'ifs* are also said to have been responsible for the social and sexual education of the sons of the elite during Mughal rule, providing an education in sensuality, poetry, and the graces of courtly conversation. Although there has perhaps always been a slight amoral taint to the profession, *tawa'ifs* were accorded considerable respect as educated women who exerted cultural influence. As such, historically *tawa'if* communities are thought to have been constituted of wealthy, independent women analogous to other courtesan communities such as the South Indian *devadasis* (Marglin 1985), Greek *heterae*, Japanese *geisha*, and 17<sup>th</sup> century Venetian courtesans.

The status of *tawa'if* communities took a turn for the worse during the 1800s and 1900s, as did those of the South Indian counterparts, the *devadasis*. The standard historical narrative about the decline of the *tawa'if* is that British colonialists mistook tawa'ifs for common prostitutes, or refused to recognize the differences between these categories of sex workers (Chatterjee 1992). Their disdain for sex workers in general, coupled with the erosion of the tawa'ifs' patronage base in the courts of South Asia's princely states, is said to have led to a dramatic decrease in these communities' affluence and influence (Oldenburg 1990). A decrease in patronage and income following the decline of Indian courts under British colonial rule, coupled with the Anti-Nautch campaigns of the 1920s - 1950s, which "sanitized" South Asian performance genres by disassociating dance from courtesans because of their connection with sex work (Chakravorty 2008; Srinivasan 2006; Qureshi 2006), and a recasting of the home as the only place for proper Indian women

(Chatterjee 1990), led to a complete undermining of the *tawa'if* system. Many *tawa'ifs* continued to practice their arts during the Anti-Nautch period, but in an increasingly polarized fashion: those who had the skill and the opportunity transformed themselves into singers, forming the core cohort of early female recording artists in the subcontinent. These *tawa'if*-cum-classical singers increasingly insisted that they were of “amateur” status so as to underline their respectability as women, first and foremost, who happened to sing for love of music—but not as “public” women of “professional” status (Farrell 1993). Those who did not make this transition were increasingly relegated to the status of “prostitute,” as the performing arts became the purview of respectable women.

Because of the erosion of their patronage base (i.e., South Asian courts), British misunderstanding and classification of *tawa'ifs* as prostitutes (Neville 1996), and the anti-Nautch movement, the *tawa'if* is often presented as a much-maligned relic of a more graceful, opulent past. The word *tawa'if*, in my experience in day-to-day Hindi conversation, seems to be an antiquated word for prostitute or sex worker, and usually the person I was speaking to would inform me that the *tawa'if* was a no-longer extant, merely historical phenomenon. This sort of correction was usually followed by an explanation of why the demise of the *tawa'if* is a shame<sup>50</sup>, and in several cases wistful personal recollections (from older men) of the dancing girls who had come to weddings during their childhoods.

For many people whom I encountered in India, this wistfulness was accompanied by the sense that the *tawa'if* occupied a different moral space than the sex worker. For

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<sup>50</sup> The demise of the *tawa'if* is considered a shame because they were beautiful performers; because they indexed a glamorous South Indian female identity; because the performances that they gave were so enjoyable and yet can no longer be seen.

example, one evening in the autumn of 2009, I was having dinner with a psychology professor in her mid-30s. We discussed prostitution in India at length, starting with her hope that perhaps my research could help to “put a stop to the whole business,” and moving on to her argument that now that it is becoming more socially acceptable for boys and men to access sex through girlfriends and mistresses, the need to have women working as sex workers should be redundant, and the profession brought to a close. She turned the topic of the conversations to courtesans, and said that the *tawa’if* was “completely different’ from a sex worker, citing the great respect given to a *tawa’if* as the basis for the distinction. Her friends’ family, whom she identified as a high status Lucknowi family, had considered “prostitutes” (she used the term “prostitutes” when referring to *tawa’ifs*, belying the blurring of the categories) to be part of the family in the 1700s, from whom the boys learned sex and conversation. She said that the sex was “implied” rather than enacted in these lessons, but that it was nonetheless from the *tawa’if* that the boys learned it. The *tawa’ifs* were given so much respect, that before saying “salaam” to their mothers, the sons of the family would say “salaam” to the courtesans.

Another scholar, a professor of Sociology, with whom I spent an afternoon discussing my research and her involvement with *Guria* in the late 1990s and early 2000s, agreed that the *tawa’if* was of a different caliber and class than the sex workers whom she had encountered in Shivdaspur through the NGO. Their difference, in fact, helped to underscore the validity and bravery of Ajeet Singh’s work through *Guria*, which she appraised positively in its steadfastness and commitment to one cause. “Could you imagine,” she asked, “going into Shivdaspur expecting to find *tawa’ifs* and instead being confronted with *those ladies* (i.e., the sex workers who are to be found there)?” That he persevered in

helping them anyway was testament to how much he cared about the issue of prostitution and human trafficking.

Indian popular media routinely paints glowing portraits of the *tawa'if*, portraying her as “the bejeweled, sensuous dancing girl with a golden voice—and almost always, a golden heart” (Gupta 2009). This portrayal is often drawn from Bollywood film accounts of courtesans, and particularly from the classic films *Devdas* (made and remade fourteen times from 1927 to 2011, with the 1955 and 2002 versions being the most famous), *Pakeezah* (1973) and *Umrao Jan* (1981; serialized for television in 2003, and remade as a feature film in 2006). These popular films, always set in the past and focused on the “prostitute with a heart of gold” portray *tawa'ifs* as women who navigate the wicked world of the brothel and the ordeals imposed on them by customers to find true love, only to lose it to the dictates of society, which will not allow them to rise above their station as courtesans to the status of wife. The accounts are also heavily nostalgic, describing an opulent world of prostitution that is no longer extant for the contemporary viewer to enjoy.

Novels written during the time period in which the Anti-Nautch reform movements began to build steam, however, are considerably more ambivalent in their treatments of the courtesan. Whether the ambivalence towards courtesans is a product of the considerable debate about the role and interpretation of sex workers occurring at the time, or rather a reflection of a less wholesome interpretation of courtesans than most contemporary scholarship and opinion allows, these viewpoints are vital in gaining an understanding of the social acceptability of courtesans. As such, I briefly examine two such novels: *Sevasadan* and *Umrao Jan Ada*.

*Premchand's Sevasadan*

Munshi Premchand's *Sevasadan* (*House of Service*), originally published in Hindi in 1916, is a novel about the social causes and effects of courtesanry in Varanasi, tracing the lives of one courtesan, her family, and the social reformers who strive to evict courtesans from Dalmandi (a process that was not fully completed in Varanasi until the 1970s). The novel depicts the lives of courtesans as depraved, beautiful and sensuous but lacking in virtue. It simultaneously takes a strikingly sympathetic stance towards courtesans themselves, arguing that they result from (mostly male) Indian society's abandonment of and disregard for the difficult plight of Indian women. A parable on the disasters of straying from virtue, and a biting satire of corruption and hypocrisy, it centers on the life of Suman, a daughter spoiled and taught to expect expensive gifts by her father, a police officer, who squanders his money on silk slippers for Suman (against his wife's warnings) and later finds he has no money for her dowry. In order to arrange a suitable marriage for her, he resorts to bribery and extortion in his role as a police officer, but does so in a way that is so grossly inept that he is quickly caught and imprisoned. His wife and two daughters must therefore be taken in by his brother-in-law, who arranges a marriage for Suman with a man of suitable caste, but who is incapable of keeping her in the style to which she was accustomed. In the interim, Suman befriends two women: one, the wife of a local lawyer, and the second, a courtesan who lives next door, named Bholi-bai (meaning "demure and innocent"). A domestic squabble results in Suman being cast out of the house by her husband, and so she takes shelter in the lawyer's house, hoping that the squabble will eventually blow over, or that she will be able to stay on in the lawyer's house as a servant. However, the lawyer, unable to bear the scandal of harboring a woman who has

been cast out by her husband, forcers her to leave his home, at which point she turns to her one remaining friend: the courtesan, Bholi-bai.

Suman soon decides to become a courtesan, both because her honor as a wife has already been sullied by being turned out of the house, and also because of the considerable material comforts that the profession provides. The following scene is from her first night in Bholi-bai's house:

Bholi's elderly aunt took Suman to the washroom. She bathed with soap. Then the aunt braided her hair. She brought her a new silk sari to wear. When Suman came back upstairs and Bholi saw her, she smiled and said—Go look at yourself in the mirror.

Suman stood in front of the mirror. It seemed as if the idol of some beauty stood before her. Suman had never realized she was so beautiful. Shame-free pride had made her lotus-blossom face bloom and there was something absolutely intoxicating about her eyes. She lay down on the couch. [...]

After a while, the water carrier brought some sweets. Suman prepared her dinner. She ate a paan and stood in front of the mirror. She said to herself—why should I leave this happiness and go back to that dark hovel? (Premchand 2005:46-47)

Shortly after casting her out of his house, the lawyer begins to feel remorse for his actions<sup>51</sup>, and tries to find Suman but is unable to do so. Upon finding out that she is now a famous courtesan in Dalmandi, he is doubly ashamed of himself, and launches into a campaign to save her from herself, shaming her for her sensuality and for the disgrace that

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<sup>51</sup> The theme of men turning their back on Suman and then later feeling incredible remorse is a common one in the course of the novel. For the sake of brevity, I have omitted several subplots in the novel, many of which are story arcs in this vein: Suman's husband, unable to bear what he has done in casting her out and hence driving her to prostitution, becomes a wandering ascetic, attempting recompense for his actions against Suman by secretly financing her sister's wedding. Suman's father, unable to bear his failures to secure a good home for her and painfully shamed by her decision to become a prostitute, decides to kill her but is unable to do so, and as a result kills himself. Although there is definitely some finger-pointing at Suman for her desire for wealth, comfort and pleasure at the expense of virtue duty, the ultimate blame for her actions is placed again and again on the men in her life; she herself is presented as capable, intelligent, and religiously virtuous when given the opportunity to pray, meditate, and study.

she brings to society by (particularly as a Brahmin woman) working as a prostitute. They discuss her financial options and she argues that she needs only 50 Rs per month to live on, but cannot find even that through more respectable forms of work, especially now that her honor is besmirched: "What would you have me do?," she asks the lawyer, "Is there some lover of the Hindu race who will agree to give me fifty rupees a month to live on?" It is eventually decided that, if the lawyer can find someone willing to pay for her upkeep, she will move to a widow's home, which she does (the lawyer paying much of her upkeep himself).

In a long and complicated subplot, the lawyer's nephew has, all this time, been visiting Dalmandi and falling in lust/love with Suman. He eventually turns his back on her, and she disappears from Dalmandi when she goes to the widow's home, effectively curtailing the romance. A match is then arranged between this same nephew and Suman's younger sister, Shanta, without either of the families realizing the relationship between the two women. That they are sisters is dramatically exposed just before the wedding, and the lawyer's family calls off the wedding immediately before it was to occur, causing great shame to Suman's family. Suman's sister, Shanta, is moved into the same widow's home by the lawyer, out of his sense of shame for what his family has now done to both of the women. The lawyer's nephew, in the interim, visits the two women in the widow's ashram and, after having built a thriving boating business and a small hut on the banks of the Ganges, moves both of the women into the hut, where initially they live happily despite the protests of his family. It eventually becomes known that Suman was once a "prostitute," and at that point the neighbors begin whispering about her, and refusing to drink water from the household (despite the fact that they had previously admired her skills as a

homemaker, sought her advice, and praised her devotion to her sister's family). She runs away from the house and winds up working as a headmistress and teacher in a school that the lawyer set up for the courtesans of Dalmandi, during a crusade that he ran to remove the courtesans from the city and reform their profession.

Although the novel itself clearly takes the stance that courtesanry is a shameful practice premised on the depravity of Indian society (Muslim and Hindu alike) and not the fault of the women who practice it, in the context of debates on the lawyer's campaign to remove the courtesans from the *chawk* (the market at the heart of the city), it provides a multitude of perspectives on the profession. For example, the novel conveys appreciation for the meeting grounds and artistic services provided by the courtesans (couched as a space free from religious and nationalist enmity, no less), but also the sense that the path of courtesanry is a departure from the wifely path of duty. The novel heaps heavy scorn on the fact that women are able to support themselves so lavishly through prostitution, but not through more honorable work like sewing, cooking, or teaching.

A striking feature of the novel, in relation to the central theme of this chapter, is that the perspectives provided apply equally to courtesans and to prostitutes; indeed, the two terms are used interchangeably. Furthermore, there is no allowance made in the world of the novel for prostitution/courtesanry in the context of destitution: having been cast out of her marital home, and subsequently the home of her friend, financial constraint figures into her Suman's decision to become a courtesan, but once she has done so all of her financial woes end, and she lives a sumptuous life of pleasure and admiration from her customers. Although there is considerable social scorn for her as a "fallen woman," financial concerns are reserved for the time she spent as the wife of a man with a limited income, and how she



will be supported when she virtuously agrees to *leave* prostitution. Nowhere in the novel does the figure of the “common prostitute” – the unskilled streetwalker or brothel worker who neither sings nor dances, but who exchanges only sex for money – appear. Nor is forced or trafficking considered<sup>52</sup>. Although Bholi-bai is portrayed as money-hungry, and eager to entice Suman into the trade, there is no trickery or violence involved: she simply provides Suman with a silk sari and some delicacies, and Suman agrees to work for her. As such, the discourse Premchand produces about prostitution in *Sevasadan* is about the moral issues attendant to prostitution as a profession and a symptom of the social ill of sensuousness. If the courtesans are slaves, they are enslaved to sensuousness at the expense of morality, rather than to brothel keepers and traffickers.

#### *Ruswa's Umrao Jan Ada*

Originally published in 1887, Mirza Mohammad Hadi Ruswa's *Umrao Jan Ada* is the semi-fictionalized account of the life of a courtesan from Lucknow. It is written largely in Umrao Jan's voice, as it is based on a series of conversations that Ruswa is said to have had with the courtesan herself (Singh and Husaini 2009). It begins with her account of her childhood in Faizabad, where she was the spoiled daughter of a Jemadar in the British Indian Army. She was kidnapped by an enemy of her father, who intended to kill her, but instead was persuaded to sell her into prostitution. She is taken to Lucknow, where she is

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<sup>52</sup> Although the novel does not treat any form of prostitution other than courtesanry, other forms of prostitution certainly existed at the time. Ruswa's *Umrao Jan*, published two decades before and discussing courtesanry in Uttar Pradesh at that time explicitly references trafficking in young girls for a variety of purposes, as well as forms of prostitution that did not involve the refinement or artistic skills of the courtesan. The same texts that reference the glory of courtesans make routine allusion to classes and castes of prostitutes ranked below that of courtesan, without noting them much beyond their degradation and the scorn heaped upon them.

sold into the *kotha* of a group of *tawa'ifs*; she adjusts quickly to the sumptuousness of her new life, and eventually becomes a famous courtesan. Her life in Lucknow is disrupted by the mutiny in Lucknow in 1857, and she moves back to Faizabad, where she briefly reunites with her mother and brother, before returning to Lucknow. At the time that the story is being narrated, Umrao Jan is living in seclusion in Delhi, having the means not to work as a courtesan; she is, instead, an ascetic solely devoted to her music.

In comparison to Premchand, Ruswa does not overly concern himself with the morality of courtesans, or with their reform. Rather, he takes a much more matter-of-fact stance on both the pleasures and culpabilities of being a courtesan. For example, Umrao Jan is depicted as saying:

I find it very hard to talk about the subject you have in mind [the sensuousness of the courtesan]. Women of my calling are usually immodest, but that is only during the time they are engaged in the profession. Besides, flesh has its own compulsions and there is some excuse for wantonness in the first flush of youth; with the years one learns to curb these instincts to keep a proper sense of proportion. All said and done, prostitutes are women and have the same feelings and emotions as other women. What will you gain by prodding me on this subject, Mirza Ruswa? (Ruswa 2009: 25)

Umrao Jan herself is straightforward on the fact that, while the extravagances and decadences of the life of the courtesan are perhaps amoral, they are also part of human nature, and comments throughout the narrative on the wickedness that is attributed to courtesans:

I have often heard people say that girls who are born in the homes of prostitutes have little chance of improving their lot and one should only expect the worst from them. They are brought up amongst people who talk of nothing except sex and fornication. And whosoever they turn to, be it their mothers or sisters, they only have examples of degradation. That is not the case with girls who are born of respectable parents. If they run away from their homes and take to the path of evil, they have no excuse whatsoever and deserve to be slaughtered like sheep – but without even the drops of water to slake their thirst before their throats are cut. (Ruswa 2009:5)

She argues, however, that this is not true of all women who are born to “respectable parents” but who find themselves working as prostitutes, citing her own experience as a kidnapped – and trafficked – girl who was sold to a courtesan household.

The novel largely meditates upon fate and our lack of control over it, and people’s thoughts on women such as Umrao Jan, as it weaves minor characters repeatedly into the narrative. A girl with whom Umrao shares a small room in the initial process of being sold through a series of brokers reappears much later in the story as the wife of a wealthy landowner: instead of being bought by a *tawa’if* as an apprentice, this girl was bought by the young landowner’s mother as a servant and companion for her son. The girl and the landowner fell in love and were married. When Umrao Jan and this woman meet again later in life it serves to underscore the capriciousness of fate: had she been purchased by a different individual, Umrao Jan might have been a respectable wife to a wealthy man, instead of a courtesan.

Other characters provide insight into the variety of ways that the moral positioning and lifestyle of the courtesan might be viewed. When she is briefly reunited with her family, her mother listens to her story and accepts her life, glad simply that the daughter she assumed had either run away or died is in fact alive and well. In contrast, her brother, who had been a loving companion in childhood, turns on her because of the shame of her profession, and attempts to slit her throat. In another vignette, when she runs away from the *kotha* with a lover and is later abandoned by him, she finds herself in conversation with a rural streetwalker, and is able to comment on the similarities between their lives as prostitutes. However, in contrast to the streetwalker, Umrao Jan is able to use her status as a *tawa’if* to escape a conflict with the police, indicating her relative power as a member of a

higher class of prostitute.

Whereas *Sevasadan* focuses on the relative helplessness of the courtesan as a woman who has been abandoned or otherwise failed by the various men in her life, causing her to resort to prostitution, in *Umrao Jan* the courtesan is heavily agential, even as she muses repeatedly on fate and describes her life as “fulfilling her destiny.” She is able, even within what might seem to be the confines of having been trafficked and working within the *kotha* context, to make decisions regarding her life: losing her virginity to someone whom she loves instead of selling it to the highest bidder (this is later done anyway, through a set of deceptions); running away from the *kotha* and setting up as a courtesan on her own; entering the household of a *nawab* and later choosing to leave it; and finally, setting up her small household in Delhi and living as a sort of ascetic singer. It is not the failure of men but the cunningness of the courtesan upon which the novel builds its foundation. As in *Sevasadan*, the courtesan is referred to repeatedly as a prostitute: the terms are used interchangeably, even as it acknowledges the great wealth and material comfort of the *tawa’if*. As such, the courtesan, the prostitute, and the sex worker are reasonably interchangeable, at least in the social world of these late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Urdu novels.

### **Is the *tawa’if* a sex worker?**

Although during the time period in which *Sevasadan* and *Umrao Jan* were written, the courtesan and the prostitute were somewhat interchangeable, contemporarily the two identities are to some extent kept separate, and it appears that they were related but separate identities in pre-colonial India as well. What follows is a transcript of a

conversation that I had with a BHU professor and one of her students, regarding the *Guria*-sponsored Pearls of Love concert held at a Varanasi hotel in the early 2000s, at which the professor saw *tawa'if* performances:

R: They [the sex workers] were performing classical singing and dancing. But someone from the audience asked them to perform as they would for their clients, and so for a very brief time, maybe thirty seconds she changed and she became like a... [Her voice trails off.] It was such a transformation! And then almost immediately she changed back to a classical performer.

M: And what was different?

R: Her entire expression changed, her movement changed, and it was clearly something that was being performed for someone else [other than the audience in question], it was not a regular [i.e., classical] performance. For me, it was such a treat, in that it is something that you see in films, but I had never actually witnessed it.

Student: Like something that the nautch girls perform!

R: Otherwise it was absolutely like a regular concert, but... she made just that one quick shift... I mean, she was wearing the same thing but it looked so different because of her expression, and the invitation that showed on her face, the movement... that was the only thing that was different. It was the same person with the same clothes, but it was different.

And then at the hotel, usually hotels have shows going on, so there was no mention that this concert was for sex workers, so they were performing normally [i.e., as classical musicians]. But then I think the word got out, and people started responding differently. Then it changed. My husband got a little uncomfortable [with the performance after that], even though it was very clear that you shouldn't show this kind of disrespect [to the performers].

Here, we see the respect afforded the *tawa'if* as classical performer, but also the disrespect that she might suffer if the word got out that she was a sex worker, in addition to a classically trained performer. In this instance, this individual was also able to perform the identity of sex worker, and to show the difference in performance style between what is done for an audience at a concert, as opposed to what is done for a paying customer, with

the result being that she is “the same person with the same clothes, but [...] different.” The *tawa’if* is thus capable of being a sex worker. However, the reverse is not necessarily true.

A sex worker is emphatically *not* a courtesan, at least insofar as the literature on courtesans is concerned. Some examples, culled from the literature on courtesans:

“Like other professional women of this type, courtesans often had sexual relationships with men, although in their lifetimes their associations were generally limited to one or two men. *The term should also separate them from other public women* (called *rakheli* and *vesya* in some areas) *who were known as prostitutes and who had little or no relationship to the arts in Indian history*” (Post 1987:98, emphasis added).

“The *kotha* [courtesan’s salon] was *not merely a brothel* but also a venue where highly skilled musicians and dancers performed, a place of relaxation, gossip, and musical appreciation as well as *venery*” (Farrell 1993:38, emphasis added)

“She [the courtesan] continued to ply her sophisticated trade on the silver screen long after her real-life counterparts had *devolved into common whores*” (Caldwell 2010:120, emphasis added).

“Courtesans in ancient India *did not merely serve the baser needs of society* but were also a symbol of culture and *ars amoris*” (Chandra 1973: v, emphasis added).

“But although they [*tawa’ifs*] were born into these disreputable castes and destined to be entertainers from the moment of their birth, *they didn’t prostitute themselves indiscriminately*: their families were often retained by the aristocracy and sex was only part of the service they provided to their patrons” (Brown 2005:29, emphasis added).

“Well-versed in literature and other arts, *the nautch girls were no ordinary vendors of mercenary sex*” (Nevile 1996:148, emphasis added).

At times, the association of *tawa’ifs* with prostitution and sex work is unavoidable within these bodies of literature, in which case the distinctions between the two are made clear, and a lack of understanding of these distinctions is lamented. Some examples:

“There were courtesans and prostitutes, as Abbe Dubois noted, and throughout Indian history specific Sanskrit terms were used to highlight distinctions between them. The exceptionally civilized public woman, proficient in arts and endowed with winsome qualities, is called a *ganika*. A *vesya*, or specifically a woman called a *rupajiva*, is a prostitute, ranked below the *ganika*, whose artistic talents she does not

possess. A very low-grade prostitute (a “whore”) is a *pumscali*, and a prostitute who is a slave is a *dasi*” (Srinivasan 2006:162).

“The British refused to recognize these hierarchical differences among ‘prostitutes’ in Lucknow out of administrative convenience, and though the officials went to *Nautch* parties, they looked upon the dancing girls as products of the ‘native society’ to be left alone. So the laws, especially that of clinical examinations in lock hospitals were uniformly forced upon all prostitutes. This completely alienated the women who were accustomed to see themselves as the pivot of aristocratic cultural practices. *To be equated with a common bazaar prostitute was to them an extreme degradation.*” (Chatterjee 1992:21, emphasis added)

“The English word ‘courtesan’ fails to capture the diversity of this community in South Asia, which runs the gamut from highly trained and refined court musicians/dancers/poets to street performers who entertain at festivals and weddings, instead creating a discursive stereotyping or ‘totalizing.’ Furthermore, the British colonialists’ lack of understanding of this simultaneous diversity and solidarity, and their frequent insensitivity to these women’s performance traditions, led them to impose the Victorian label ‘prostitute’ on female members of the community (and, whenever possible to interact with them in this way). The majority of mainstream post-colonial Indians have adopted the term ‘prostitute’ along with the judgmental attitude it indexes to refer to courtesans of all types. Several have *tried to prove* the point that these women are indeed prostitutes by interpreting ancient texts that elaborate on how these women are bearers of culture yet morally suspect because they do not fit into the South Asian patriarchal system as economically dependent and monogamous wives” (Maciszewski 2006:334, emphasis added).

The definition of the courtesan is thus continually made *against* the figure of the “common bazaar prostitute,” the *veshya*, the “common whore,” and the “ordinary vendors of mercenary sex,” who serve the “baser needs of society” from their “mere brothels.” Again and again, there is a nod in these statements to commercial sex, but also a continual attempt to put it at arms’ length from the courtesan, and to distinguish her from the “common prostitute.” This defensiveness is not mere posturing: it indexes a very real colonial process of subsuming and subjugating a host of South Asian identities under one foreign term—“prostitute”—which completely ignored the importance of such distinctions in both the subjective experience of the women who bore such identities, and in their

treatment. Additionally, the considerable artistic training and skill, as well as the remarkable independence wielded by the *tawa'if* is undeniable.

However, the pains which are taken to distinguish the courtesan from the prostitute raise some very pointed questions about the category "prostitute" (or "sex worker," discussed in chapter 3, and again below): Who is this "common whore," who has nothing to offer but "mercenary sex" from her brothel? Why is it so important that the *tawa'if* be distinguished from her?

### **Who is the sex worker?**

*"Modern sex work is a form of service sector wage labour [sic], performed under conditions of ever increasing commoditization of all goods and services, within the currently expanding system of global capitalism." – Pradip Baksi, Herstory of Sexuality and Sex Work in Sonaachi, Kolkata, West Bengal, India.*

*"The kind of oppression that can be meted out to a sex worker can never be perpetrated against a regular worker." – DMSC, Sex Workers' Manifesto*

While the courtesan is morally suspect, but affluent and glamorous, the sex worker is occasionally understood as morally suspect, but more often currently understood as impoverished or enslaved, and lacking in allure (although she might be an object of pitiable curiosity). In contrast to the celebrated courtesan, the contemporary sex worker or prostitute is understood as perhaps the most exploited of all workers, and either a wicked, morally bankrupt woman (if she has chosen the work) or a modern day slave (if she has not). Whereas portrayals of *tawa'ifs* focus on their artistry and cultural value, portrayals of sex workers drawn from anti-trafficking social work and social science literature, and from journalism on the topic tend to focus on their exploitation. To wit:



The factors which lead women into this occupation are complex, and include poverty, the gendered division of labour, exploitation and trafficking, and a history of abuse and sexual control, all of which are well known. More than 50% of sex workers in Kerala had been married and experienced domestic violence, desertion by their husbands, being sold by their husbands or having their property seized by their husbands, and later divorced. [...] Sex workers' own family members often exploit them by asking for money, yet often they will not acknowledge the women as relatives or invite them to family functions such as weddings. (Jayasree 2004:57)

Young girls, usually between the ages of nine and sixteen years, are sold across the borders to brothels in India, where prostitution is legal.<sup>53</sup> They often have to work between fourteen and eighteen h/day offering commercial sex for which they are not paid. The trafficking of girls from Nepal to India for the principle purpose of prostitution is perhaps the busiest 'slave traffick' of its kind anywhere in the world. (Deane 2010)

The most common form of sex work involves young women and girls from economically deprived and marginalized groups (e.g. Dalits) who have been 'recruited' by brokers, sold to pimps or brothel-owners (most of whom are ex-prostitutes), and forced into prostitution. (Joffres *et al* 2008)

Women usually enter the sex trade as a last resort, due to poverty and a loss of family support, and thus are in a vulnerable situation. They enter a hierarchical sex trade, with madams and pimps often exerting strict control over their working conditions, and keeping them isolated from other sex workers. In an ambiguous legal situation, they are vulnerable to arrest by police and have little recourse to justice if exploited or abused by clients, madams, or others. Symbolically, women who sell sex are marginalized within popular culture, for instance, being presented in Hindi films as objects of men's lust, ultimately to be rejected in favor of the chaste woman. (Cornish 2006)

When Mira, a sweet-faced virgin with golden brown skin, refused to have sex, she was dragged into a torture chamber in a dark alley used for 'breaking in' new girls. She was locked in a narrow, windowless room without food or water. On the fourth day, when she still refused to work, one of the madam's thugs, called a *goonda*, wrestled her to the floor and banged her head against the concrete until she passed out. When she awoke, she was naked; a rattan cane smeared with pureed red chili peppers had been shoved up her vagina. Later, she was raped by the *goonda*. "They torture you until you say yes," Mira recently recounted during an interview here. 'Nobody hears your cries.' (Friedman 1996)

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<sup>53</sup> Note that exchange of sexual services for money is legal, but all other actions surrounding the industry are illegal: brothel keeping, pimping, soliciting, etc.

In the examples given above, selected for their common and problematic stereotyping of sex workers<sup>54</sup>, the sex worker is presented as a victim in multiple dimensions. First, by virtue of low social and caste status. Second, as the victim of familial violence or some other breakdown of the familial system that leaves her without a support system, or as the victim of trafficking starting within her family. Third, as the victim of atrocious, forced working conditions, subject to torture should she refuse to comply with the conditions. Fourth, she is the victim of being unheard and forgotten: Nobody hears her cries. There is no question, here, of wantonness, luxury, skill, education, respect, and the transgression of originally low status; because they are already victims of low social status, sex workers fall prey to victimhood of a higher order in the form of forced prostitution, and are not allowed opportunities for advancement within the sex industry, or to save themselves from the industry itself.

Just as the concept of the “courtesan” is historically situated and contextually defined, the notion of the “prostitute” or “sex worker” is likewise not a given category or all-encompassing identity. The wide variety of experiences and working conditions that are currently encompassed by the term “prostitute” or “sex worker” is discussed more fully in the following chapter, as these experiences relate to notions of “authentic” prostitute or sex worker voices. Historically, similarly wide ranges of experience related to the exchange of sex for money are reported and attitudes towards the women who engaged in such activities have obviously changed throughout time. The encompassing of all of these experiences and identities under the term “prostitution,” and an understanding of

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<sup>54</sup> These examples are but a few, and all restricted to India. See Doezeema 2010 for a more comprehensive collection of such statements, in a global context.

prostitution as abject exploitation from which women must be saved, however, is a process that does not occur until the mid-nineteenth century, both in the West (particularly in England and America) and, as part of the colonial process, in South Asia. In fact, it is the creation of the category “prostitute” in England that helped to conflate *tawa’ifs* with less prestigious forms of sex work that were also being subsumed under the category of the “prostitute” in a colonial attempt at regulation of such women for the purposes of controlling venereal disease in the empire and regulating morality in the colonies. The history of the “invention” of prostitution in these contexts, as well as the social campaigns aimed at reformation of prostitutes, is well-described elsewhere (Baksi 2005; Banerjee 2000; Chatterjee 1992; Levine 1996; Levine 2004; Soneji 2011; Wahab 2002). For our purposes here, it is important to understand that it was during the colonial period that South Asian attitudes shifted from those of scornful acceptance of sex workers of many varieties as morally suspect women who nonetheless had an accepted economic and sometimes social role, to a category of women who posed a “social problem,” the solution to which was State control or activist, feminist reform. Organizations like Guria obviously operate within this same sphere, albeit nearly two centuries later.

The concept “sex worker,” likewise, is a historically contingent term that emerges from sex worker activism in the late twentieth century. The term belies the intent that “prostitution” come to be understood as labor, as well as a desire to encompass a wider range of sexual services than the exchange of intercourse for money, including erotic dance, phone sex, and the making of pornography (Delacoste and Alexander 1998). The contemporary representations of “sex workers” or “prostitutes” are thus no more static or

reflective of the realities of the lives of women who exchange sex for money than are contemporary understandings of *tawa'ifs*.

However, given that representations of the *tawa'if* and the sex worker are conceptually linked, but are not currently synonymous, the performance of each identity on the ground can be expected to differ significantly. As such, I examine two performances of *tawa'if* identity that occurred in Varanasi during the course of my fieldwork: the first, a Guria-sponsored event that is intended to showcase the talents of women in prostitution, and the second, an annual performance of sex workers on Manikarnika Ghat in Varanasi which is unrelated to the NGO *Guria*. It is to these performances that I now turn.

### **Pearls of Love: *Guria*'s Concert of the Marginalized Artists Against Human Trafficking**



**Figure 11: The boat upon which the artists perform during the Pearls of Love concert. A boat is used to provide separation from the audience, so that audience members cannot harass the female performers.**



**Figure 12: A Lucknawi courtesan performing. Older women with clear vocal training, performing classical or light-classical genres, were often the earliest performers in the evening, finishing before the sun had even set.**

Pearls of Love is an annual concert sponsored by *Guria* which showcases the artistic talents of women in prostitution, although since its inception it has expanded (and been re-codified) as a concert of “marginalized artists.” The first *Guria Mahotsav* was held in Delhi in 1995, and was specifically meant to highlight the artistic talents of women in prostitution, calling particular attention to the remnants of the courtesan tradition throughout the country. The *mahotsav* was the result of Ajeet’s recognition that many of the women whom he encountered while he did anti-trafficking and educational work in red-light districts were also artistic performers: “It was found during interaction with sex workers that many of them had exceptional singing and dancing talent, so we [activists working with *Guria*] formed a cultural troupe, a first in the country, of thirty sex workers from Varanasi, Bihar and ‘*bedia*’ community in Madhya Pradesh” (Malaviya 2008). Press-clippings about the early *Mahotsavs* tend to focus on the talent of the women performing

and the genres in which they perform, which serves as a counterpoint to the fact that they are sex workers: “The objective of the festival [...] was to highlight the fact that there were some women, talented and trained in music and dance, who had been forced to become prostitutes in the absence of any takers for their talent” (Staff Reporter 1998). Newspaper accounts also iterate (and reiterate) the desire of Ajeet Singh and *Guria* that the *Guria Mahotsav* provide alternative livelihood and therefore serve as economic rehabilitation for women in prostitution, while also preserving traditional Indian art forms:

Apart from depicting the sex-workers’ talents, aspirations, and plights – stemmed from the exploitation by procurers, pimps, police and criminals [sic] – through songs, plays and dance-numbers, *Guria*’s initiative is also aimed at reviving the rapidly dwindling traditional cultural forms practiced by the *tawa’ifs* in the *kothis*. ‘Our experience in Varanasi and inputs from other places make us believe that with the Thumri, Dadra, Chaiti, Purbi, and other classical and folk music being threatened by alien cultural invasion, the *tawa’ifs*’ means of earning livelihood are being jeopardized and as a result their profession, which was once guided by some ethics, is being reduced to mere flesh trade,” Mr. Kumar [representing *Guria*] said (Bhaumik 1999).

The *mahotsav* was thus meant as, simultaneously, a showcase, a reform, and a revival of dying cultural forms. As such, it reflects *Guria*’s position that it is possible for sex work to occur in a non-exploitative way, such as the profession that *tawa’ifs* once engaged in, which was “guided by some ethics.” Lack of support for the non-sexual component of the courtesan’s work has caused devolution of their profession to that of the “mere flesh trade.” The *mahotsav* was initially intended as a way of alluding to and sparking interest in these older forms of sex work that involved more than the exchange of sex, and that as such afforded the women practicing it a higher status than that of contemporary sex workers.

By November of 2009, when I was able to observe Pearls of Love for its two week running span on Dharbanga Ghat, the show had been modified to the point of not mentioning prostitution at all; instead, it took the unwieldy title “Pearls of Love: The

Concert of the Marginalized Artists Against Human Trafficking,” with only the concert’s stance “against human trafficking” indexing who the performers might be.

As described in the opening of this chapter, the complete silence observed on the subject of prostitution for the duration of the concert struck me as odd at the outset: if the purpose of the concert is to show that women in prostitution had “other” talents, doesn’t *not* mentioning that they are sex workers defeat that purpose? If the purpose was, instead, to increase awareness of *Guria* and its work as an organization working with sex workers, does refusing to speak of what they do serve that purpose? The answers to these questions turn out to be “yes,” on the one hand, but also “no,” on the other, and speak to the difficulty of doing the work that *Guria* does in a realm in which speaking about the subject of their activism is not socially acceptable. Indeed, the silence begs the question of whether or not *Guria* is currently actively working towards improving public opinion of sex workers at all, or whether it has decided instead to take on the ambitious and utopian task of changing sex work itself before focusing on public opinion.

The performance each day included five-six performers or groups of performers, usually beginning with women (and men) singing classical and light-classical North Indian vocal genres, including *thumri*, *ghazal*, *sher*, and *qawwali*<sup>55</sup>. Generally, these individuals would perform from 4 to 5:30 or 6, until just about the time the sun was setting, following which performance groups coming from folk traditions would begin to perform: dancers from a Maharasthran *Bedia*<sup>56</sup> community with which *Guria* also works, who performed

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<sup>55</sup> *Qawwali* is a genre of music defined as “Muslim devotional song” (Neuman 1990:175).

<sup>56</sup> The *Bedia* are a scheduled caste group who were historically nomadic and, like some other nomadic groups such as the *Kanjari*, engage in generational prostitution for income. Although the women who marry men in the *Bedia* community are not sex workers,

*rai*<sup>57</sup> dances, two women dancing as a group of men played drums and sang; a Rajasthani dance troop, with women both singing and dancing, and men from the community spitting and swallowing fire; another dance troop in which women and young girls danced while balancing impressive quantities of pots on their heads, and did acrobatics; and a group of Varanasi-based *dhobis* (a caste group that washes clothing for a living), in which no women performed, but in which some men sang and others, dressed in women's clothing, danced as though they were women. While not all of these individuals were affiliated with sex work or prostitution in any way, some were. The inclusion of non-sex workers simultaneously unites the sex workers present with other marginalized communities while pulling the focus of the festival off of sex work itself.

The women who performed early in the evening were clearly performing as classical or semi-classical singers, and in genres associated with the *tawa'if*. Sometimes the poetry that they recited and the songs that they sang were about social struggles, as were the songs of some of the groups that performed later (the *bedia* and the *dhobi* performers in particular), but often – while performing *ghazals* in particular – the topic was romantic love and the insanity that it brings, as well as the pain of being spurned by a lover. The audience was markedly appreciative of these performances, and reacted to them with loud exclamations of approval, much in the vein of what one would see at any such classical music performance. These women were respected as performers.

Despite the fact that there are women in Shivdaspur who perform some of these genres – *sher* and *qawwali* in particular -- they were not invited to perform at Pearls of

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daughters resulting from the marriage will be expected to go into sex work, as will the daughters born to *Bedia* women who do sex work (*c.f.* Agrawal 2008).

<sup>57</sup> *Rai* is a form of dance associated with the *bedia* in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh.



Love because the quality of their performance is considered to be too low; the *tawa'ifs* who performed at the concert were all from Lucknow, U.P., or from Muzaffpur, Bihar, and had been invited due to their considerable skill. The women from Shivdaspur, and what little might be left of the *tawa'if* tradition there, was not of high enough quality to merit showcasing. Ajeet said that in this regard "Benares has lost everything"; there are no *tawa'ifs* to be found, and even those in Shivdaspur who do still sing and dance (who were in previous years invited to the festival) are only pretending to the status of the *tawa'if* for the sake of feeling superior to any woman in Shivdaspur who does not sing or dance, but only sells her body. He says:

Very few singing women are left [in Shivdaspur], and of those who are left, their singing is not high quality. It is not worth inviting them to the festival, I know they're just singing *filmi* [Bollywood-esque] songs, or doing vulgar dances, which is not at all acceptable now. But still they would think they are superior to the other ones. [Personal Interview 2/24/2010]

The *tawa'if* performances that occur at Pearls of Love, then, are of a selective quality that is highly respectable, judging from the audience's reaction. The quality of their performance is notable not only for its classical proficiency, and for the fact that it represents musical art forms unique to India, but also, in Ajeet's view, for the fact that these *tawa'ifs* have maintained these traditions despite their contemporary status as prostitutes. *Pearls of Love* is an attempt to give them the respect that they deserve as artists. Ajeet would sometimes say when we talked about the concert and the women who performed there, that as singers they were so excellent that, had they simply been born in a different community and with a different set of resources, they might have reached the highest levels of classical singing on the national level. Their association with red light areas prevented this, however, as did the dwindling patronage for these sorts of arts.

Audience members, for their part, seemed to sincerely enjoy the performances, and were respectful of the performers. In particular, they seemed to enjoy and interact most with the women who performed earlier in the evening, loudly agreeing with *sher* and *ghazals* about the pain of love, and the difficulty of earning a living. Each evening, the crowd consisted of 150-200 people, many of whom came back night after night, particularly for the performances that occurred earlier in the evening.

There was one man who came back several times with his wife and his wife's sister, who commented on how much he enjoyed the concert, noting that he and his wife looked forward to it every year and came to see the women singing in particular. When I asked if they were familiar with *Guria's* work, and understood who the women were, they all said that they were, the man noting that *Guria* had made substantive, positive changes to Shivdaspur, and then explaining that to be a *tawa'if* was simply the "artistic profession" of these women. Groups of teen-aged boys would sometimes wander past the concert and stay to listen to the singers, applauding loudly at the end of each song.

There was never any hint of disrespect for those performing or any explicit acknowledgement of their background as sex workers that I observed, except one evening. As I was walking through the crowd, collecting donations with one of the *Guria* employees, a teacher I knew from the *balwadi*, he leaned in and asked if I understood that the women dancing were *bediya*. I confirmed that I understood this, and then, to be sure that he had gotten his point across, he leaned in and hissed "prostitutes!" I again nodded that I understood, and he let the topic drop. Even this was not necessarily disrespectful, but rather an attempt to make sure that I comprehended what I was seeing; and this, too, was

directed at the *bediya* women, who were doing a folk dance, and not at those performing within the classical *tawa'if* idiom.

Interspersed with the performances were announcements by Ajeet, in both English and Hindi, introducing the performers and in some cases explaining their genre – a group of poets from Rajasthan who were devotees of the poet-saint Kabir were introduced as such, with notes of admiration that it was this group of individuals from far away who were helping to keep Kabir's tradition alive, even though he had been born near Varanasi. Otherwise, his commentary as emcee was focused on the fact that he was trying to raise awareness of the problem of human trafficking, although he did not note any potential correlation between the performers on the stage and the issue at hand. Finally, Ajeet often talked about the difficulty of preserving these dying arts, particularly at a time when people had little energy or attention for them. Tying together a lack of appreciation for the *tawa'if* with a lack of appreciation for the art forms that she represented, and staging the concert as a means of potentially redressing these wrongs, Pearls of Love (and the *tawa'if* performances contained within them) can be read as an attempt to encourage respect for what is a “traditional” form of entertainment, in which women provided their customers with more than just sexual access to their bodies. However, because what is being respected here is the artistry of sex workers as singers and dancers – *in spite* of their occupation as sex workers – it does not necessarily hold sex work up as a respectable profession. Instead, it allows for one form of sex work, and a nearly extinct one at that, to be given as an example of a form of entertainment that is associated with sex work that is not only tolerable, but perhaps also to be celebrated.

This is not to suggest that Ajeet and *Guria*, do not respect sex workers in and of themselves, as human beings; they do respect them as such, particularly within the framework of anti-trafficking and human rights from which they is working. Ajeet's particular respect for the *tawa'if*, though, as a maligned artist who practiced sex work in a way that was "guided by some ethics," helps to underscore the problem with contemporary brothel-based sex work and life in the red-light district more broadly construed: it lacks artistry and the higher quality of life that art and music bring, as well as lacking in dignity for those practicing the trade.

In teasing out these issues – who is the sex worker, who is the *tawa'if*? – throughout the course of my research, it became clear to me that there are women in Shivdaspur who continue to participate in these same *tawa'if*-affiliated artistic traditions. In talking about wedding celebrations in Bhind Basti, Anu praised, in particular, a man and woman from the neighborhood who recited *sher*. Many women participate in "dance parties," and one of the women who I interviewed had a history as a "dancing girl," explaining that those jobs were enjoyable because they involved dance only, and that dancers are well fed at the party, so that they have enough energy to dance the entire night through. On *Eid Milan*, one of the houses that I visited with Manju featured many prominently displayed photos of the older woman who owned the house singing, and a young woman associated with the household was practicing dance when we arrived. Although I cannot say with any certainty that *tawa'if* identity as such is important to women living and working in Shivdaspur, I can say that there are at least remnants of this tradition that exist within the community: if not *tawa'if*, there are at least *nachne-ghane-vale-aurat* (singing-and-dancing women) in Shivdaspur. They are not, however, given the respect that is granted to the *tawa'if*, a

respect so important that an entire concert series has been set up and maintained for 15 years to ensure that they get it. In contrast, sex workers performing outside of the *tawa'if* idiom are not given the same respect as classical performers; in describing the differences in both their performance and their reception, I now discuss an annual performance by sex workers on Manikarnika Ghat, the main cremation area in Varanasi.

### Performance of the Nagar Vadhus at Manikarnika Ghat



Figure 13: Introduction to the performance of the *nagar vadhus*, including honorific reference to the *sadhu* standing to the right.



**Figure 14: One of the *nagar vadhus* shortly before she began her performance.**

Many months before the performance occurred, I was told by a member of the family with which I was living that I should be sure to see a performance that occurs during Chaitra Navaratri<sup>58</sup>, in which sex workers danced on Manikarnika Ghat, the main cremation area along the banks of the Ganges in Varanasi. It was explained to me that, historically, the performance was done by courtesans but that now that all of the courtesans are gone, sex

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<sup>58</sup> Chaitra Navaratri celebrates the beginning of the new year according to the Hindu calendar.

workers have stepped in to continue the tradition<sup>59</sup>. In March of 2010, the following announcement appeared in a local English-language newspaper:

*Nagar Vadhus [Brides of the City] To Dance Around Pyres on Seventh Day of Navratra*

Varanasi: Come the seventh day of the Chaitra Navaratra (March 22) and sex workers from far and near will congregate at the Manikarnika Ghat in the evening. After worshipping the lord of the great cremation ground, they will perform dance and music to please the deity. It is traditionally believed that such a musical show at the Manikarnika cremation ghat would bring salvation to them.

A large number of women in prostitution, called Nagar Vadhu (brides of the city), perform religious ritual at the Baba Mahashmashan Nath temple and dance and sing near the burning pyres. It is an annual feature of the city, perhaps the only of its kind. Their performance is also a part of the three-day annual Shrinagar Mahotsava at Baba Mahashmashan Nath temple, beginning from Saturday evening with Rudrabhishek and bhajan. According to organiser [sic] Gulshan Kapoor, a “bhandara” followed by the programme [sic] of folk songs and jagan will be held on Sunday. The celebration would [sic] conclude with the traditional musical programme of the prostitutes on the night of March 22. [Sunday Times of India, March 21, 2010]

Television reporting on the festival on ZeeTV indicated that the tradition of sex workers dancing on the cremation grounds is approximately 450 years old, and that it originates with the restoration of the Baba Mahashmashan Nath temple on Manikarnika Ghat. At the time of the restoration of the temple, it was considered appropriate or necessary to have a celebration with song and dance to mark the occasion, and the only performers willing to come were the “nagar vadhus.” The tradition continues, with sex workers from the surrounding area coming during Chaitra Navaratri (an annual festival for the worship of the goddess Durga that marks the new year according to the Hindu calendar), to do *puja* in hopes of being born to a better life in their next incarnation, followed by a public

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<sup>59</sup> This conversation was conducted in English, and the English word terms “courtesan” and “sex worker” were used exactly as indicated.

performance of song and dance. It is unclear to me when, in the course of the tradition, the focus shifted from celebration of the temple to having metaphysical benefit to the sex worker who is performing. However, the emphasis on the metaphysical benefit to the sex workers shifts the focus of the performance from the audience to the performer in a way that excuses what is, in practice, a sort of mild strip tease or burlesque that would not otherwise be held in such a public venue.

In contrast to the *Guria* performance, it is publicly advertized and known that the women performing are sex workers. It is not possible to say that the sex workers in this case perform *courtesan* identity, although I do argue that the performance alludes to the courtesan tradition. The performance is, instead, *filmi* – meaning that much of the dancing is drawn from Bollywood-esque dance sequences to popular film music and also that, in comparison to the courtesan identity to which it alludes, it appears “cheap” and vulgar in nature (although this “cheapness” does not seem to prevent the audience from enjoying it).

Despite the fact that the dance of the *nagar vadhush* was publicized in the newspaper, it took many phone calls to find out the details of when it would occur. I was eventually told that it would begin at approximately 10pm, and last into the early hours of the morning. It is not generally considered appropriate for women to be out so late in Varanasi; while it is certainly not impossible for a woman to be out on the streets at that time, it is frowned upon. My regular rickshaw driver led me through the narrow alleys leading to the temple to ensure that I would not get lost, but he did not feel comfortable staying to attend the performance itself, and so left me there with instructions to call him shortly before I wanted to leave so that he could come and escort me back to the rickshaw. When I arrived, shortly before 10pm, I was the only woman present in the audience, with the exception of a



dreadlocked woman tourist with a few other foreign men; she left shortly before the performance started, leaving me the only woman in the audience, which was otherwise composed of approximately 200 men of widely varying ages. A young man noticed me standing towards the back of the crowd, and insisted that I follow him to a chair just a few rows back in the audience, ousting two little boys from the chair so that I had a seat. Several rows of plastic chairs were lined up in front of the stage, and a standing crowd went for many rows behind and to the sides of the stage. There were several musicians (a tabla player, harmonium player, and a *dholak* player) sitting at the back of the stage warming up, and two women in fancy mesh-and-sequin *lengha-choli* (skirt and blouse) outfits milling about to the side of the stage. For the most part, members of the audience ignored me, although I was able to engage some of the men next to me in light conversation about what was going to happen: namely, first there would be a short *puja*, and then there would be a performance. The two women in the *lengha-choli* were escorted by the event's organizers through the crowd and to the small temple, where a ceremony was performed for 10 minutes. Following this, the events' organizer made a brief speech about the event and who had funded it, acknowledging several *sadhus* (ascetics) associated with the temple, and handed over the microphone to a middle-aged man who emceed the event, mostly by thanking the audience for their attendance and patronage (in the form of money given to the female performers).

The performance itself began with live background music much in the vein of the background music for *Qawwali* (a harmonium-tabla accompaniment). From my fieldnotes:

a group of approximately 10 young women come out on stage, all wearing *lengha-choli* [skirts and tops that leave the midriff exposed] with sheer *dupattas* [shawls], some with them demurely covering their heads and faces, although one of the younger women runs excitedly about the stage, giggling

and pulling the *dupattas* off the heads of the other women. The dholak starts, the tabla kicks in, the harmonium accompanies, and the women look at each other, expectantly, and then begin to dance. They mostly hop about, bouncing and jiggling. It's very enthusiastic, but there does not appear to be much training here, no apparent practice. Still, it is what it is: musicians playing light classical music, and girls enthusiastically shimmying along, bumping into each other. The dance ends, and all the women clear off the stage to applause.

Following this group dance, an older woman performed solo to the same sort of music. After her first dance, she was given a microphone which she laboriously sound-checked for several minutes, calling out "Hello! Hello!" into the audience (with several men calling "Hello!" in response). She then announced that she is from Benares, and that she was happy to perform at the Benarsi tradition. She recited several *sher* to the appreciative audience, after which a man from the audience came up to the stage and handed her several rs100<sup>60</sup> notes, which she turned over to the emcee. The emcee, receiving the money, held it above his head and shouted out *Hare Mahadev!*,<sup>61</sup> after which the woman left the stage.

Following the older woman's semi-classical performance, the event changed both in tone and in the genre of performance. The next woman who came onstage was considerably younger than the first, and performed a very difficult, practiced routine reminiscent of Bollywood dance numbers while she lip-synched to a Bhojpuri pop song. The subsequent performances that night were in this vein: the *sher* and semi-classical performance having been dispensed with (and the courtesan tradition successfully alluded to), the strobe lights came out and the dances, both solo and in groups, became more

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<sup>60</sup> At the time, 100 rupees was worth approximately \$2.00.

<sup>61</sup> *Hare* here is an exclamation, and *Mahadev* refers to the deity Shiva. Although the phrase can be used in religious worship, here it is just an exclamation, on the order of the English "Oh God!"

similar to contemporary Indian cinema dancing, and increasingly bawdier as the night wore on. The audience – all men – additionally became larger and rowdier. From my fieldnotes:

The audience of men is growing, and as they struggle to fit into the small area in front of the stage, they are pushing forward and nearly toppling the chairs. The police beat them back with *lathis*, and they settle for a few minutes, only to surge forward in a new wave a few minutes later. The balcony above is packed with men of all ages; there is a TV crew there; men with professional cameras film the stage, as do boys in late adolescence, crowding around the stage with their camera-phones. The strobe lights come on, another pop song blares forth, and all the women return to the stage to dance. 10 Rs notes are flung at the stage, fluttering around the women as they bounce and undulate, and the emcee, in the middle of it, shouts "*Hare Mahadev!*" [Fieldnotes, 23 March 2011]

I left the performance around 11:30pm, as the crowd was becoming increasingly raucous, but was later able to talk to several people who saw the concert into the early hours of the morning; I also spoke with Anu about the meaning of the performance, as she understood it, and about her understanding of the perspective of the women who had danced.

First and foremost, Benarsi people with whom I spoke about the performance (and who saw the videos of it that I recorded), dismissed its having any sort of religious significance. Rather, it was interpreted as an excuse to have a "dance party"<sup>62</sup> in a public context where it would otherwise be impossible to have one. A young man I knew who stayed at the performance until 2am said that, as the evening went on, the women's clothing became "*aur chota, aur chota*" (smaller and smaller), and ever greater amounts of money were thrown at the women; in some cases the money was put directly into their

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<sup>62</sup> A "dance party," always said in English, is an occasion at which women dance for male clientele, but which does not include or imply any sexual services beyond the dancing. Several of the women from Shivdaspur engage in dance parties, often as part of a set of festivities celebrating a wedding, sometimes travelling as far as Mumbai to take part in them.

*choli* [blouse], but otherwise contact between the women and the audience was kept to a minimum.

Anu, likewise, argued that the performance was not religious, but was rather about money, like any other performance given by women from Shivdaspur. The clothing and makeup that the women wore to Manikarnika Ghat that night was, she argued, what would be worn to any other “dance party” and as such was somewhat scandalous, in that the outfits are made with blouses smaller and tighter than usual, and feature shawls that are completely sheer. She did say, when pressed, that the moment when the two women went into the temple “to do *puja* with their heads covered [by their *dupattas*]” was religious, but that otherwise the event was solely about money, even if it was somehow cloaked in the idea of long-standing tradition affiliated with this temple, and to the benefit of the souls of the dancers (only two of whom participated in *puja*).

Ajeet Singh, for his part, dismissed the occurrence of the performance as a Hindu ceremony without particular meaning:

Oh, I know what you are talking about. It is a traditional thing that on that particularly day a *tawa'if* or *bai-ji* will sing on that Ghat, and then God will be happy. It's typical Indian culture. Hindus have a reason for everything: they will have a ceremony to kill you, too, they have so many ceremonies and so many Gods [Personal Interview, 4/3/2010].

However, he did use the topic of the performance on the *ghat* as an opportunity to lament the loss of courtesan culture in Benares, saying that when it comes to the arts of the courtesans “Benares has lost everything.”: There are no more courtesans there, and the woman who was reciting Sher on Manikarnika ghat is no *bai-ji*, although she might claim to be in order to say that she is superior to the woman who lip-synchs to Bhojpuri cinema music, who is in turn superior to the women soliciting from doorways in the brothels of Shivdaspur Alley in the afternoon. Ajeet said he knew the sort of performance that would

have occurred on Manikarnika Ghat:

They [the women who performed] are not quality singers, I know they are not. In the past, we invited two or three of them to perform at our concerts, but it was not feasible to keep inviting them because of the [higher] quality of the other performers. You saw the *tawa'ifs* who came and sang in our concert this year, and how good their singing was. If they'd only had the chance, they could have gone much further with their music, but they never had the opportunity. The older woman who sang [at Pearls of Love] was a perfect classical singer [Personal Interview 4/3/2010].

The type of performance on the *ghat*, then – vulgar, reminiscent of Bollywood musical numbers – simultaneously elevates the *tawa'if* in relation to the women of Shivdaspur and highlights the degradation of the more contemporary performance genres that sex workers from Shivdaspur engage in.

It is, however, possible to interpret the sex workers singing and dancing on the *ghat* in a considerably less cynical and perhaps less condescending way, which takes into account the possibility of their being simultaneously “degraded” and powerful women. A few days after the performance, I encountered one backpacker who had attended the performance, who recognized me at a local coffee shop because I had stood out as the only woman in attendance on the *ghat* that night. He felt that it was a shame that such a long-standing tradition was denigrated as cheap or overtly sexual, and attributed the (similarly mercenary) interpretations he had heard of the event to “fear of tantra.” In his mind, the performance was not about anything tawdry, or sexually taboo, but rather about a sincere appreciation of sexuality made plausible by the tantric traditions in Hinduism. Although tantra is heavily mythologized and misunderstood (*c.f.* White 2003) among the tourists who pass through Varanasi, and I heard many a scandalized and jocular tale about foreign women being duped into having sex with fake (or legitimate) practitioners of tantra,

Varanasi does have a long-standing *tantric* tradition that allows for a richer symbolic interpretation of what happened on the *ghat* that evening.

Tantra refers “to a specific brand of religious practice common to the Hindu, Buddhist, and Jain traditions since at least the seventh century; above all, it is identified as a particularly radical and dangerous practice that involves activities normally prohibited in mainstream society, such as sexual intercourse with lower-class partners and consumption of meat and wine” (Urban 2003:1). The specific practices, and meanings, associated with tantra are in fact incredibly varied, however, and tantra or tantrism do not

refer to a singular, monolithic, or neatly defined category. Rather, this is an extremely messy and ambiguous term used to refer to a ‘bewilderingly diverse array of esoteric precepts and practices attested across much of South, Inner and East Asia from the sixth century down to the present day (Urban 2010: 4).

The notion of tantra as a unified or codified set of practices developed out of 18<sup>th</sup> century Orientalist scholarship on the wide range of practices that came to be understood as tantra (White 2003; Urban 2003; Urban 2010), with the unifying thread to such practices being their inversion of social and political norms in the regions and religious communities where tantra was practiced. The fact that some tantric rights are sexual in nature has attracted significant attention in Western scholarship and popular Indian and Western understandings of tantric practices, although the sexual rites, as all else associated with tantra, are theoretically more about encountering the divine through the transcendence of the material world and its concerns than about eroticism in and of itself. Practitioners of tantra thus engage in what are considered socially unacceptable practices to more orthodox Hindus (???), including sexual relations, and other unacceptable, and unclean or “polluting” acts. These include the ingestion of substances, such as meat, alcohol and other

drugs (and in the case of *Aghori* tantrism practiced in Varanasi, human flesh), or the embracing of death and its pollution by frequenting and worshiping on the cremation grounds, and smearing oneself in the ash that is gathered there. To the extent that tantra is one, easily definable thing, it is the violation of Orthodox religious practice. If Orthodox Hindu practice is a path to the divine through practices such as meditation, worship of deities, and the strict observance of dietary and social practices meant to preserve the purity of the practitioner, tantra is considered a second, often disreputable and dangerous route to the divine through the systematic violation of the Orthodox traditions.



**Figure 15 : Hindu icons representing *yog* and *bhog* outside a temple on the Panchkroshi Yatra, a pilgrimage route circling Varanasi. According to my guide on the route, Prof. P.B. Rana Singh of Benares Hindu University, the figure on the left represents *yog*, or the more Orthodox path to the divine; the figure on the right is *bhog*, the less Orthodox path which overlaps with *tantra*. While the figure representing *yog* is meditating, the figure representing *bhog* is grinding *bhang* (a preparation of the cannabis plant). While both figures have been worshiped recently, the figure representing *yog* is considerably worn away from worship, whereas *bhog* is relatively intact.**

Although tantra involves a range of spiritual and religious practices other than the sexual, David Gordon White argues that “sexualized ritual practices” are currently understood as giving tantric practice “specificity over and against other South Asian religious traditions” (2003:7). Although contemporary Orthodox Hinduism is often mistakenly understood as the “classical” religion of South Asia, White argues that this understanding is the relatively recent result of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century religious reform, and that “tantra has been the predominant religious paradigm, for over a millennium, of the great majority of inhabitants of the Indian subcontinent” (2003:3). White thus reads tantra as a subaltern (i.e., non-elite, non-colonial) religious practice.

As described above, it is colonial-era reforms, created and implemented by elites, that led to the decline of courtesan culture in South Asia, and which imparted a Victorian morality on the South Asian interpretation of sex workers. Although not all subaltern categories are necessarily linked, tantra and sex work/prostitution are historically, symbolically and practically intertwined in the ritualized sexual practices of tantra. Precisely because of their remarkably low and impure status in both Orthodox and Heterodox Hindu society, prostitutes are among the preferred sexual partners of tantric practitioners:

Tantric sexual union not only accepts the inherent impurity of sexual union but in fact exaggerates and exploits it as a source of tremendous power. Tantric *maithuna* is by no means a conventional act of sexual union between partners of compatible casts aimed at producing a child; rather, it is an explicitly transgressive rite that deliberately inverts normal laws surrounding sexual relations (Urban 2010:116).

Because the tantric rights are deliberately transgressive in nature, women who would otherwise be considered unsuitable sexual partners become instead favored partners. Sex



with a menstruating woman would generally be considered tremendously polluting, and yet in certain tantric rituals, a menstruating woman is preferred as one's partner for ritualized sexual acts, which are conceptualized as worship or a form of sacrifice. Better yet than a menstruating woman as a partner for such acts is a prostitute, or someone else's wife, because of the tremendous breach of social norms and class/caste boundaries that such a union entails. Indeed, prostitutes were historically understood to play vital roles in such worship, because of the symbolic power of incorporating "power from the margins" (Urban 2010:118) into religious practice. Precisely because of her marginality, the prostitute is in possession of great power for the purposes of the ritual, although Biernacki (2007) cautions against interpreting that power as agential, or as something which is wielded *by* the sex worker. Instead, such female power is co-opted for the purposes of the male participant in the ritual.

It is precisely the interconnection of prostitutes and tantra that is at play in how we might interpret the dancing of contemporary sex workers on Manikarnika Ghat. Although the event is not explicitly listed as tantric, there is no doubt that it is couched in tantric allusion. Recall the event's write-up in the newspaper, mentioning the dancing and singing of the sex workers "near the burning pyres," a combination of factors which are considered polluting (proximity to death and cremation, and the public sexuality of the sex worker) but through the alchemy of tantra can combine to form a powerful religious event. In this case, through its acceptance into the religious, the public sexuality of the sex worker becomes an experience of the divine through the power that comes with transgression, rather than a polluting liability. It is this transgressive power to which the foreign tourist referred when he said that cynical interpretations of the event as irreligious were "afraid of

tantra.” The event can thus be read differently than the cynical interpretation of it as a public burlesque masquerading as a religious rite. Although the dance event did not involve the specific ritualized sex acts described in tantric texts, the event can be read as a sanctified transgression of social norms benefitting the practitioners, hence the “salvation,” (an oddly Christian/colonial term) that the dancing is said to confer on the sex workers in the newspaper description.

The power of transgression adheres to sex workers in other South Asian contexts, as well. As Maciszewski argues, pre-colonial South Asian sex workers, particularly courtesans, were liminal figures. Coming from low-status backgrounds, they were able to access elite social spheres because their skills were considered vital to those social spheres. Likewise, in tantric rites the sex worker’s pollution and low status becomes an asset instead of a liability, bringing her into contact with, and making her valuable to, the religious elite and their fellow religious practitioners. The South Indian *devadasi*, or temple “prostitutes” (courtesans, technically, in that like the North Indian *tawa’if* they served as entertainers and companions in the courts that sponsored the temples to which they were attached), likewise transcended their low-status social and caste background. It is precisely this inability to transgress the social boundaries conferred upon them by their low status that Maciszewski argues plagues *contemporary* courtesans, and that Ajeet Singh argues characterizes contemporary sex workers, to whom social mobility and acceptance are not considered possible.

However, it is vital to recognize that the sort of social mobility and power born of liminality possessed by *tawa’ifs* and *devadasis*, as well as the prostitutes engaged in tantric sexual rituals, is derived categorically from their exclusion and marginalization. For the

prostitutes engaged in tantra, they are useful because of the power their partners can attain from them in the transgression of social and moral boundaries that sexual union with a prostitute entails. *Devadasis*, in addition to their transcendence of low social station through court and temple activities, and their importance in temple ritual, were specifically excluded from certain aspects of worship: although their dancing and singing were considered part of the necessary *puja*, or worship, offered by the royal patrons of the temple (Marglin 1985:171-175), *devadasis* themselves were not allowed into the inner sanctum of temples because of their sexual impurity (Singh 1997: 135). Almost tautologically, the liminality enjoyed by the *tawa'if* is remarkable and its reinstatement desirable precisely *because* of the low-status and exclusion of the women in question.

Indeed, power as wielded (or, more passively, enjoyed) by sex workers in South Asia is thus a result of their exclusion, just as *homo sacer* (Giorgio Agamben's exemplar of the concept of bare life, the Roman legal figure of the criminal who lost all political protections and could be murdered without impunity, but not sacrificed because in his political-legal exclusion he has become sacred) is sacred (*sacer*). Agamben argues that *homo sacer*, and all other taboos or banned persons or actions, are included in religious, social and legal systems only through their exclusion: they operate as exceptions which prove (and strengthen) the rules that they maintain (1998:49-62). The power that *homo sacer* possesses, and that which the courtesan or the prostitute engaged in tantra possesses, is a power born of exclusion from societal acceptance: the notion of making courtesans acceptable through activism, then, eliminates the source of power that they are thought historically to possess. In concluding this chapter, I consider the irony of the ways in which the courtesan is engaged in Guria's activism.

### **The *Tawa'if* in Guria's Activism**

As has been shown, the *tawa'if*, at least as she is imagined or constructed, operates on the outskirts of sex work, but does so in a way that allows her to sidestep many of the non-moralistic objections to sex work and prostitution. Contemporary abolitionists object to contemporary sex work on the grounds that it is dangerous, putting both the worker and her client at considerable risk of disease, as well as putting the worker herself at risk of assault by both customers and pimps. Sex work carries with it strong overtones of coercion and lack of agency, exemplified by the trafficked sex worker, sold into the profession and forced to engage in prostitution in order to pay back debts that she incurred during trafficking. If she has not been literally coerced into being a sex worker, then she is the victim of economic coercion, having decided to go into this line of work failing other viable employment opportunities, because she is low in social status and often uneducated. Thus, the sex worker is conceptualized as stigmatized, powerless, poor, uneducated, and unsafe.

The historical *tawa'if* as she is currently depicted by scholars and by her contemporary middle-class admirers, on the other hand, engages in sex work but has few of these problems. Although she may also come from a marginalized social background, she has greater access to elite spheres, and is accorded status-by-association with elites. Although sex work is lucrative, courtesanry is, in theory, even more so, and as such stereotypically money and poverty are not issues. Because the *tawa'if* does not have a large number of customers, but rather only a handful of patrons and sexual relationships in her lifetime, her risk of disease (and the risk that she poses to clients) is considerably

lowered. Finally, she is by definition educated, at least the in arts, and by virtue of having to be well versed in poetry, and to write it, she is literate. The *tawa'if*, then, as the stereotype goes, is a sort of model sex worker: educated, respected, affluent, and secure.

It is for this reason that there are fewer objections to the idea of courtesanry than to sex work, and as such the courtesan once figured prominently in Guria's activism, both as an example of a more morally acceptable sex work, and also as an identity for which contemporary sex workers might strive. One article in the *Guria* newspaper archive states that at one point women affiliated with the NGO, and working to fight human trafficking in various red light areas in India, "want to be called as tawa'if or courtesan instead of prostitutes" (Singh 2006), thus appealing to the status and respect (and agency to prefer one appellation over another) of the *tawa'if* as opposed to the sex worker.

In 2003, *Guria Sansthan* announced a new, and what was ultimately short-lived, component to its activism: it sought to help women in prostitution leave the trade by supporting them as artists, providing a small stipend in order for them to study music and dance. The hope was that they would be able to support themselves as performing artists rather than as prostitutes. Although to my knowledge the program no longer functions, one can still donate to it through Guria's website ([www.guriaindia.org](http://www.guriaindia.org))<sup>63</sup> under the heading "Rehabilitation through cultural teams of women in prostitution." The original plan called for twenty-eight women and fifty-six accompanists to be selected for training; they would perform at ten annual festivals throughout the country, and eventually earn their own livelihood. A local newspaper article at the time of the troupe's inception quotes Ajeet as saying

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<sup>63</sup> The website has not been updated since 2007. To the best of my knowledge, it is not a primary means of fundraising for the NGO.

'Our main aim [is] to help the sex workers show courage to fight against discrimination, work for women's empowerment, and join the mainstream.' According to him, since long [sic] the society had recognized '*Nautanki*'<sup>64</sup> and [they] want that such [a] group would be emerged [sic] so the sex workers can be in position to earn money through their cultural talents instead of selling their flesh (Singh 2003).

The program did not last for more than a few years, however, and when I asked Ajeet about it he would say, sadly, that no one appreciated such music anymore, and that therefore they had not been able to keep the program funded. I should note that *Guria* has no difficulty finding funding for its anti-trafficking and educational work, but no one was willing to sponsor a performance troupe of singers, dancers and musicians who had emerged from a red-light area background. Since the raids in Shivdaspur in 2005, *Guria*'s focus has been elsewhere, but the shows how the idea of keeping the art forms of the *tawa'ifs* alive were once important to *Guria*'s activism.

However, for *Guria* the *tawa'if* is always located somewhere *other* than the primary location of their activism, Shivdaspur, and furthermore is located in or associated with the past. Ajeet says that when he began his work in Shivdaspur in the early 1990s, he was still able to find a few *tawa'if* households in Varanasi, one or two in Shivdaspur and more in Dalmandi, which at the time was already defunct as a red light area. Ajeet says:

Shivdaspur is in a transitional phase. [Although there used to be musicians in red-light areas], at this point music has nearly vanished from the red light area in Benares. There are very few such musicians left. I know of four or five women from Shivdaspur who sing, and of those, the ones who are better at singing have migrated to Nagpur. Dalmandi is no more. Dalmandi is history. Maybe there are one or two singers left there, but they are hidden away because you can't stay in Dalmandi openly as a prostitute anymore. I visited Dalmandi when it was still a little alive, maybe ten years ago or more and I saw a few remnants of that [courtesan] culture. Most of that vanished in the 1970s, though, and I only found remnants in the 1990s. Maybe I could

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<sup>64</sup> Nautanki is a form of musical folk theater performed in North India. For a more complete discussion of the art form, see Hansen 1992.

trace out ten or fifteen families, but even they have gone [from Varanasi] and I've never found them again since [Personal Interview, 2/24/2010].

The artistry, then, has gone out of sex work in Varanasi in the last decade, and has nearly completely vanished. As previously mentioned, what does remain is not thought to be high enough quality to merit its inclusion in the Pearls of Love concert series, or its recognition as a characteristic that distinguishes some of the women in Shivdaspur as *tawa'if* or as artisans living amongst sex workers:

There was always a hierarchy among prostitutes, even historically. There were the *tawa'ifs* and then seven or eight categories below them. The ones who sold their bodies were the lowest, and those who could sing were at the top. ... This classification is still there in some form. It's a very recent phenomenon, that there are so few women singing, and that they are not quality singers and musicians. It [the music] is too degenerated [Ajeet Singh, Personal Interview, 2/24/2010].

According to Ajeet, any pretense to courtesanry on the part of contemporary Shivdaspuris is simply an attempt to keep oneself separate from or superior to the other sex workers in Shivdaspur, to say "I [the *tawa'if*] am not like her [the sex worker]." Although I did not encounter Shivdaspuris who attempted to distinguish themselves from the others on the grounds of courtesanry, the way that Ajeet maps these distinctions onto the community of Shivdaspur is in accordance with the fact that individuals who came from Bhind Basti or from around Manduadih argued that they were not like the people who lived in Shivdaspur Alley. Ajeet, however, views the pretence to distinction on the part of those who live in Bhind Basti to be a corruption of older hierarchies in red light areas based on musical talent. Those who currently make any claim to doing the work of *tawa'if* or *bai-jis* are lying about their higher status.

To Ajeet, the reasons for their falsehood are simultaneously their lack of talent, and also their involvement in the higher levels of the social and political hierarchies that

dominate the sex trade in Shivdaspur. These *tawa'if*-pretenders come from the wealthier households of Bhind Basti and Manduadih, those which are involved in brothel keeping and trafficking. The denial of *tawa'if* identity to these individuals in Shivdaspur is combined with a generalized respect for the *tawa'if* as a historical (and still, rarely, extant) phenomenon, as a form of sex work practiced with "some ethics," and with a corresponding respect for women more generally. Of *tawa'if* households, Ajeet says:

In *tawa'if*'s families, they had a custom of taking care of their daughter-in-law with great respect. It is true. I have seen such families. You would not be able to see even the face of the daughter-in-law, such was the respect for her... I'm not in favor of the *purdah* system, but what I'm trying to say is that from their point of view, they maintained the sanctity of their daughters-in-law. A customer would never even be able to see the face of the daughter-in-law!. But, that's all gone. These are only historical facts [Personal Interview, 2/24/2010].

This description of the respect for the daughter-in-law in the *tawa'if* household was presented to me in order to show the distinction between such households and those in contemporary Shivdaspur, where it does not matter if a woman marries or not because her in-laws will be happy to prostitute her to a customer willing to pay enough money. The moral economy of these households, in contrast to those of the *tawa'ifs* is suspect, and those with the power and money to claim superiority over others are imposters to the historical grandeur that was the *tawa'if*.

Ajeet is not alone in his assertion that the *tawa'if* is different from the sex worker, and that the *tawa'if* no longer inhabits Shivdaspur. When I initially arrived in Varanasi and mentioned that part of what I hoped to research was *tawa'if* identity in Shivdaspur, I was often told in casual conversation by those whom I encountered that all I would find in Shivdaspur were sex workers, living and working in tiny rooms, in squalid conditions. The customers for those selling sex in Shivdaspur, I was told, were themselves impoverished



and of low status: cycle-rickshaw pullers and other petty day-laborers, and making a wage of about rs100 per day<sup>65</sup>, they would only be able to afford the cheapest of sex workers, such as those available in Shivdaspur Alley. I was told instead to look in Dalmandi, and when I countered that my understanding was that all of the courtesan's salons there were closed, and had been for some time, I was often told that I was mistaken. This was generally followed by a vague suggestion of being able to help: the person with whom I was speaking would find a *kotha* [salon] for me and take me to see the "remnants" of the *tawa'if* tradition, or the person's father would be able to arrange such an experience, but the *kothas* and the *tawa'ifs* never materialized. Still, I was told, these were the women whom I should seek out as examples of the rare wealth and glamour that could exist in sex work in South Asia.

Because *Guria* and Ajeet maintain that they are not raising moral objections to the selling of sex in general, and because Ajeet's long-term goal for Shivdaspur is to transform it into an "exploitation-free red light area," the courtesan is useful to both him and the organization in that she represents (and is constructed as) a sex worker who embodies the goals that he has for the women who he imagines will eventually live and work in Shivdaspur. The courtesan is symbolic of the sort of utopian sex worker who would inhabit the utopian exploitation-free red-light area that is his goal: independently earning her money and choosing when, how, and with whom she might exchange sex for money.

In an early issue of the NGO's magazine, *Guria: Voice of the Tawa'if*, Ajeet Singh published a short editorial piece entitled "What One Tawa'if Told," about his conversation with a woman named Manita, who had performed at the Pearls of Love concerts several

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<sup>65</sup> Approximately \$2.25 in late 2009.

times. He had asked her whether or not she ever fell in love in the course of her profession, and if not, what sort of emotions came into her work. She explains that she tries to keep love and emotion out of the equation, that it is not possible in her circumstances. My rough translation of his Hindi is as follows:

She understood this much, that love is not a commodity—No, because she was sold, she knew that buying is nothing [i.e., you cannot buy genuine emotion]. Love is not possible in some store. If eroticism was what was to be sold to the customer, then that was what came into a prostitute's face, but it was not sincere eroticism. In the monetary transaction, there had been no love relationship.

Although her work did not bring romantic fulfillment into her life, as a *tawa'if* she found fulfillment in her music, and as a result there was considerable joy and love in her life:

If in her heart music played, then the entire world seemed beautiful. If something happened in the music, then the heart would come on that journey. Existence is full of color, but because our insides are colorless, we cannot see it. From inside music, understanding is born, and from this the entire world becomes full of light, and you can see everything.

The *tawa'if*, then, was saved from the degradations of sex work by her ability, as a *tawa'if*, to practice music of a sort that led to fuller understanding and fuller existence, and it is for this reason that Ajeet can set her apart from other sex workers.

Although much scholarship and public opinion celebrates the positive attributes of the courtesan – her education, her independence, her wealth, her beauty – as we have seen the historical reality of the sex work is not so unequivocally positive. While certain aspects of the courtesan were celebrated, her commercial nature was always considered suspect, and much of the social and religious power that she possessed was derived from her exclusion from the world of more conventionally respectable women. Thus, the attempts of contemporary scholars, as well as Guria, to somehow separate the courtesan from her

environs as a sex worker do so at the expense of understanding courtesans in all of their complexity; these attempts also compound the notion of the contemporary sex worker as degraded and untalented.

Despite being constructed in opposition to each other, courtesans and contemporary sex workers are more accurately understood as being part of a continuum of women engaged in sexual labor in South Asia. However, the politics of contemporary constructions of good or virtuous women, combined with the relatively recent “degeneration” of the role of sex workers such as *ganika*, *tawa’if*, and *devadasis* in the region, has created a political context in which an activism or identity politics based in the notion of the “positive” attributes of sex work and sex workers is not viable. Hence, the silence about sex work that Guria maintains during “Pearls of Love,” for its own purposes and at the behest of the sex workers performing in the concert. This silence, though, calls into question the efficacy of this aspect of Guria’s activist project, a topic taken up in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 6  
THE TRIPLY SUBALTERN SEX WORKER: THE PROBLEMS OF SILENCE AND VOICE IN  
GURIA'S ACTIVISM

*In a gust of sentiment we may wish to mutter encouraging and brave things about 'resistance' and so forth, emphasizing the fragility of such counterhegemonic voices and signifiers hugely winged and ready to fly. But that sort of response is more for us than for those voices. It is we who gain courage from their confluence of strength and fragility, the strength in their fragility given to the weak and the defeated... – Michael Taussig, Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man, p. 210.*

*Can the subaltern speak? – Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak*

*First of all, they have a tendency to lie. -- Ajeet Singh*

In *Shamanism, Colonialism and the Wild Man*, Michael Taussig grapples with issues of representation of the Other, particularly an Other assumed to be savage, irrational, and violent. Describing the horrific treatment of rubber plantation workers in the Putomayo in Columbia and Peru in the early 1900s, he argues that the barbarity of colonial mistreatment of indigenous “workers” was a product of “mimesis between the savagery attributed to the Indians by the colonists and the savagery perpetrated by the colonists in the name of [...] civilization, meaning business” rather than an accurate representation of the workers themselves (1987:134). The purported savagery of the Indians turned the colonists into savages themselves: responding to rumors that Indians would respond to colonists’ incursions into their territory for business purposes with irrational and extraordinary violence, they in turn treated Indians that they encountered with that same irrational and extraordinary violence.

Although savagery may not be an applicable concept in contemporary Varanasi, *Guria* attributes extraordinary violence and cruelty to brothel owners, pimps, and traffickers in Shivdaspur. Being trafficked into a brothel is described as a brutal process by

which a girl is “broken up” into fragments of a person, such that she works docilely, does not attempt to escape, and continually lies about the nature of her work and her relationship to those who own brothels. The following is from an interview with Ajeet Singh:

M: You had mentioned that when they [women and girls] are being “groomed” by the pimps and brothel keepers that they are taught to lie. What else does that process involve?

A: That process is the cruelest part of the business. It happens when the girl is brought in by the trafficker, when she is sold into the brothel. The trafficker prepares her [“grooms her up”] for the business of sex work somewhere else, before bringing her to work in the brothel. She is sexually abused, she is beaten, she is partially broken up. Then when she goes to the brothel, the brothel keeper takes her through the process again, burning her with cigarette butts, using chili powder [on her genitals], giving her electric shocks. It is very, *very* brutal, you see. [He bangs his hand on the table in emphasis.] And they are taught, there [in the brothels], never to speak the truth. All the girls who we’ve rescued lie on their first day [about their lives in the brothels], it is only when their statement is taken later [longer after their removal from the brothels] that they speak the truth. At first, they call their brothel keepers “mothers” or “aunties,” and so the police and everyone else is confused. They say: “She is my mother, I am her daughter,” she herself speaks that way because she has been taught to say such things. She is taught to say those things in the toughest of situations. During the grooming process, fake customers are sent in to her and they ask her “Who brought you here?” and say “Maybe we can get you out of this place...” Then, if the woman says “Yes, yes, please get me out,” she will be beaten up again. So they [sex workers] do not speak the truth very easily [Personal Interview, 5/18/2010].

Here, Ajeet represents the entry into sex work as it has been described to him. According to him, entry does not happen voluntarily and, in fact, the desire of a girl or a woman sold into a brothel to avoid doing sex work is so strong, and her will to escape it so powerful, that torture and trickery (followed by more torture) are necessary in order to bring her to comply with it. Even following rescue, girls and women will lie about their predicament until they have been out of the brothels for a period of time, after which they will finally speak “the truth.” The violence exacted on the girls in this system justifies the

extraordinary and potentially violent actions of his NGO when it engages in rescue work. To be clear: Ajeet Singh is not equivalent to a rubber trader in the Putumayo in terms of the violent actions which he and his NGO have engaged in; no torture of brothel keepers is involved in brothel raids, and the vast majority of his actions as an activist are non-violent. However, he constructs representations of the lives of sex workers as so degraded and painful that any action on his part to aid them is justified. As such, the claimed accuracy of the representation is of concrete importance to his justification of his tactics.

Sealing Cheng (2010)

In untangling the representations of Indians in the Putumayo as savages, and the influence of those representations on the violent actions of colonists, Michael Taussig turns to contemporary and historic native Putumayo Indians:

Post-Enlightenment European culture makes it difficult if not impossible to draw apart the veil of the heart of darkness without either succumbing to its hallucinatory quality or losing that quality. Fascist poetics succeed where liberal rationalism self-destructs. But what might point a way out of this impasse is precisely what is so painfully absent from the Putumayo accounts, namely the narrative mode of the Indians themselves. It is the ultimate anthropological conceit, anthropology at its highest, indeed redemptive, moment, rescuing the “voice” of the Indians from the obscurity of pain and time. From the represented shall come that which overturns the representation (1987:134-135).

Although the differences are obvious, there are parallels between the Putumayo and Shivdaspur: both involve systems of labor in which individuals are represented as having been forced to work, and punished and tortured if they have refused. Whereas in Shivdaspur it is relatively important to the activists associated with Guria to be able to

discern whether sex work is forced or voluntary<sup>66</sup>, what is at stake in Taussig's analysis is not labor conditions, but, rather, the purported savagery of the Indians, the truth or fiction of which can be clarified by their "voice."

Taussig's insistence on this "voice" is useful here, in that it provides us, theoretically, with a tool for understanding the day-to-day realities of sex work. The reclamation of ignored or silenced "voices" is likewise central to the historiography of the Subaltern Studies project, which seeks to reclaim the histories of pre-colonial and non-elite South Asia from the colonial archive that was constructed about, but not by, South Asian populations. Likewise, the voices and narratives of sex workers could corroborate the veracity of narratives that are told *about* them: brothel prostitution understood as forced, brutal and cruel can be confirmed as such, or overturned as a rescuer's fiction, through the voices of sex workers.

The potential brutality of engaging in brothel-based sex work is not something that is described only by Ajeet and *Guria* for the purposes of explaining and justifying their activism. Rather, Ajeet's understanding of sex work as violent and cruel corresponded with the dominant understandings of sex work that I encountered among socially conscious middle-class Indians. This understanding is seconded, albeit with a meaningful twist, by sex workers affiliated with the Kolkata-based NGO *Durbar*, whose Secretary Swapna Gayen made the following statement at the Third [West Bengal] State Conference of Sex Workers in 2005:

In any society, a few women fall through the net of familial bondage for various reasons, and provide sexual services as free wage laborers. The society

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<sup>66</sup> See Peng (2005) for a deconstruction of the forced/voluntary dichotomy as it relates to sex work, as well as a discussion of why reliance on this distinction is harmful to sex worker's activism and mobilization as workers.

punishes us for this freedom. The conditions in which we are forced to work are very bad. We work with loads of torture, stigma and abuse heaped upon us by the police, hooligans, labor contractors and sundry other people. However, we are fighting against all these injustices and for gaining our rights as workers, because we are free human beings.

Although “torture, stigma and abuse” are cited here as well as in Ajeet Singh’s description of the conditions in brothels under which sex work takes place, what is different here from Ajeet’s rendering of the situation is that Swapna Gayen reframes sex work as freedom from “the net of familial bondage,” rather than a trafficking *into* bondage, even as the working conditions of sex workers are understood as something against which to be struggled. Durbar claims that the majority of women working as sex workers in India do so voluntarily despite the deplorable working conditions, a finding corroborated by the ethnographic work of Prabha Kotiswaran (2011)<sup>67</sup>. Insisting on the importance of the forced/voluntary dichotomy in sex work is ultimately harmful to sex workers in that it can discredit all sex workers’ attempts to mobilize for better working conditions by implying that those who choose sex work have “chosen” exploitation; focus on this dichotomy additionally reinscribes virgin/whore identifications on women based on whether or not their participation in sex work is voluntary or conscripted (Peng 2005). However, the use of the voluntary/forced dichotomy is unfortunately at the heart of how Guria justifies its activism, and is therefore of some utility in gauging the responses of sex workers to Guria’s work in Shivdaspur. If sex work is generally voluntary, the sort of brutality which Ajeet attributes to the process of making a girl or woman into a sex worker would appear to be nonsensical, or perhaps a neoabolitionist fiction. If brothel-based sex workers are generally of the opinion that what they do is work, as opposed to slavery, and that the

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<sup>67</sup> Kotiswaran’s research was conducted with Durbar in Kolkatta, as well as with sex worker activists in the temple town of Tirupati.



brothels in which they currently work can be exploitative but are necessary to their labor, then a reform of the brothel system, as opposed to its complete destruction the via “rescue-and-report” tactics, would be a better response to the problem at hand, as it would cause less disruption to the day-to-day working lives of the women.

However, Ajeet has a retort to this argument: The sex workers lie. Recall, from above, that the rationale behind the “grooming up” of a girl into brothel-based sex work is to teach her to lie: to lie to customers that would help her escape; to lie to and confuse the police when she is brought to them after a rescue operation, and it is only after the girls have been away from the brothels for some time that they might tell the “truth,” or at least a version of the truth that corresponds to Guria’s understanding of brothel-based sex work.<sup>68</sup> Their voices, then, cannot help us out of the conundrum, because from his perspective their voices cannot be trusted. However, in my experience, their voices cannot help us out of this conundrum not because they lie, but rather because they do not want to speak about it: they are silent on the topic.

In the course of my fieldwork, I spoke with many people who were involved with and implicated in sex work. seven were women I knew to be, or to have been, sex workers. Many, many more were people who were connected to, involved with, or implicated in sex work: *dalals*, brothel keepers, traffickers and, more often, the wives and children of *dalals*, brothel keepers, and traffickers. Stretching the circle of involvement farther, I spoke with rickshaw drivers and shopkeepers who served the population of Shivdaspur; with police

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<sup>68</sup> Sealing Cheng, in her ethnography of migrant entertainers in South Korea, describes the curation of the narratives of “trafficked” women to fit the stories of victimhood that are expected by and useful to anti-trafficking NGOs (2010:192-219).

officers from the nearby Manduadih station; and, of course, with NGO workers who, day in and day out for years, walked or road their bicycles and motorcycles into Shivdaspur Alley. These individuals were generally quite happy to talk with me. With the exception of Ajeet and Manju, however, there was one thing in particular about which they emphatically did not want to speak: sex work.<sup>69</sup>

Previous chapters have focused largely on representations and understandings of sex workers and prostitutes in India. In this chapter, I turn to the ways in which sex workers with whom I interacted represented themselves to me. These representations by and large took the form of silence on the topic of their work: only begrudgingly could they be brought to speak of it. Because of their silence, what they actually said will be discussed and contextualized in reference to broader discussions of the intersections of silence, stigma, power and protection as it relates to sex work, sexuality, and gender both within and outside of the South Asian context.

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<sup>69</sup> Although my initial experience of having difficulty engaging sex workers in speaking about their work appears to be typical, in other cases ethnographers have not had such long-term difficulty when doing research with sex workers. In the Indian context, see Dewey (2008), Kotiswaran (2011), Saeed (2002), as well as research produced by the NGO Durbar. For ethnographies outside the Indian context, see Bernstein (2007), Brennan (2004), and Zheng (2009). The fact that I was not able to do more standard participant observation within Shivdaspur, and unable to routinely go to the homes of people I knew in Shivdaspur, obviously prevented building the sort of rapport which could potentially have led to more open conversation. Similarly, that I was affiliated with the NGO *Guria* made it difficult for people to tell me things that differed from the Guria perspective or that they might not worry would get back to Guria. It was also impossible to collect opinion on the organization that was not biased in its favor. As a result, the information that I present here is a direct result of my position vis-à-vis Shivdaspur as a researcher working under the auspices of *Guria*, which is to say that the people with whom I spoke told me what they felt was appropriate to tell a familiar outsider. The sort of silence that I encountered is much more common in the attempts of historians to tease the “voices” of sex workers from archival materials not written by sex workers themselves, in which they often feature as criminals, victims, or both (*c.f.* Banerjee 1998; Tambe 2008).

The seemingly self-evident reasons for this silence are stigma and embarrassment (or the assumption that this is how Guria views their work, and that I shared that view point because of my association with Guria). Because the sex worker is understood as the symbolic antithesis of the chaste South Asian wife no one, in the general order of things, wishes to identify as a prostitute. Nor, as Bandyopadhyay (1996) notes, do women generally wish to be known as “sex workers,” given that the word “sex” features so prominently in the appellation. It would be perfectly reasonable to say that, for these reasons, those involved in sex work desire not to speak on the subject and that I as a researcher was therefore unable to collect their “voice” on the topic. However, the content of their silences -- when, exactly, they refused to speak, or when they quickly changed the topic of conversation, and what they changed the topic of conversation to -- ultimately did “speak” volumes about what they wanted or felt was appropriate to say. It is necessary here to read their silence on the topic of sex work as the “voice” they wished to put forth on the subject matter to an outsider. However, it is important to note that, based on the ways in which women and girls in Shivdaspur would scold each other when they referenced sex work in my presence, sex workers do speak about sex work amongst themselves. Likewise, women engaged in sex work in Shivdaspur are the subjects of gossip amongst those involved in the sex trade in Shivdaspur Alley (as nearly everyone there is), but who do not themselves engage in sex work. Their silence on the topic is reserved for outsiders.

This is not to say that they do not ever speak about sex work with outsiders: after 6 months of near complete silence on the topic, Anu eventually took me into (some of her) confidence regarding the topic. Additionally, occasionally the young women who would come to *Guria’s* community events would slip into a manner of “frank speak” that one of

them would quickly correct in my presence, indicating that silence on the topic when speaking to outsiders is not a universal convention, although the silence was always maintained shortly after the young woman who broke it was corrected or scolded by others. Likewise, in some of the formal interviews that I conducted through the auspices of *Guria*, women would speak quite frankly on the topic. The content of what they said is covered below. However, even this frank speech was muted by demure and/or irritated disclaimers: their “What is to tell?,” “What shall I say?,” and “What can one do?” constantly belittled the importance of what was told, said, or done in their narratives. In this chapter, then, I consider the ways in which silence informed and shaded everything that I came to know about Shivdaspur as a red light district from Shivdaspuris themselves. I argue, following Basso (1970), Gal (1990) and Glenn (2004) that their silence is not a lack of content but rather an ambiguous rhetorical strategy: just as silence muffles “the truth” of what happens or does not happen in Shivdaspur, it serves as a protective veil for those who would – for reasons of privacy, honor, dignity, and evasion of law – rather not be known to have anything to do with sex work.

### *Silence and Voice*

The notion of “voice” is important in the civil society, NGO sector in South Asia. A common model for social action in this sphere is to address social problems or injustices by making the voices of those affected by the problem heard by those who have the power (or are presumed to have the power) to change it. The problem of voice when it comes to sex work in this context is well recognized by the civil society activists who rely on the concept:

But what about citizens’ voices derived from identities that are not recognized, nor respected? How can women who are sex workers make their

claims visible and gain in self-respect and the respect of the wider community? (Mukhopadhyay and Meer 2004: 65)

Unlike other gendered social issues – women’s right to inheritance of familial land, or increasing the Dalit women’s representation in local government, for example – the intense stigma of sex work makes collectivization and speaking out from the position of identifying as a sex worker considerably more difficult. The Kolkata-based sex-worker activist organization *Durbar* provides a potential solution to this dilemma: de-stigmatize sex work by emphasizing that it is *work*, and empower the women working in sex work to claim this identity for the sake of raising enough voice to gain the attention and sympathy of those making decisions regarding trafficking that would affect the day-to-day lives of sex workers. Mukhopadhyay and Meer (2004:65), examining *Durbar*’s actions in the early 2000s to include research conducted from sex workers’ perspectives on the causes and outcomes of trafficking into the sex industry in decisions that the Central government was making regarding trafficking regulations, describe how *Durbar* refused the silencing of sex workers in this decision on the part of the Central government with whom it was working.

Barred because of their identity from consultation spaces where these debates were taking place, *Durbar* decided to inform the debate with research undertaken from the perspective of the sex workers (rather than the abolitionists’ perspective) on how and why trafficking takes place, and created spaces for discussion and debate on the practical mechanisms to curb trafficking. The space created to inform the public and to debate the issues was a unique, high-profile event that captured the imagination of the national media. *Durbar* organized a *mela* [gathering] in March 2001, a tradition which they continued in subsequent years (2004:65).

The *mela*, at least in its first year, was televised, thereby “beam[ing] it into every middle-class home via live coverage” (Mukhopadhyay and Meer 2004:66), ensuring that the voices of sex workers were heard instead of silenced. Such actions are often greeted with celebratory aplomb in volumes such as Mukhopadhyay and Meer’s, as well as in activist

circles. In the two decades since Durbar's founding, it has built a wide variety of services for sex workers in West Bengal, and has conducted and published research on the lives of sex workers in the area. Its programs include a wide-array of services: savings banks run by Durbar for sex workers, condom and HIV awareness campaigns resulting in a nearly 80% increase in reported condom usage among sex workers affiliated with Durbar, educational programs for the children of sex workers, and self-regulatory boards to prevent forced or coerced trafficking and engagement in sex work by minors. Accompanying all of this is sophisticated media representation and the continued rally cry for sex workers to make their voices heard in order to affect change in their lives and working conditions.

In comparison, Guria Sansthan operates quietly in the shadows. Instead of using work as the primary locus of their bid for sex workers' respect and betterment, they locate their activism in providing respect for sex workers as something *other* than sex workers: as artisans and *tawa'ifs*, as women and as human beings, but not as individuals who labor, because the labor itself is viewed as unjust. The unjustness of the work that sex workers do within the brothel structure has been previously discussed. It is important to note here that in refusing to locate the reasons that sex workers should be respected within their work, Guria locates it instead in the same places as the women with whom I spoke: namely, in any facet of their identity which is *not* their work. In this way, the silence which Guria keeps on sex work is in alignment with the ways in which the sex workers on whose behalf it does its activism would like to present themselves. Ironically, this alignment has led to a form of activism that disrupts their ability to continue doing their work.

Silence played an extraordinarily important role in my fieldwork. In fact, it was through coming to understand the ways in which this silence is kept that I came to gain Ajeet's trust enough for him to set up interviews for me. Just prior to my going to the house of Durba and her sister in December of 2009, Ajeet and I sat down in the Guria offices in Khadjuri Colony and talked about my observations of Shivdaspur from the vantage point of the *balwadi*. When I noted that it seemed to me that the women for whom his organization worked did not want to be recognized or identified as sex workers, and that – having read so much NGO literature in the vein of that produced by organizations like Durbar – I was surprised by this, he jumped in to say that I was coming to understand Shivaspur in the same way that he did. Yes, he said, from the perspective of activism one wants these women to break the silence around their profession and talk about what can be done to help them, but practically speaking they will refuse to organize around this identity. Identifying them as sex workers “is only for our benefit,” he interjected, “for the benefit of the condom-sellers and the NGOs.” The women themselves would only speak from the position of “sex worker,” and organize on their own behalf to do so, in a “crisis” situation.” Otherwise, they wanted to be left in peace, and so their staunch refusal to discuss their work or its conditions is a protection that both allowed them to continue working and yet to avoid concrete admission that they were sex workers.

As an abolitionist working against the current structure of the red light district, though, Ajeet could recognize this desire for silence but not entirely abide by it. In late May, when I had finished conducting the formal interviews that he and Manju were able to arrange, he and I spoke about the interviews for which Manju had been present. When I arrived at the Khadjuri Colony offices, he was still finishing up his morning meeting with

his staff. He was in an excited, happy mood: the difficulties with the neighborhood regarding the location of the evening tuitions seemed to be lifting and, having come downstairs to unlock the heavy padlock on the office doors and let me in, he explained that once he was done with this staff meeting, we would have to talk. There were some things that I needed to understand about the interviews, based on Manju's recounting of what the women and I had talked about. Namely, he reiterated and qualified his previous statements about the tendency of sex workers to lie about their life histories and profession, with which I began this chapter:

First of all, they have a tendency to lie. I have explained that to you before. Even if you have achieved your goal [of getting to know and understand sex workers], and you have started interacting with them and gone into their lives, mostly they will still lie to you about their lives. I am not judgmental of their lying. I take it as part and parcel of their lives because they have learned to survive by lying. Do you get my point? Their lying is a survival strategy at first [so that the brothel keepers don't beat them, or they don't get caught by the police], but then it becomes a habit for them. I don't know how to fully interpret it [their lying], but this is my interpretation [Personal Interview, 5/18/2010].

Here Ajeet repeats a theme about which we had spoken repeatedly: It is not possible to believe that what the women tell you is true<sup>70</sup>. He bolstered this assertion with many examples from his own interactions with women in Shivdaspur, drawn from the eleven years during which he was a primary teacher at the *balwadi* and hence was more regularly interacting with the community. Because they have been taught not to by traffickers and brothel keepers, women in sex work will not tell you the truth about their situation.

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<sup>70</sup> Obviously, if the women are liars by nature, it is possible that they lie to Ajeet and to Manju as well. In fact, it took Ajeet many years to realize that they had been telling him lies, and while over the years parts of their stories that he recognizes as true have come into what they tell him, it seems that he locates the truth of their lives in his observations rather than their statements.



Additionally as previously noted, he spoke of brothels using spies posing as customers with new girls to be sure that the girls would not tell customers that they wanted to leave the brothel, or that they were there against their will. The spies would go in to be alone with the girls like any other customer, and ask the girl if she really wanted to be there, promising that he would help her to escape if that was what she wanted. If the girl took the spy/customer up on his offer, he would report this back to the brothel keeper, and punishment would ensue. The girls therefore learn, if they are still working in a brothel, not to tell anyone if they do not want to be there. After they are finally working independently, they continue to lie out of habit, in order to spin whatever story makes them more sympathetic or less likely to be perceived as a prostitute. Perceiving them as victims within this system, there is no value judgment to be made regarding their lying. Describing it as a “survival strategy,” as well, makes lying a rational action, one that can only make sense within the system in which they live and work. However, it also silences them, by casting into doubt anything that they say.

### *The Politics of Representation of Sex Work*

The issue of voice and “the authority to speak” (Chapkis 1997:182) is continually problematic in discussions of sex work and sex worker activism. Sex-worker activists Margo St. James (founder of COYOTE<sup>71</sup>) and Jo Doezema both note the difficulty of speaking both as and for sex workers, and describe the tendency of those listening to their opinions on and experiences as sex workers to dismiss them as atypical or exceptional. Even within the community of sex workers, there can be conflicts over whose experience as a sex

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<sup>71</sup> COYOTE stands for “Call Off Your Old Tired Ethics,” and was founded in 1973 as an American sex-worker’s advocacy organization.

worker is more authentic or representative. The experiences recounted by a woman working for a well-paying escort service will be different from those of a street walker, whose experiences will be different from those of an exotic dancer. Within these categories themselves, experiences will vary considerably, and yet because all of these categories are presumed to be the same (i.e., they are all “sex workers” or “prostitutes”), issues of authenticity and accurate representation arise.

These conflicts speak to at least two potential problems within the framework of representation. Firstly, there is the politics of refusing to accept someone’s speech as authentic, of saying to a sex worker “That cannot possibly be your experience” or “Well, that may be your experience, but it cannot possibly be like the experiences of other sex workers.” Even if the experience being recounted, explained and interpreted for a listener is somehow *not* more generally representative, what is happening in these instances is that speech indicating agency, choice, pleasure, power, or desire to continue being a sex worker is being silenced by the critique that it cannot speak for “all sex workers,” and certainly not “typical sex workers.”

The notion of somehow defining the “typical sex worker” is additionally problematic. The field of sex work is widely varied, in terms of the location of work, working conditions, pay, and degree of choice about how one will work, when one will work, and who one’s customers will be. Within the context of Varanasi alone, I was told of many locales, types and conditions of sex work. There is brothel-based prostitution in Shivdaspur, which means that sex work is taking place within a specific area understood as a “red light district,” and within which much of the sex work occurs in spaces designated as brothels, meaning that it occurs within a structure where a hierarchical personnel play

different roles. There is a brothel keeper, who watches over the house; *dalal*, who acts as procurer, protector, and also (sometimes violent) manager; sex worker, who performs the actual sex acts in exchange for money from which other personnel take a cut. However, women who live and work in Shivdaspur also engage in street-walking, as do women who do *not* live and work in Shivdaspur: they solicit from the side of the highway, for example, or outside of temples or mosques in the evenings. There are women (and men, and *hijras*) who work in hotels, catering to tourists. Likewise, there are women who live and do odd jobs in the train station, including construction work, the provisioning of bottled (and adulterated) water to travelers, the cleaning of used train cars, and sex work. I was often told that young women, university students in particular, engaged in sex work using *Orkut* (the social networking site) as a medium of solicitation. This brief list leaves out completely other forms of sex work: courtesanry, call-girls, *devadasis*, women who dance in bars, etc. Even were the list not so varied, how could the experience of a woman from Bihar who occasionally engages in prostitution in the train station be the same as a Bengali woman working in a brothel in Shivdaspur? The question of whether or not any one woman's experience or portrayal of sex work is "representative" is largely moot, given the range of experiences possible, and as such should not be used to silence the individual in question. However, in these instances we are talking about silencing or discounting the narratives of sex workers, which implies that they are speaking about sex work. In contrast, if sex workers refuse to speak about their experiences, are we still to interpret that silence as a "silencing"? Although Guria as an organization would say, based on their experience, that we should regard them as "silenced," or at least "encouraged to lie," there

are other ways that silence might be operating, as an agential strategy, in their narratives. To tease out this strategy, a variety of forms of silence on sex work are considered below.

Each of these forms of silence can be understood best when framed by what Michael Taussig calls “the public secret”: “that which is generally known, but cannot be articulated” (1999:5) because of the relationship of that which is kept secret to power. As Taussig explains it,

Knowing what not to know lies at the heart of a vast range of social powers and knowledges intertwined with those powers, such that the clumsy hybrid of power/knowledge comes at last into meaningful focus, it being not that knowledge is power but rather that active not-knowing makes it so (1999:6-7).

In Varanasi and in India more generally, the sort of silence that is kept on the topic of prostitution masks the power that allows it to occur. Much like the silence itself, this power is slippery. Not speaking about prostitution allows for those involved in prostitution to practice it without immediate censure. That it should be kept secret to avoid censure allows for a variety of forms of exploitation to occur: individual women’s wages can be garnished by those who help to keep her “secret,” such as *dalals* and middle men, or by the police, who demand to be paid off in order to avoid speaking the truth that she is a sex worker in the legal arena. Police operate this same racket on the broader level of extorting such payments from brothel keepers and traffickers, as well. The public secrecy of prostitution allows places like Shivdaspur to exist. People seeking sex can visit there with the knowledge that anyone who sees them there is likewise “guilty” of having participated in prostitution, and so both parties are likely to keep quiet. It also allows women who want *not* to be mistaken for being of loose morals or general sexual availability to avoid the area, but in order to do so it is vital that the location of the area be known to all. Because

prostitution is morally suspect, silence must be kept on it in order for it to continue to operate.

On the flip side of the sort of power that allows for public secrecy, however, is the power associated with “defacement,” or the moment when that which has been knowingly kept secret is revealed. Nayanika Mookherjee (2006) discusses how public secrecy and defacement operate in relationship to women’s experiences of rape during the 1971 Bangladesh War. Although it was common knowledge that many women were raped during this time period, knowledge of those rapes was ignored in order to preserve the honor of the raped women and their families. Understanding that the experience was so common, and that there was nothing that the women in question could have done to prevent the rapes in that context, everyone kept silent about it so that the women were able to be married and a veneer of normalcy could return following the war. However, women who broke this silence by testifying in national hearings meant to bring war criminals to justice were responded to with public shaming and scorn. Their speaking of that which was unspeakable revealed deep fault lines of power regarding gendered norms about how rape victims should behave. In speaking about rape, the women made public shameful information about themselves and their state of defilement as raped women which, had they remained silent, everyone in their villages would have been willing to overlook.

Silence on prostitution in Varanasi operates in much this same way. Individuals who have engaged in prostitution will keep quiet on the matter to outsiders so as to avoid defacing a public image as, potentially at least, “good women,” even if everyone knows the truth of their work. In speaking on the topic, they participate in their own defacement.

Likewise, for someone else to break silence on the topic would be to admit knowledge of it, potentially defacing themselves or, in the case that they were not or could not be implicated in prostitution to lord that powerful information over those involved. In each of the many instances of silence on the topic of sex work, from a variety of actors, some involved very concretely in prostitution and some completely removed from it, prostitution can be seen as a public secret.

### *Women's Silence on Sex Work*

Three months into my fieldwork, I had an experience that had become so commonplace that I almost did not notice it. Having come home from Shivdaspur for the day, I joined the women of the family with whom I was living for tea. On this day, a young woman, a cousin from a nearby village who had come to stay in Varanasi with the family was there and, finding that I spoke Hindi, chattily asked me many questions about how long I had been in Varanasi, how I found it, and what I was doing in the city. The conversation was flowing very pleasantly until she asked the topic of my research. "Prostitution," I responded, and the conversation screeched to a halt. "Oh," she said, her voice descending quickly through the short note of her utterance, eyes suddenly cast down. She asked if I wanted more tea, and went off into the kitchen to get it.

Based on my observations it is clear that prostitution and sex work are generally not spoken about in conversation in India, particularly among women. Scholars might speak of it, or perhaps activists, and the news media reliably reports any notable criminal activity in red light areas, as well as opinion pieces either sympathetic to or disdainful of the plights of sex workers. Although I gather that men might speak to other men about sex workers, and

men with whom I spoke might occasionally tell me a story about the time they accidentally wandered into Shivdaspur Alley, or went with a friend who wanted to “use a prostitute,” in my experience the topic is generally not something middle-class men generally discussed in conversation with women. For example, when I interviewed a female shop keeper in the Manduadih market, near Shivdaspur, whose son I occasionally saw at the *balwadi*, she stuck out her tongue (a gesture of embarrassment) and then clasped her ears (a gesture indicating that one does not or will not do something ever again). At my mention of Shivdaspur Alley, “I never go there!,” she said, and steered the conversation to the fact that the part of Shivdaspur where she lives was occupied by poor (*garib*), hard-working (*mazdur*) people like herself.

#### *Guria Activists’ Silence on Sex Work*

Because of the stigma associated with sex work, I expected to encounter a large degree of hesitation to speak about sex work on the part of Shivdasपुरi women. I was not prepared, however, for the degree to which *Guria* workers would participate in silence and maintain public secrecy on the topic. As an activist organization working with and for sex workers, I expected *Guria* workers to be outspoken on the topic because of their familiarity with it, and because they were ostensibly acting to change the working and living conditions of sex workers and their children. If silence and public secrecy are what allow prostitution to thrive, one would expect that the staff of an activist organization seeking to end prostitution in its current iteration would speak loudly and voluminously on the topic, forcefully unveiling the secret of who was involved and how. While this was certainly the case with Ajeet and Manju (although Manju is less bombastic on the topic), open speech

about prostitution and sex work were not forthcoming from any of the other *Guria* employees with whom I interacted.

After I had been to the *balwadi* a few times, I casually mentioned to Anu and another Shivdasपुरi woman who occasionally did some volunteer work with *Guria* that I had come to learn about the neighborhood. This was met with stiff, but interested nods. Not wanting to cause offense, and also wanting to convey that I was genuinely interested in what went on in Shivdasपुर *besides* sex work, I said that I was interested in the people who lived in the neighborhood, and wanted to know a bit about the work (I used the general word for work, *kaam*, and not any of the words that refer specifically to sex work or prostitution) that people did there. At the mention of work, both went suddenly quiet, although they were happy then to talk about “other aspects of their lives.” They discussed who is in their families, weddings that had occurred in the neighborhood, and the distinction between different parts of Shivdasपुर, noting that the area that we were in at the time, in which the *balwadi* is located, was different from the area where I had visited them in their homes for *Eid Milan* the week before. Anu, generally bubbly and interested in talking to me, continued to go silent and tight-lipped whenever I mentioned *kaam*, in either Shivdasपुर Alley or in Bhind Basti, for many months.

There did come a point in my fieldwork in which I felt that the silence surrounding the topic of sex work with Anu was lifting. She started to volunteer information to me during the last three months that I was there, rather than only answering my questions about the topic. The first time that this happened was in February, on an afternoon when I visited the *balwadi* to find that Meena, a ten year old girl whom I had not seen in a month or so, was there. I commented on her absence, asking where she had been, and she quietly



told me that she had gone to Mumbai. When I asked why, she said that she had gone to learn to dance, and then ran off to play with some of the other children. Anu pulled me aside here, and said that Meena had gone to Mumbai with her mother, because her mother had been hired as part of the elaborate entertainment for a wedding; "*Uski mummy SEX WORKER hai*" (her mother is a sex worker), she added, in a whispered, hissed tone, emphasizing the words "sex worker," which she said in English. Meena, she told me in a somewhat scandalized way, would one day be a sex worker as well, although Anu emphasized to me that Meena's mother had gone to Mumbai in order to perform at "dance parties," which she defined as gatherings at which no actual sex takes place, only dancing.

From this day on, Anu was more receptive to talking to me about sex work in Shivdaspur, although these conversations never lost the salacious, gossipy tone of this first conversation. She spoke quite frankly about seeing the women who went to perform at Manikarnika Ghat go off in their evening finery for the performance, and enjoyed discussing the kinds of dance they might have done there, and the negligible (by Varanasi standards) amount of clothing they wore. At moments when the conversation could not assume this tone, it simply shut down. For example, one day in the *balwadi*, Anu and I were talking about child prostitution. Ajeet says that it no longer happens in Shivdaspur, and she agreed that this was the case, or at least that she did not know of it. I mentioned, however, that I had visited a community of migrant workers living in the train station, who relied on sex work as one of the many ways that they earned an income. In that case, quite young girls (as young as ten years old) were engaging in sex work, either with or without their parents' explicit knowledge (if the parents were even present in the community). "Yes," Anu replied curtly when I described the train station, "In India, this happens." There being

no fun in gossiping about children having to work as sex workers, she quickly changed the topic.

Anu's mother had a similar attitude and tone towards the subject. On one of the days when Manju came to Shivdaspur to arrange interviews with sex workers for me, I was waiting outside of the room where Manju was explaining the interview to one such woman, a middle-aged woman who had been in Shivdaspur for at least the last decade and who now worked as a middle-man or procurer of customers for younger sex workers in the area. Anu's mother stood there with me, mostly making small talk about how much longer I would be staying in Varanasi, and whether I would be happy to see my family when I went home, when she switched over to mention that she knew I was about to talk to this other woman, gesturing repeatedly towards the other room with her eyes and saying "look who's come!" and sticking her tongue out in embarrassment, seemingly simply at being in the presence of the sex worker.

### *Kajal*

On some days, before tensions heightened between the NGO and some elements of the Shivdaspuri community, I would walk into Shivdaspur alley instead of going in with my rickshaw driver. On the walks, I was able to peer into the little shops interspersed with the brothels and say "hi" to the women as I walked by. Although many said "hi," or would exchange pleasantries about the weather or the *balwadi* (of which they held a high opinion), conversations were generally short and shallow. One day, as I walked in, a woman named Kajal, who had said "hi" to me several times before, and who would wave to me as I passed in the rickshaw, called out "*Namaste!*" and gestured for me to come over to

her. A one-story, two-room brick structure with a corrugated tin roof, her house was set off a bit from the other brothels, and generally only Kajal could be seen standing outside of it, soliciting each afternoon in a synthetic red sari. Kajal was not particularly young; my best estimate of her age would have been in her early-to-mid 30s, but she was clearly older than many of the other women on the street. This afternoon, she asked me how things were going with me, and so I responded that all was well, and returned the question to her. Instead of answering with a simple pleasantry, which was what I expected, she replied “I am helpless [*majboor*].” Caught slightly off guard, I asked her why this was the case, and she replied that there had been no work lately, and so there was “nothing in her stomach.” She had no money, and she had children to care for, as well. Here, she gestured into the front room of her house, where two children, a boy and a girl in clean but well-worn clothing, both seeming to be 6 to 8 years old, were dancing about and using chalk to draw what looked like a hopscotch board on the cement floor of the house, absorbed in their play. I asked if the children went to the *balwadi*, as I had not seen them there, or to any school, and she told me that she tried to send them but that they did not like it: “they only want to play.” I expected, at this point, that she might ask me for money, but she did not. Instead, she suggested that they might be waiting for me at the *balwadi*, and so I crossed the street to its entrance. Subsequently, Kajal would always smile and do “Namaste” when I passed, but never again engaged me in any conversation; and shortly after this, the tensions between the NGO and Shivdaspur became so great that I had to rely on the rickshaw to take me to the *balwadi*. A few weeks before my research concluded in Shivdaspur, an elderly woman and two other women, one about Kajal’s age and another who was clearly younger, moved into the house. All of them could be seen sitting outside of

it sometimes, the elderly woman in her *maxi* (housecoat) letting her hair dry in the sun, and the others clearly soliciting. I hoped that having more women working in the house had eased her financial concerns, but other than the one lapse into conversation, she did not try to speak with me again.

### *Sex Workers' Presentations of their Lives and Work*

When it came to speaking with sex workers from Shivdaspur on a formal basis, I did so entirely with the help of *Guria*. From December to May, Ajeet and Manju arranged interviews with six women, two of whom were sisters and were interviewed together; the remaining four were interviewed in the presence of Manju, because by that point in time NGO-community relations were at a remarkably tense point, and the women were hesitant to come at all, let alone to speak with a stranger on their own. Here, I describe the interviews, paying particular attention to what the women said (or did not say) about their work.

### *Durba, her Sister, and her Husband*

In late December, shortly before Christmas, Manju asked me to go with her to Shivdaspur on a day when I had instead planned to do office work. She was meeting with several women, and wanted to introduce me to a Nepali woman, Durba, and her sister, who was also a sex worker. Durba and her sister came to the *balwadi*, and Manju made the introduction there, instructing me to follow Chandni (a girl who was regularly at the *balwadi*) to their house in fifteen minutes.

Their house was small, from what I saw, but clean and quite beautiful, behind blue

metal doors which opened onto a courtyard paved with white marble tiles. They kept a small, fluffy, pretty gray and white dog in the courtyard, whose fur was brushed and clean. When I commented, as I was leaving, that it was a beautiful dog, Durba said that she always keeps a dog because she loves them. The courtyard was criss-crossed with clothes lines, and to the right, there was a niche in the wall with several rows of books on it. From the courtyard, I was asked to come and sit in a long, windowless room with a bed in it, on which a Nepali man, Durba's husband, sat. The bed was piled with blankets, and paperwork, and there was a small open brazier with coal ashes on the floor nearby. I sat in a plastic chair opposite the bed, with Durba and her husband on the bed, and her younger sister off in the next room preparing some tea and snacks.

Durba's husband was very interested in speaking to me. He spoke a bit of English, and wanted to practice, although eventually we switched over to Hindi. They said they had been in Shivdaspur for many years now, and when I asked how long they had been married, they said seventeen or eighteen years. He told me that they have one son, who is fifteen years old and studying in the 9th class. They then referred to their son's picture on the wall above my head, and I stood up and turned around to see a wall decorated with his school portraits; a lone-head shot of him that I would guess is a few years old if he is now fifteen, as well as several years of class portraits for his English Medium school.

The longest wall of the room was strung with garlands, and decked out with approximately eight pictures of deities, clearly from a matching set. I asked which deities they were, and Durba explained that there were many of them, pausing to say to me "I am a prostitute [*veshya*]," but that nonetheless religious workshop was important to her, the Goddess in particular featuring strongly in her devotional activities. Her husband then gave

a long speech to the effect of “no matter who you pray to, in the end all of the deities are one.” Durba then said that Sir-ji and Madam-ji were her deities. When I asked her to clarify that she meant Ajeet and Manju, and she confirmed this.

Besides this one direct reference to herself as a prostitute, we tip-toed around the topic of work. They brought up the topic of HIV, showing me the HIV test results of everyone in the family (Durba and her husband are HIV+, their son and Durba’s younger sister are not), and when I said that that was a very big problem in “this type of work” they agreed and didn’t seem offended, but they politely declined to answer questions about how long Durba had been working as a sex worker. When I said that I was doing research about the neighborhood, and wanted to know about their lives and work, her husband made a face when I referenced the work, and the otherwise well-flowing conversation ground to a halt.

This impasse was resolved when they showed me their monthly medicine bill, which amounted to a little over rs1200 per month, and laughed when I exclaimed in surprise and asked if they had enough money to cover their expenses. They said that this bill was just for one month, but that they are able to pay it. The husband is retired from the Indian army, and although both are Nepali, they have Indian citizenship. We chatted for another ten or fifteen minutes about various things, time that I had spent in the Himalayas, and American geography, but I got the very strong sense that her husband in particular preferred that the interview take more the form of a social call. Instead of speaking about sex work, they preferred to appear as a small but extended familial unit, working together to run a household and raise a child.

## *Amrita*

On a blisteringly hot day in May, Manju asked Amrita to stop by *Guria's* Center in Shivdaspur so that I could interview her. It was in reference to Amrita that the short exchange with Anu's mother regarding her attitudes towards sex workers, mentioned above, occurred. The terms of the interviews were bounded by a heavy set of restrictions: Ajeet had insisted that I not ask direct questions, that I go about finding out what I wanted to from them sideways, or slyly, through conversation. I explained to him that the woman would have to know that interviews were being done for the purposes of research, and so he agreed that both I and Manju could explain this. Although this was explained, and Amrita consented both to being part of my research and to having the interview recorded, she did so only on the condition that Manju be present for the interview. When I asked my first question – a simple "Please tell me about your life," Amrita looked down blankly, and hesitated until Manju interrupted and said, in English, that the woman would not tell me her true story anyway if I asked like this, that she would make something up, and so that I should ask more direct questions. Flustered by the contradictions between Ajeet and Manju's instructions, I started by asking where she was from and how she came to Shivdaspur, and at this she stiffened a bit in her posture and looked away from me, towards Manju.

Looking at Manju the whole time, she said that she had been kidnapped – her mother had sent her to a doctor's office with a woman whom she (the woman being interviewed, who was a girl at the time that the story takes place) did not know. From the doctor's office, she was turned over to someone else who sold her into "work" (*kaam*, designating simply work, not specifically prostitution), and eventually through this she

came to Shivdaspur. At various points in her life, she had had husbands, two total, but eventually both of them left her and she returned to working; at this point, being too old to do the work itself (she appeared to be in her 50s), she made little bits of money as a middleman, leading customers looking for a sex worker to women who were still young enough to make money through direct sex work. At this point in the interview, her eyes welled up with tears, and she said that she did not understand why her life was like this. None of her sisters worked “like this,” she said. Rather, they were all married in and around the region outside of Kolkata where she had been born, and no one at home knew what she did here in Varanasi. “It must be written on my forehead,” she said, referring to a widespread belief in India that at the time of birth, one’s fate or destiny is written on one’s forehead by a visiting deity. What is written on one’s forehead is unalterable, and “one must bear [this] fate since no amount of effort can alter it” (Kent 2009:1). Otherwise she had no explanation for why this should happen to her whereas the other women in her family are married and still living at home. At this point, clearly somewhat upset, she asked if the interview was done, and I answered that of course it was, and thanked her for her time. Here she said something quickly to Manju in Bangla, and returned a few minutes later, as Manju and I were discussing the interview, with some puffed rice and other *namkeen* (salty snacks), as well as some chunks of jaggery for Manju, explaining that these had been sent to her from home (in Bengal). Knowing the Manju is from the same region, she wanted to share them with her, as people enjoy the things from their homes. Sometimes, she said, she wanted to go home to her extended family, but she was afraid of what people might say or think of her. Manju later told me that she had told this woman



that if she wanted to go home, she herself would arrange it, and go to her family with a story that provided a plausible explanation about her work.

Amrita clearly did not want to speak with me about sex work. Her demeanor in interacting with me was nervous and polite, and it was only while looking at Manju, and apparently as a favor to Manju, that she spoke at all. When she did, she was quite frank in explaining how she had come to Shivdaspur, through a middle-man of some sort to whom she had not given her permission. She also spoke quite openly about how she earned her money now, as well as the direness of her situation as a woman without family and without large income. However, silence operates in her narrative when it comes to how she maintains her relationship with her family, *i.e.*, by omitting her profession. This is an important point which will be analyzed below.

### *Anjali*

The second woman whom Manju called to speak with me was also from Kolkata originally. She arrived shortly after Amrita left, wearing a red-and-white print *maxi* (housecoat) with a *dupatta* flung across her shoulders, and stood hesitantly in the doorway. Manju and I explained that I had been volunteering in the *balwadi* these last nine months, and that I came to do research about the neighborhood of Shivdaspur. At the time of the interview, she was perhaps in her 40s, and still occasionally working. Anjali spoke very bluntly, although she did not seem to find her life worth discussing, interjecting her discussion of her life with phrases like: “My story is that of a poor man” and “My story is nothing,” but continuing on to give me the broad outlines of her life. She explained to me, initially, that she came to Shivdaspur “after childhood,” and on her own (“*aapnae aap yaha*

ayi"). She started working in Shivdaspur shortly thereafter, and has ever since. She was married once, but made no mention of her husband or where he might have gone. Instead, she spoke quite a bit about her son, who works in the hotel industry in Mumbai. She is working and saving money, and he is doing the same, hoping to save enough to build a house together. I asked her if her house would be in Shivdaspur, and she laughed, and said "no," that Shivdaspur was a "dirty place."

Anjali discussed her work only in the context of necessity:

Through this work, I get two *roti* a day. As long as I get that, it is fine. My son will come [back from Mumbai], and we will build a house. I will stop my work and then as long as I have my two *roti* still I will rest easy. This is not good work, but what shall I do? ("*laekin kya karae?*") We all must work, right? I have no support (literally, "there is no one behind or ahead of me"; "*marae agae-pitchae to koi nahin hae*"). I have my child, and my sister, too, she has children. If I don't work, we don't eat, and the children can't study. We will have to plan a wedding for my sister's daughter, too.

Because she mentioned the "dirtiness" of Shivdaspur, and that the work was not good, I asked her what is bad about the work, and here her story shifted a bit. She stopped looking at me as she spoke and turned, instead, to face Manju, explaining rapidly that someone else brought her here to Shivdaspur, and that her brothel keeper used to beat her when she did not see enough customers, lifting her *dupatta* off her arms to indicate where she used to be beaten. She left the brothel once, she says, and went to the nearby police station, but because at that time she spoke only Bangla and not Hindi, they used the Hindi to "confuse" her and then sent her back to the brothel. As she was talking seemingly without hesitation now, I asked her about the customers, and in response she said:

Men come, and how they talk [to you]! You have sex, sometimes they beat you, they give you money, and then some other comes and it happens all again. I don't like it. But I am helpless. I am not the one who gets to play instead of work.

She reiterated to me that these things were not worth speaking of, and so I asked her about her work now. Now, she says, she is working independently, outside of the context of the brothel, and so it is not so bad. Again, she emphasized that the work is only “to fill her belly,” so that she can have her “two *rotis* a day,” and not for anything else, indicating a desire to be seen as doing sex work out of necessity as opposed to out of an immoral or greedy desire for consumer luxuries.

After a while, she and Manju lapsed into friendly conversation, and she turned to ask if we are done. I thanked her for her time, and she and Manju walked out into the hallway, Anjali turning to say “Namaste” to me. Although she did not appear to be at all embarrassed to speak about her work, or to be trying to hide her status as a sex worker, and eventually talked freely about her opinions on sex work and her life, the interview also began with a sort of silence. Not reticent in nature, this silence is characterized by the feeling that such things are not worth speaking of. The work has been bad and hard, or at least was so when she worked in a brothel, but now she has managed to put her life together in a way that did not seem unpleasing to her, and was planning for a retirement with her son. Her son and the house were worth talking about, but she did not see the point in belaboring what were sad points about awful work. Although matter-of-fact and to the point, and therefore not obfuscatory in nature, it still seemed an attempt at not speaking about sex work by means of devaluing it as a topic of conversation.

### *Ambu*

Unlike the other women who Ajeet and Manju chose for me to interview, the third woman was a woman I specifically asked Manju for an interview. She was a Nepali woman

who had moved into Shivdaspur, or at least who had become noticeable to me sometime in December of 2009, setting up shop in a building across from *Guria's* Center (where the children eat lunch in the afternoon, and where the library is housed). She was vocal and vibrant on the street, often seeming to hold court there during the afternoon, chatting and laughing with other women as she knitted shawls and scarves. As the weather warmed up, she could often be seen sitting in the entranceway to the building/brothel, splay-legged and confident on a plastic chair, calling out boisterously to men as they came by, and also exuberantly greeting me as I walked from the *balwadi* to the Center and vice versa. When asked how she was, she would often flash a big smile and respond with a "Having seen you, very good!" although she appeared to be uninterested in more conversation.

After speaking with Amrita and Anjali, Manju and I had left the Center and walked down Shivdaspur Alley towards the field where Manju's car was parked, when we walked past Ambu, who cheerfully greeted the two of us. Reaching the car, I asked Manju if it would be possible for her to arrange an interview with Ambu, as she and I had said "hello" to each other many times over the months, and I found her interesting. On hearing this suggestion, Manju froze and then said quickly and tensely that the ones who were smiling and friendly were not the ones to interview. "Who is very sweet is also very cunning. This woman is cruel and clever, and you should know it," she said. Ambu is a brothel keeper, and because of this Manju felt that she would tell me all sorts of "wrong things." As such Manju and Ajeet would pick the women with whom I spoke, to ensure that I learned the truth about sex work in Shivdaspur. Feeling that she was upset and concerned – her fear was palpable – I thanked her for her help, saying that even if the woman told me "lies," I

was interested in what she said, and that I would be grateful for any interviews that *Guria* could arrange.

Because of this interaction, I was surprised to find that the next woman that Manju had asked to speak with me was Ambu. Manju explained, before she arrived, that she had had someone else in mind, but that she wanted for me to be able to speak to this woman if I wanted. I was to be exceptionally careful in this interview, though, because the woman was “working from both sides.” According to Manju, she was a brothel keeper and therefore worked closely with other brothel keepers and some of the pimps, but she had also from time-to-time worked with *Guria*. I could ask the woman about her personal experiences, if I wanted, but for the sake of the NGO, I was not to ask any pointed questions about trafficking.

Ambu arrived wearing a housedress and *dupatta* but with large, elaborate gold earrings in (as opposed to the other women, who were very plainly adorned), each finger bearing a jeweled ring. Seeing her on the street, usually made up and elaborately dressed, I had guessed her age as somewhere in her mid-30s. In the morning, though, in her housedress and without make-up, she was clearly in her late-40s to early 50s. Her demeanor was smiling and bubbly when she saw me in the room in the *balwadi* for the interview, and she said that she was relieved that an interview was all that it was about. Jokingly, she said that when Manju called her, she was worried, wondering “What have I done, that Manju-ma’am is calling me?” The reason for her having been called explained and out of the way, the interview went quickly – she was pleasant and indicated that she was happy to talk, but gave curt (if friendly responses) to my questions. Noticing that she was wearing *sindoor*, I ask if she was married, and she responded in the affirmative. She

was married twice, and had no children. Unlike the other women, she did not want to talk much about family or home.

Having asked the other women if they ever sang or danced (and having been told “no”), I asked her if she used to do this and she said that this was an older form of work. Yes, she used to do it, but that “no one does this now.” Given the quick, curt nature of her replies, the interview was over very quickly, and then she turned to Manju, saying that she has a problem with a child in her household, whom she had been caring for. The child had been sickly for a long time, and would not eat, and as she explained the details of the child’s health she became distraught and started to weep, crying while talking for a good five to ten minutes, and eventually beginning to shake. Manju talked quietly and sympathetically to her, and asked her to calm down. She said she would talk to Ajeet and they would go to the doctor with whom they arrange treatment for the women and children in Shivdaspur. Soothed, Ambu returned to pleasantness, and excused herself to go.

Although Ambu was pleasant and gave off the aura of being happy to speak, in reality she said very little, responding quickly and briefly, and then asking what was next. Even the singing and dancing did not elicit anything that she wanted to speak about, and ultimately, the interview took the backseat to this larger, clearly distressing discussion of the health of a child in her care. As with Anjali’s interview, Ambu gave the sense that sex work was not worth discussing.

### *Roshni*

The fourth, and final, woman whom I interviewed in Manju’s presence was clearly a friend of hers. Roshni was perhaps in her late thirties and had a calm, happy demeanor.

She came neatly dressed in a bright blue polyester *salwar-kameez*, with silver spangled embroidery at the edges of the sleeve and shirt, and held her posture carefully erect in the plastic chair in which she sat. As we settled into the little room where the interviews were being conducted, Manju asked after the woman's son. She replied, sadly, that he had begun working, and turned to me to explain that her "dream" (*sapna*) was that her son become highly educated and take up some sort of work outside of Shivdaspur. Instead, he had fallen in with some *badmash* (roughly, "hooligan") men in the area, and left school in favor of starting to work. He was weaving saris instead of studying, which she thought was a shame, because he is very smart, and showed very promising talent as an artist. Manju agreed with this. Seeing that Roshni was wearing *sindur*, I asked her if she was married. She replied that she was, but that there is no one – husband or children – in her house anymore. At this point, Manju interrupted me, sharply, to say that none of them are married, that I had misunderstood; they are all prostitutes, and will only represent themselves (falsely) as being married. She did this in English, but, sensing the tension (or perhaps understanding some of it), Roshni rose to go, though Manju then apologized and asked her to stay for a few more questions. I asked about singing and dancing, and in response to this question, she became engaged and talkative. She used to do that "*bai-ji*" type of work, and said that this was good, enjoyable work. She would get paid for dancing all night as part of a celebration, and in addition to the monetary payment, she would be given whatever food or meal had been prepared for the celebration. "If they didn't feed us, how could we dance all night?" She laughed when Manju expressed surprise that such elaborate food might be included with the payment. All of this is gone now, she said, although it had been good work.

In this case, Roshni spoke concretely about sex work only in the context of courtesanry about which she was happy to talk. Likewise, she enjoyed speaking of her son, and mentioned without any discomfort, in contrast to Amrita, that her marriages had ended. I do not know how forthcoming Roshni might have been, had the interview been allowed to move along smoothly without Manju's interruption, which clearly startled her. However, given her happiness to talk about other things, I imagine that the straightforward mention of sex work might have brought down the tone of the interview into something negative, as it did in other interviews. Although many of the women did eventually speak on the topic, it seemed to me that they would have strongly preferred to keep silent.

### **The Content of Women's Silence in South Asia**

Veena Das' reflections on the importance of silence in her research with South Asian women repatriated after Partition are analogous to the sorts of silence that I encountered while doing research in Shivdaspur. Women who lived through Partition were, in some cases, "abducted"<sup>72</sup> by men of the other religious community; they converted, or were forced to convert, from Islam to Hinduism or vice versa; in many cases, they were raped, and in more cases still, they married into the family of their "abductors." The abduction of women was shaming to both Hindu and Muslim communities, and, more broadly, to the

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<sup>72</sup> Note that the term "abducted" silences narratives of protection, refusing to allow any ambiguity in the matter: a Muslim woman found to be living with a Hindu family (or vice versa) after Partition was as a matter of course classified or understood as having been "abducted" by the other nationalistic party involved. It also allows for a confusion or blurring between women who were "abducted" in order to protect or provide stability for them in a context of chaos, and instances in which women were abducted, raped, and forced to convert and live with a family and a religion not of their choosing, much as the classification of courtesans, highly paid escorts, and brothel-based sex workers as "prostitutes" allows for a classification of disparate lives and working conditions under one negatively-charged term.



nascent Indian and Pakistani states. In order to recover the abducted women and thereby communal honor, the Indian and Pakistani governments began a massive campaign to find, rescue, and return such women to their natal communities in 1949, two years after the events of the Partition. Both governments, and their agents (police, social workers, etc), were allowed wide latitude in the recovery of such women.

Similarly to the false consciousness attributed to sex workers who oppose “rescue” operations, or other interference with their work in brothels, it was assumed by the social workers who supervised Partition-related abduction cases that abducted women who were later located but who desired to stay with their abductors (to whom they were now married, and with whom they might have children) were subject to a sort of Stockholm Syndrome or “misrecognition” with the families to which they had come to belong. In cases in which women expressed a desire to stay with their “abductors,” both the Indian and Pakistani governments refused categorically to legally recognize the validity of the marriages. A woman insistent on remaining with her affinal family would be able to do so only by consenting to be classified as a prostitute or concubine of her husband.

In doing research and speaking with such women forty years later, Veena Das found, that the women (and men) with whom she spoke were reluctant to discuss the events of partition:

I continue to be struck by the silence on the violence that was done to and by people in the context of the Partition. As I stated, it is not that, if asked, people would not tell a story—but that none of the performative aspects or the struggles over the control of the story, a mark of storytelling in everyday life, are present. In contrast, there is the quality of frozen slides in the accounts of the violence of the Partition (Das 2006:80).

Das argues that this frozen-slide quality of accounts of violence – specifically, a focus on particular details, and a lack of connection of the story with the remainder of one’s life’s

narrative – serves to reinforce both individual and cultural silence on the topic because it is out of keeping with standard narrative practices. Some stories of violence can be fit into larger cultural and historical narratives of what it is to be a proper person in South Asia. Stories are told, for example, about villages in which the well became clogged with the bodies of women committing suicide before they could be dishonored, or about men who, knowing that an attack was imminent, killed the women who lived in their village rather than see them raped in the attack. While gruesome, these stories are tell-able because in them the center holds on gendered order, in which the women died honorable deaths as chaste women. Similarly, Das notes that there are many un-authored stories about instances during Partition in which women did not die honorably (i.e., were raped or shamed in the course of their deaths) or in which they lived but were raped or disrobed and forced to convert religions and live in the other community. These stories are likewise tell-able, but only because they are not personal; these are stories that happened to other people, and as such the woman telling it does not have to admit to having been dishonored. In contrast, individual women who were abducted and then subsequently rescued, and families that contain such women, do not speak of it because to do so is to expose suspicions that the woman in question not only endured an attack on her personhood and honor but has brought further dishonor on herself and the family by having lived to tell the tale. Their silence on the topic offers a very serious, and very valuable, form of protection to the woman in question.

Silence and lying on the topic of prostitution similarly allows women who work in Shivdaspur a form of protection from shame, dishonor, and discrimination, as well as some measure of control over how they are viewed by the people with whom they speak

(although below I will argue that their silence is more than a simple defense mechanism). This protection may be weak or flimsy, in the sense that a couple of pointed questions might bring the ruse tumbling down. It may also be a sort of public secrecy game that everyone involved in maintaining the silence (sex workers and others alike) is playing, in which everyone knows full well what the reality of the situation is, but which also allows those who maintain the silence to continue interacting with one another without having lost any honor. Recall, for example, the role of silence in the interview conducted with Amrita.

Amrita was hesitant to speak directly about sex work but nonetheless did so, apparently as a favor to Manju. There was, in her telling of her story, no apparent pride, anger, or sense of accomplishment in navigating her life (as there was with some of the other women with whom I spoke), but rather only a sorrowful fulfillment of fate that involved doing a sort of work that caused her to lose honor (*izzat*), such that she was afraid to return to her family. Despite her fear of returning to her family, though, she was still in touch with them: she knew the whereabouts of her sisters and where their lives had taken them, and family members sometimes sent her food items from home. She said that they do not know what she does; as such, she has not lost her honor with them, at least not to the point where she has been cast out of the family. It is possible, though, and perhaps even likely that her family does know what she does, or at least has some inkling about it, which they never cause to blossom into a full understanding by asking questions. She was turned over to the individual who “trafficked” her by her mother who, I would wager, did not turn her over on the explicit condition that her daughter would be sold into a brothel, but rather on the promise of some other kind of work, such as housework. I have no way of

knowing, of course, whether her mother knew that it was possible (perhaps even likely) that her daughter would become a sex worker, but it is precisely this possibility of lack of knowledge and a maintenance of silence around the work that her daughter ultimately engaged in that perhaps allows them to maintain contact. Not speaking about doing sex work, then, provides a form of protection – a cloak of silence – that allows for the maintenance of honor by all parties involved, and therefore a continuation of a relationship that would otherwise be expected to be curtailed. However, going home, and ending her now-marginal involvement in sex work, would require that some sort of more detailed story be told, and would require the intervention of Manju to provide a cover, suggesting that this silence is both deliberate and not complete; no lie detailed enough is in place to allow this woman to return home as is without facing potential scrutiny, either by her family or by those around them, and if whatever story was told crumbled under questioning. Both this woman and the family who took her in could face the heavy, general disapproval associated with the ‘dirtiness’ of sex work and those involved in it. The silence protects, then, even as – or, rather, precisely because – it is complicit with the stigma attached to sex work.

### **The Problems of Silence and Lies in Activism**

Keith H. Basso has argued convincingly for the notion that when to remain silent is just as important as speaking when it comes to communication and proper social conduct:

There is considerable evidence to suggest that extra-linguistic factors influence not only the use of speech but its actual occurrence as well. In our own culture, for example, remarks such as “Don’t you know when to keep quiet?” “Don’t talk until you’re introduced!,” and “Remember now, no talking in church” all point to the fact that an individual’s decision to speak may be directly contingent upon the character of his surroundings. Few of us would

maintain that “silence is golden” for all people at all times. But we feel that silence is a virtue for some people some of the time, and we encourage children on the road to cultural competence accordingly” (1970:215).

Drawing on his fieldwork with the Western Apache, Basso argues that the Apache avoid speaking in situations in which “the status of the focal participant is marked by ambiguity—either because he is unfamiliar to other participants in the situation or because, owing to some recent event, a status he formerly held has been changed” (1970:225). Thus, Apache refrain from speaking in a variety of situations in which their relationship to another person is ambiguous: they will not speak to strangers, for example, or will refrain from speaking to people with whom their relationship has recently changed or may change (i.e., someone whom one is courting, a child who has recently returned from boarding school outside the reservation, a person who is grieving, or a person who is “cussing them out”). Although Basso cautions that his observation of silence in ambiguous social situations is not known to apply cross-culturally, he submits it as a pattern that might be observable elsewhere.

The ambiguity that Basso discusses can partially help us to explain the refusal of women to tell what Ajeet terms “the truth” – that is to describe exploitative working conditions to the police, or to speak directly about sex work in Shivdaspur with outsiders, including researchers and NGO workers. In the case of the police, the situation is highly ambiguous because it is unclear to the woman in question if or how the police will “help” them (if, indeed, they desire to be helped at all) if they give a statement other than the simple fiction of “No, she doesn’t keep a brothel, she is my aunt and she takes care of me.” When it comes to speaking to outsiders, who are simultaneously ambiguous as strangers and ambiguous in terms of their intentions, the tendency towards silence and erasure

becomes even more pronounced: how are sex workers to know whether breaking the customary silence on sex work will be considered appropriate, and what benefit (or harm) will doing so bring to them? Given that engagement in sex work was repeatedly described to me as the result of being helpless (*majboor*) and the simple desire to earn one's daily bread, even strangers whom women might perceive as sympathetic are ambiguous with regards to the response they might give to being told clear-cut stories of the experience of exploitation, suffering, and cruelty. A highly sympathetic and friendly character, who is demonstrably dedicated to the cause of improving their lives, such as Ajeet Singh, can use those stories as justification for a series of actions that, at least in the short-run, compromise their safety, security and labor opportunities within what is an admittedly exploitative but at least predictable system of brothel prostitution.

In addition to ambiguity, however, there is the question of power in Shivdasपुरi sex workers' silence on the topic of their labor. There are many reasons to distrust silence, as well as to distrust those who silence, through refusal to hear, record, or lend credence to the narratives of others. At a surface and seemingly obvious level, this is because silence is thought to represent a lack of content. If someone will not tell us her story, then it becomes difficult if not impossible to say that we have an understanding of how she perceives or evaluates her life, let alone to perceive or evaluate it from our own standards. What might exist beyond the veil of the silence remains simply unknown, and while keeping this veil in place may serve the purposes of those who keep silent (if silence is maintained for protection, as in the cases of women abducted during Partition, and of sex workers in Shivdasपुर, for example) it does not necessarily help us to understand whatever it is that we seek to understand. If I went to Shivdasपुर to come to a better understanding of how

South Asian brothel workers understand their work in the context of their lives (or vice versa), and I found that it was something about which they would rather not speak, then that partially answers my query. They prefer not to understand their lives in terms of their work. However, as I also went to Shivdaspur to understand how the residents of Shivdaspur interact with the NGO Guria, and to understand whether or not they felt that Guria's interventions in their community had been worthwhile, their silence on the topic of sex work and Guria's actions against sex work leave me with no greater understanding. The silence kept, while protective, does not illuminate the topic at hand.

When it comes to women's narratives, additionally, great attention has been paid to supporting and encouraging women's speech, with the understanding that freely speaking and being heard are in and of themselves valuable and powerful. In her discussion of the power of silence, it is with the power of speech that Susan Gal writes, "It has become clear that gender relations are created not only by a sexual division of labor and a set of symbolic images, but also through contrasting possibilities of expression for men and women" (1991:175). That women have been historically silenced through lack of access to public speech has meant that men more so than women have been able to produce and control credible narratives regarding history, gender, and power, among other topics. The issue of controlling credible narratives is of course not limited to men maintaining control over women (nor has it always been successful), but also operates within many other and overlapping spheres of power.

Likewise, the entirety of the Subaltern Studies project is premised on the idea that the powerful control credible narratives and have traditionally created and dominated the materials that scholars use to create their interpretations of the past. Lack of "voice" or

representation is taken as a clear sign of subjugation, and scholars have gone to great lengths to “recover” these lost, missing, or silenced voices. The equation of speech with power pervades much of critical cultural theory. Gal notes,

Whether we use Gramsci’s term ‘cultural hegemony,’ or symbolic domination (Bourdieu 1977); oppositional, emergent, and residual cultures (Williams 1973); or subjugated knowledges (Foucault 1980), the central notion remains: the control of discourse or of representations of reality occurs in social interaction, located in institutions, and is a source of social power; it may be, therefore, the occasion for coercion, conflict, or complicity (Gal 1991:177).

Other anthropologists have likewise focused on silence as a locus of power. Robin Sheriff, for example, argues that cultural consensus regarding which topics should not be discussed, or “customary silences,” constitute “cultural censorship.” Using the example of the customary silence on race in Brazil, Sheriff argues that customary silences reflect the political interests of dominant groups within a society; unlike state censorship, customary silences operate less through overt coercion than through hegemonic acceptance of the notion that something should not be discussed (2008). Similarly, Maria-Luisa Achino Loeb argues for “silence as the currency of power,” taking as a “guiding premise [...] that silence, while universal in its form as perceived absence, is indicative of repressed, unobtrusive presence and functionally tied to context” (2006:2); the “absence” that silence indexes is that of power, although silence’s relation to power is ambiguous, as it can either keep someone from speaking, or withhold information from someone. Rhetorician Cheryl Glenn likewise argues that “people use silence and silencing every day to fulfill their rhetorical purpose, whether it is to maintain their position of power, resist the domination of others, or submit to subordination” and that “each one of these rhetorical situations offers the participants a chance to readjust relations of power” (2004:153).



In this light, we can read the hesitancy of the women with whom I talked to speak about sex work, their cursory treatment of it as unimportant (even as it evoked very strong emotions of sadness, shame, or discomfort in the interviews), and their insistence on traditional identifiers for South Asian women (wives and mothers), as quintessentially hegemonic. Although the familial structure that was to protect their honor has failed them, as a result of which they have become sex workers, they present themselves within this same system of valuation of their lives. In short, they are simultaneously on the losing end of a set of ideological tendencies and complicit in maintaining the heteronormative and patriarchal family ideal. Even interpretation of their silence as protective within these ideological tendencies does not redeem their silence from its reinforcement of the very same ideology.

Likewise, Guria's dismissal of the narratives of sex workers as lies, however well-intentioned the dismissal may be, smacks of the employment of social power against a remarkably marginalized group. Sex workers in Shivdaspur are triply Subaltern: they are from predominantly low or uncasted Hindu communities and equivalent Muslim families; they are women; and they are women who by virtue of association with sex work are of even lower status than they might otherwise be within other low-caste communities. It can easily be argued that for an activist of comparatively much higher social standing (in terms of caste, gender, education, and moral stance against prostitution) to describe their statements as categorically lies, even as he does so sympathetically, is for a considerably more powerful man to silence the statements of such women. Completely ignoring the "objective" truth content of their statements, he is in a position to describe them as lies because he is in a position to be believed over them.

While acknowledging the silencing nature of Ajeet's interpretation of sex workers' speech, however, a simple act of the powerful silencing the less-powerful does not fully accounts for this interaction. Gayatri Spivak has famously enumerated the difficulties of retrieving the "speech" of subaltern subjects at all, let alone that of the "doubly effected" subaltern woman: "If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is more deeply in shadow..." (1988:28). The problem of teasing "truth" out of the statements of the women with whom I spoke is one of attempting to access, through the many muffling layers of what can be said and to whom, the voices of the triply subaltern. When Ajeet says that they lie, his statement is very probably true. If a woman says "*Aapnae aap Shivdspur ayi*" (I came on my own to Shivdaspur), when in fact she was given by her mother to a woman who gave her to another man who brought her to Shivdaspur, "the lie" in that statement is a means of not going into something she would rather not go into, because the outcome of telling the truth will not result in her being removed from her situation. It is also possible that, years later, she no longer wishes to be removed from it, even if at one point she did. For those of us who are not this women, her decision (or not) to enter sex work is the crux of our arguments for her legitimacy as either a worker or as a slave. But the truth that we seek is not, it seems, relevant to the woman in the same way. It is possible that we cannot know, and that instead, if we wish to speak of a sex-worker activism that takes into account the positions of sex workers, it will be necessary to move beyond concerns of diametrically opposed binary notions of truth and lies, slavery and voluntary labor, victim and agent, forced and voluntary.

*Conclusion: Is there a Counter-Point to the Silence on Sex Work?*

The purported lies of sex workers leave us in a thorny place when it comes to questions of voice and activism and social work, particularly that which is meant to operate on behalf of a group of people who do not organize for themselves. Durbar, for all of its emphasis on voice and collective action, was founded not by a sex worker but by a local academic, who still maintains control of the organization, although at this point it is a collective with 65,000+ members. Ajeet once argued to me that Durbar listened to women who were in positions of power within Sonagachi: the brothel keepers and madams, who are happy to participate in self-regulatory boards and condom distributions provided they stay in their position of power over the women who work for them in their brothels. The notion of sex work as a choice, then, and as something that we can treat as labor falls flat if one believes Ajeet's accounting of Durbar's strategy. If you can discredit those who speak of sex work as just a job, and one into which the majority of workers willingly enter (contrary to the popular wisdom that they are forcefully trafficked), as Durbar states, then you can justify abolitionist sentiments, or brothel raids regardless of their results on the business of the women who work in the red light district. If you believe that the majority of the women working in brothels are workers, not captives, and that regardless of whether they came there of their own volition with full knowledge of the work they would do, they now want to be left alone to earn their two *roti* a day in peace, while employing the symbolism and language of South Asian womanhood (*i.e.*, most proscriptively, wifedom) to overshadow their status as sex workers, then you cannot engage in abolitionism or rescue work. Instead, you must leave the women alone, or provide for them that which they say they want: banks, education, a union to ensure condom usage, hot meals for their children.

What is acceptable as sex-worker activism, and as social work that involves sex workers, is determined at least in part by the truth of the women's statements. Silence on the topic (which is a refusal to speak about it), or lies about it (which is an obfuscatory response that can be read as "silencing" the truth), block our way out of the conundrum of finding activism that sex workers feel benefits them. Unless, to return to an earlier point, their silence and lies are, in fact, their answer to the questions of how we interpret their lives and what can be done to help them.

Another activist working with sex workers in Varanasi, a Western social worker named Jennifer, took me twice to the train station to meet the women that she was working to aid. These women (and adolescents) were living as part of a migrant community, squatting in small tents made of sticks and plastic tarps outside the station, provided the police were not inclined to make them move elsewhere (which they sometimes did, suddenly tearing down the structures and forcing the community to move elsewhere temporarily). Sex work was a major source of income for the women, although they (and the men who lived with them) also did other labor at the station when it was available. Drug use (mostly sniffing glue or other chemical solutions) was very common, as was alcohol use. During my second visit to the community, I spent some time talking to a very drunk and at that moment very happy woman who told me quite enthusiastically, upon seeing her current husband walk by, that men come, and they go, but that they could not be relied upon; they come home to eat, she told me, and then they beat you, after which they go away again. Comparatively, Shivdaspur seemed a paradise of stability and sobriety.

Jennifer, unlike Ajeet, took a more moralistic stance against sex work in and of itself, and against the ways in which these individuals lived more generally. She viewed the

lifestyles of the sex workers living in the train station as something that they did by choice, and judged that choice as morally wrong, although she was sympathetic to the reasons that had led the women to live as they did, as well as to the violence and depravation they experienced in their day-to-day lives. Under the auspices of a large, international Catholic charity, she had set up a rehabilitation complex of sorts, where she had intended that these women and their children would come to live. The complex would provide safe, stable shelter and food, as well as therapy, education, and vocational training. Upon its completion, the women refused to come because, as they said, they preferred their freedom. In the train station, they could earn money and do what they pleased. Jennifer told me that they insisted that they had chosen this life, although they said they did not want it for their children, and so she had shifted tactics, working to have the women send their children to live in the complex, and using her cell phone to allow the mothers to talk to their children who were living in the complex when she visited. Some of the mothers, however, refused to send their children. While Jennifer was compassionate in acknowledging the difficulty of this decision, and recognized that the children were sources of love, joy, and purpose for the mothers, she was adamant that the children would have a better life living under the care of her charity. She was frustrated by the women's refusal not only to send their children, but also to come live there themselves. When I asked her if she had asked the women themselves what they wanted, and what would be useful for them, she replied that she had done this once she realized that the women would not come and live in the charity complex. Their response was that they wanted her to come and have a cup of tea and sit and talk with them. When women insist that all they want is some company and tea, and yet at the same time quietly discuss the difficulties that they have

earning enough money for adequate food, and the violence that they experience at the hands of husbands, customers, and police, she said, “it is hard to listen.”

On one of my visits to this community with Jennifer, I spent a long time talking to an older man, cheerfully referred to as “Pandit-ji” because he identified as Brahmin and could speak a bit of Sanskrit, who had recently moved from Patna in Bihar to the train station. He had been unable to find work in Patna for a long time, and so his wife and two youngest daughters, who were about thirteen and sixteen, had come west to Varanasi. Jennifer explained to me that the mother and older daughter had told her recently that she (the older daughter) had just started doing sex work, and the fact of her earnings was apparent, compared to the rest of the women there. Her clothes were new, and she had several costume-jewelry rings on her fingers, her eyebrows having been recently threaded and her nails done in a salon. The two daughters sat behind their parents while I talked to their father, who was asking me questions about the educational system in America. He had been unable to provide education for his daughters, and so he worried about their future. He wished, he said, that someone would take them and educate them so that they could earn better money (he of course never mentioned the work that his older daughter does), but as it was, he would have to try to arrange marriages for them, after which he and his wife would be able to “rest easy.” I turned to ask his older daughter if she would go with someone who could provide her an education, or a better marriage, and she smiled and insisted she would not. “I’ll stay here, like this,” she said, looking at the ground. Later, as Jennifer and I got up to leave, the man repeated several times that it was good that we had come, to sit and talk and drink tea with them.

During the ten months that I was doing fieldwork in Shivdaspur, I was routinely invited to people's homes for cups of tea. For the most part, Ajeet and Manju insisted that I not accept these invitations. None of the other teachers in the *balwadi* would ever do that, Ajeet explained, and I should behave as any other teacher. Furthermore, I was reminded, these people were criminals, and some of them were dangerous. Given that *Guria* provided my only possible access to Shivdaspur, and that my research was focused on *Guria's* interaction with the community in Shivdaspur, I followed their wishes. On occasions when the NGO did deem it appropriate and useful to visit households in Shivdaspur, though, I was invited along (these were festival occasions such as *Eid Milan* or *Diwali*) and here, again, the simple act of sitting down to eat and drink with the people in question was regarded as meaningful and, more simply, fun.

Sitting down to eat and drink with people from this community, it should be noted, would not be a simple matter for any individual who was caste-conscious, as the individuals in question are of extraordinarily low caste status. In this light, it is important to understand that the invitation to sit and eat and drink is also a request for recognition as equal, or at least as not inferior. Likewise, when I spoke to Ajeet in August of 2008, and he described his early days as an activist and educator in Shivdaspur, he too recalled that in the beginning, women only asked him for small things: cups of tea, hair pins, and other sundry items. His offers of the large-scale help he hoped to provide, that which would help them leave this work if that was what they wanted, or to continue in the profession without the exploitation of *dalals* and police officers, was met with a request for tiny, seemingly unimportant things. He bought them these little things, he said, because as far as he was

concerned that was one less item for which the women would be dependent on *dalals*, transforming these small actions into ideologically large ones.

At the risk of backing into a potentially maudlin theoretical corner, and at the risk of suggesting that activism of this nature operates in a sphere far too complex for it to be successful at its aims, I suggest that silence, lies, and “simple” requests for *chai* are valid and meaningful responses to the question “What can I do for you?,” posed by social worker to a sex worker. At their root are the small requests of friendship (or perhaps just acquaintanceship) which are potentially more meaningful to the women making the requests than brothel raids, the arrests of *dalals*, or rehabilitation homes.<sup>73</sup> Answering the question “What can we do to help sex workers, in their opinion?” then becomes deceptively simple. Sit and have a cup of tea.

The obvious retort to the conclusion above is that sitting and having a cup of tea does not remove the women in question from exploitation, improve their working conditions, protect them from physical violence, interfere with police officers who are paid off by *dalals*, reduce their risk of sexually transmitted disease, or provide them with a viable means of alternative livelihood if that is what they so wish, all of which are standard and worthy goals of sex worker activist organizations in India (and elsewhere). There are organizations in which the desires of sex workers and the goals of the organization are not

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<sup>73</sup> Rehabilitation homes, by the way, have a notorious reputations in Varanasi, and elsewhere in India, as sites of abuse and neglect rather than “reform,” not to mention the fact that women sent to them are generally done so after having been forcibly recovered from sex work, rather than having requested help in leaving the profession. In one of the early issues of its magazine, “The Voice of the *Tawa’if*,” a volunteer for *Guria* wrote an expose on Varanasi’s Home for the Protection and Rehabilitation of Women, describing its squalid conditions. I was also told, by one of the young men of the family with whom I lived, that it was rumored in Varanasi that the woman who currently ran this Rehabilitation home routinely sold women and girls sent there to traffickers, who funneled them back into sex work.



so apparently at odds with one another<sup>74</sup>, and as such I do not mean to imply that the problem that *Guria* faces here with regards to the desires of the women for whom they work is inherent to all such organizations. Nor do I mean to suggest that if the outcome of *Guria's* activism were to be investigated in ten or twenty years the results that its tactics produce will be worse than the results of a similar period of tea drinking and conversation would be.

I do suggest, however, that “the sex workers’ voice” (which is not itself unified or homogenous) does not provide a simple retort to or evaluation of actions that are taken on behalf of (and sometimes against) the sex workers themselves because sex workers, like everyone else, operate within larger and shifting social spheres in which they inhabit multiple “truths” and speak from multiple places of interest. While I find it plausible that many sex workers would prefer less exploitative working environments, and prefer to experience less social stigma, they are also adept at operating within those environments and in the context of that stigma. In attempting to maintain silence on certain facets of their profession, they protect themselves and their honor in service, perhaps, of the possibility of building the social relationships that might be engendered by sitting, talking and having a cup of tea with someone. However, this same silence also serves, intentionally or otherwise, to protect a system of brothel prostitution that is exploitative of their labor. Their silence and lies, slippery as they are, are also a valid and serious response to questions of the role of their work in their lives, as well as what might be done (or not

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<sup>74</sup> Durbar and Sunlaap of West Bengal come to mind in this regard, as do non-Indian organizations such as COYOTE, and Shan Women’s Action Network of Burma, to name only a few.

done) to help them as individuals, rather than as a group understood as abject, excluded, and subject to continual cruelty.

## CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

In this dissertation, I have described the various ways in which sex workers are excluded from middle-class conceptualizations of a good or proper life for a woman in South Asia, and how these exclusions are informed by and play out in the realm of the neo-abolitionist sex-worker activism conducted by Guria. Their exclusions are many-fold: conceptualized as a form of bare life, they are *de facto* ignored by and denied the sovereign protections of the State; they are denied the small comfort of stability when those who seek to aid them “rescue” them from brothels in an attempt to dismantle the brothel system by bringing the laws of the State to bear on the red-light area; they are conceptually denied marriage, the most legitimating status available to them as South Asian women, and when they do marry the validity of those marriages are questioned on the grounds of their profession and on the marriages’ lack of conformity to middle-class standards of marriage; they are regarded as categorically different from the one form of sex worker identity (courtesanship) which is considered of value in contemporary South Asia; and they are denied the ability to shape their own narratives, in that the telling of their own stories in their own voices are disavowed on the grounds that they lie.

One in-road that Guria as a neoabolitionist organization has been able to make into their exclusion – the provisioning of their children with education, both within and, perhaps more importantly, beyond the red light district – is considered by Guria itself to be to some extent besides-the-point because it does not, ultimately, lead to an end to prostitution in its current iteration in Shivdaspur. The abovementioned exclusions occur at different levels. Much of their social exclusion, exemplified previously in this dissertation by the ideological refusal to conflate sex workers and wives, occurs at a societal level on the

grounds that sex workers have failed to be “good women:” chaste, pure, marriageable. Similarly, much of their exclusion from the sovereign protections of the State occur at a societal level, and not in fact at the juridical level of the law, which actually provides a multitude of protections for sex workers. These protections are premised on the assumption that sex work is forced or coerced, and that the State should intervene to help remove women from the situation and rehabilitate them into more normative positions and stereotypical conception of womanhood; nonetheless, the protections exist, but simply are not implemented by the police and juridical system as it operates on the ground.

Many of the other exclusions discussed, however, occur within the ideological framework of the activism conducted by Guria and organizations like it. Some elements of Guria’s activism are *inclusive* of sex workers. The *balwadi*, by serving a community-building function with Shivdaspur, and by funneling sex workers’ children into mainstream schools, decreases the social and spatial exclusion of sex workers’ children by bringing them into contact with children from other backgrounds. Other facets of Guria’s activism not dealt with at length in the dissertation because they were not routinely in evidence during my fieldwork are likewise intended to be inclusive, such as the provisioning of health knowledge and helping to arrange affordable health-care, for example. The long-standing, emotionally intimate relationships that were evident between Ajeet and Manju and many individuals in Shivdaspur, mostly sex workers and their children, likewise serve to reinscribe an element of humanity into the structures of exclusion.

However, many facets of Guria’s ideology as a neo-abolitionist organization are, as has been shown, *exclusionary* of sex workers. The understanding of sex workers as exemplifying bare life, the refusal to consider sex workers in the same category as *tawa’if*,

and the understanding of sex workers' self-presentations as lies which serve the very power structure of their "enslavement," all serve to place sex workers in the category of abjection and in need of outside intervention and "rescue." As with "Western constructions of third world peoples as abject, intractable, and doomed" (Comaroff 2007:201) neoabolitionist constructions of sex workers as enslaved and tortured serve to push sex workers to the limits of alterity. Because sex workers have already been so heavily violated (abandoned, sold or lost by their families, trafficked into brothels, and forced to routinely subject themselves to bodily violation) further violations in the name of their rescue can be justified: they can be forcibly removed from the brothels in which they were forced to work; it can be insisted that their "true" stories be told in order to prosecute their captors; structural forces related to the closure of brothels and the loss of an environment conducive to their collaboration with Guria can cause them to seek employment as sex workers in new environments. Because their work is not conceptualized as work, as are a myriad of other low-prestige forms of labor, rescuing them through brothel raids is considered possible, acceptable and heroic in a way that storming into a house inhabited with rickshaw pullers or day-laborers to "liberate" them would not be.

Ajeet Singh's counter-argument to this criticism of some of his organization's methods is simple and compelling: brothel-based prostitution is slavery, characterized by force and torture. There is no doubt in his mind that this fact is true, and those of us inclined to criticize him on the philosophical grounds that exclusionary practices are inherently damaging would do well to remember that his understanding of brothel-based sex workers in Shivdaspur as slaves is based on nearly twenty years of on-the-ground activism in Shivdaspur, during which time most of the sex workers he has known have met

violent or sad ends, either literally disappearing or falling into severe drug or alcohol addiction.

Most of the women over the age of thirty say very strange and sad things. Most of them become drunkards or drug addicts. There are many drug addicts just outside of the *balwadi*. They keep changing places, but mostly you'll see them to the right of our building, there are three or four of them who are severe drug addicts. You can see by the [unhealthy] state of their bodies that they have lost everything. [...] Often, they don't seem sane to me. The way they talk, the way they behave is very strange. It's a different behavior. I am not a psychiatrist, but because we used to talk every day I could tell that their mental health was not normal. Because of the way their life has been, what looks normal to them actually looks quite abnormal to other people [Ajeet Singh, Personal Interview].

In Ajeet's experience, the ones who do not succumb to the cruelties of the system ironically go on to perpetuate it.

The women who work as brothel keepers are not born into that position. They themselves were trafficked, and brought into prostitution in that way. Occasionally, there will be a female brothel keeper who got some capital from somewhere, got in touch with a pimp, and they decided to go into the business, but that is very rare. Generally, the brothel keepers were previously prostitutes themselves. However, not all sex workers eventually run brothels. Ninety percent of them vanish on the streets. As they get older, they disappear. Maybe 10% are able to assert their presence and graduate into being a brothel keeper. Not all of them can do it. It requires special skills: they must be more cunning, they must know how to handle customers and pimps and the police. Not all of them can do it, but a few of course do. [Ajeet Singh, Personal Interview]

The form of brothel prostitution that Ajeet Singh seeks to eradicate is one in which sex workers are abject, in which they are subject to abuse, in which they are devalued as commodities and inclined to drug addiction and madness. Even as he understands brothel keepers, pimps, and all stakeholders in the economy that thrives around brothel prostitution as "parasites" garnering their money from the sexual and economic exploitation of women, and as such strives to destroy their economy and punish them for their behavior, he understands them as products of an inherently unhealthy and

destructive environment.

M: Why do you think the pimps and brothel keepers do the jobs that they do?

A: Why does anyone do crime? Because they are disconnected from themselves, I think. That applies to any criminal: thieves, smugglers, traffickers. They have all fallen, they are all disoriented. Somehow, the understanding of life is not clear to them. And so in that disorientation, naturally, they go into these things. Their environment is responsible for that. This is the second-largest illegal trade in the world today; it is all chaos, crime and drugs [Ajeet Singh, Personal Interview].

Ajeet went on to explain that this disorientation, and the environment that engenders it, is a result of a materialistic desire for money and possessions. The emphasis on material gain, and on the ability to get money by any means, including the highly exploitative means of forcing women to engage in prostitution, does not lead to happiness because it comes at the cost of being disconnected from one's self. In this light, the meditation and art projects, and the emphasis on creative education in the *balwadi* is an attempt to provide a corrective to this environment that is otherwise poisonous to those who live within it.

In the context of this remarkably violent atmosphere, which perversely values money over life, any action which works to destroy the atmosphere (that is, the economy of brothel prostitution) is justified, even if that ironically means that individuals being helped are harmed in the process. Jean Comaroff has argued that this irony is often at the core of modern political formation as it relates to and encompasses the realm of bare life:

But what is distinctive about modern politics, for Agamben, is that it "knows no value....*other* than life (1998:10, emphasis added). To wit, bare life is simultaneously its object and its subject: the object of state enforcement, the subject of projects of democratic emancipation. As exception becomes the rule, a contradictory process manifests itself. A predisposition to human liberation and a tendency towards state fascism collapse into each other, rooting themselves in the same ground: the "new biopolitical body of humanity" (Agamben 1998:9). This con/fusion drives the political history of the West, culminating in a polis in which an unprecedented capacity and

concern to enhance life is rivaled only by the power to destroy it (2007:207)

Although Ajeet Singh and Guria are not themselves the State, they operate within the neoliberal configuration of NGO-State interactions to force the State to enforce its own laws regarding prostitution, and in this context bring a similar dynamic into being: the very justification for harm caused to those involved in sex work through the destruction of that economy is that those individuals did not value life in the first place. By not allowing for inclusive forms of life for sex workers within South Asian society in the first place, by forcing them to engage in labor that disconnects them from their humanity, human rights, and the experience of life as independent, autonomous women capable of love and affectionate human relations, the red light area in its current iteration is excluded by Guria from that which is morally permissible. Each chapter of this dissertation has described a form of this exclusion.

A significant feature of the grounds for excluding the red light area from that which is acceptable is the assertion that much of the labor conducted there is forced, and that individuals who tell you otherwise are either lying or exceptional in what is otherwise essentially a slave market. My ethnographic data can neither confirm nor refute these claims, although stories of violence were common, as was the occasional sign of physical violence – a woman soliciting with a black eye, for example. Equally common, however, were women who talked to me about mundane, day-to-day experiences and invited me to their homes for tea.

Other ethnographers have found that sex work is often *not* the product of violence, enslavement, and force, as *Guria* describes, even in situations in which it is assumed to be forced on the levels which Guria argues that sex work is forced in Shivdaspur. Rhacel



Parrenas, in her study of migrant laborers in Toyko hostess clubs, found that hostesses “are indeed susceptible to exploitation” but that, contrary to being forced prostitutes, most had migrated voluntarily and chose to engage in the work (2011). Likewise, Sealing Cheng (2010), in her study of migrant Filipino entertainers in South Korea, recounts the apparent indifference to the fact of their rescue of two Filipina sex workers who were “rescued” from “forced prostitution” in the course of a brothel raid. Rather than asserting themselves as traumatized victims of sexual slavery, they were seemingly indifferent to their prior “captors” and happily forgave the brothel keepers’ holding of their passports and requiring them to work in their brothel in exchange for a sum of money. In her examination of what is for many the unthinkable world of child prostitution, Heather Montgomery (2001), describes both the immense physical and emotional difficulty of the work that the children do, but also the ways in which engaging in such work makes sense and is of concrete value to the children within a broader set of cultural logics about hard work and familial obligation. The children with whom she did her research experience sex work as difficult but also feel it is the best way to fulfill their filial obligations to help their parents, and Montgomery argues that enforcing their right *not* to be sexually exploited would ironically trample their rights to live with their families in their communities of origin. They are not waiting to be “rescued” from their work. Similarly, in her work on migrant Thai sex workers, Kaoru Ayoama (2009) found exploitative labor conditions but no evidence of forced migration or forced prostitution. Rather, the women with whom she conducted her research described cooperating with traffickers, with the knowledge that they would be engaging in prostitution abroad. In the South Asian context, Kotiswaran (2011) likewise does not find evidence of sexual slavery in red light districts. Instead, the sex workers she

describes are insistent that their work be recognized as labor and treated as such. Thus, several ethnographic studies fail to confirm the notion that sex workers necessarily perceive themselves as enslaved or in need of rescue.

This is of course not to say that forced prostitution does not exist anywhere, or that the working conditions of brothel-based sex workers cannot be exploitative or dangerous. During my field visits to Kolkata, activists associated with Durbar described their Self-Regulatory Boards, which attempt to locate individuals being coerced to engage in sex work. They remove new sex workers from brothels to talk to them about how they came there and what their motivations are, thereby hoping to find and provide assistance to anyone who has been brought to work against their will, indicating that they expect to sometimes find such women. However, compared to the imagined scale of the problem of forced trafficking and prostitution, ethnographic evidence does not support the common perception that forced prostitution is widespread.

In this light, it seems unlikely that Shivdaspur constitutes a radically different realm of sex work, and more likely that these differences in perception are due to ideological orientation. None of the ethnographers above describes sex work as non-exploitative, noting instead the set of social and legal factors that lead to marginalization and an inability to report abuses to authorities due to the illegal nature of the work (and, in some cases, the undocumented or illegal immigrant status of the sex workers). Each ethnography does, however, concretely engage with the intentions of sex workers, and with their interpretations of their work and lives. Ajeet Singh and Guria, in contrast, do not speak about the intentionality or self-interpretation of sex workers: rather, sex workers in the organization's representations of them are largely *intention-less* or lacking in the agency to

act on their intentions: forced by traffickers, pimps, or brothel keepers to engage in labor that they despise, and punished so ruthlessly if they attempt to leave that they never do. As described in the previous chapters, statements of intentionality, how they perceive themselves, or how they would like to be perceived by others (as wives, as mothers, as “helpless” laborers working to earn their daily bread, but as laborers nonetheless), are understood by those intent on liberating them as obfuscating the inherent fact of their obvious slavery. Again, these representations are based upon years of direct observation and personal interaction, but are also normalized representations based on a multitude of narratives that cannot all conform to this one narrative of victimhood and slavery. It is not that Guria has created a fictional account of sex work in Shivdaspur. Instead, it is that sex work cannot be ideologically contextualized within a form of life that the middle-class activists associated with Guria can see as worth living.

However, based on ethnographic insight it is necessary to insist on interpretations of sex workers as living within the realm of signification and social meaning, and within the fold of cultures and societies, and not as inhabiting an alterity so radical that they must be “saved” from it in opposition, at times, to their own stated desires. Even as sex workers occupy realms of South Asian society that can be exploitative, in which violence and drug abuse are commonplace, and in which women strive to eke out a living in a way that they themselves often characterize as “bad” or “dirty” work, they also operate within the same frames of reference for interpreting their lives as do others. It is important to understand them in relation to what they say about their enjoyment of holidays, the pleasure and pride that they take in their children (and also their frustrations with them), and how they describe themselves, perhaps only aspirationally, within the familial context of having a

husband or “man.” The extraordinary circumstances in which they live do not put them outside of the realm of interpretable, meaningful, and even pleasurable human interactions, and a characterization of their lives as otherwise does not do justice to the fullness of them.

In Jean Comaroff’s analysis of third world AIDS patients as constituting “bare life,” she describes the tremendous tenacity of such individuals, assumed to be dying needlessly and in utter abjection, to instead engage in activism and community building that defies their identification as bare life even as, from the outside, they seem to fit the definition. “In a zone of exclusion and erasure, bare life asserts a stubborn connection to social meaningful existence” (Comaroff 2007:209). Shivdasपुरi sex workers, in their descriptions of marriage and motherhood, and in their recalling of the *tawa’if* and tantric traditions, do precisely the same.

Here, again, ethnographic understandings of violence provide useful analogy. E. Valentine Daniel, in closing his anthropography of the tremendous violence of the Sri Lankan civil war, provides a meaningful counterpoint to what is otherwise a bleak account of abject horror. In contrast to all of the stories of violence that he was told, he ends his work with a story instead of tremendous personal kindness, in which a Tamil man is saved from being killed or greatly harmed in the 1977 anti-Tamil riots by an obviously Sinhalese woman. As a Sinhalese mob descended on the train, pulling Tamil passengers off of it before it could pull out of the station, a Sinhalese woman decided to sit next to an obviously Tamil passenger and hold his hand in a train car, giving the impression that they were married and that he, too, was Sinhalese, causing the mob to pass him by. In the story, neither he nor the woman ever said a word to each other, nor did they ever see each other again. The story, though, refers to registers of experience within the incidence of

tremendous violence that serve in opposition to the otherwise wholly horrific portrait of human possibilities for violence and seeming inhumanity posed by the rest of the war.

The day-to-day kindnesses and nets of familial relationship and friendship that exist in Shivdaspur, as described and analyzed in this dissertation, serve a similar counterpoint to the understanding of Shivdaspur that the NGO Guria proposes. These counterpoints work in opposition to the notion that any sort of action meant to help sex workers is justified on the grounds of their striking marginalization and exploitation. These kindnesses and relationships, however, should not be taken as necessarily a negation of the sort of world that Guria sees operating in Shivdaspur, just as Guria's description of Shivdaspur should not negate the existence of Shivdaspur as a place in which individuals live, work, grow up and engage in socially meaningful relationships. Although they are incommensurate, both Shivdaspurs exist. Taking both into account could, perhaps, inform an activism that might work with the existing structure of the red light district, rather than seeking to destroy it so that a utopian exploitation-free red light district can grow from the ashes of presumed slavery-based brothels. Although Guria views their actions as the best means of ending sexual exploitation in Shivdaspur, the preponderance of ethnographic research on sex work indicates that their understanding of brothel-based sex work as slavery and their use of rescue tactics cause harm to sex workers and misrepresent the ways that some sex workers themselves understand their lives.

Especially given this conflict between neo-abolitionist and ethnographic perspectives on sex work, and given that this ethnography is largely one of middle-class sex workers activists, is important to recognize that, from the perspective of neo-abolitionist middle-class activists such as Guria, their current methodology *is* working to bring about the sort of

social change that *they* wish to see: brothels are closing, some independent women are renting rooms or building houses in Shivdaspur, from which they can conduct their work on their own terms. Although conflict with Shivdaspur is ongoing, from the perspective of the activists associated with Guria, positive change is occurring in Shivdaspur : a form of life that they view as unfit for women to live appears to be ending in their site of activism. However, the fact that this positive appraisal is generated by those external to Shivdaspur must be acknowledged, and help to temper what appears to be a top-down assessment of Shivdaspur emphatically not shared by those involved in the sex trade itself, as evidenced by the sort of resistance to NGO activities in Shivdaspur described in Chapter 2.

It must also be acknowledged that contemporary Shivdaspur is, in Ajeet Singh's perspective, a work in progress, and a work to which he and his organization are committed. What will Shivdaspur look like in twenty years? Ajeet is insistent that broad changes are afoot, and so I conclude with his assessment of the current situation, and his hopeful optimism.

People say otherwise, but a red light area *can* go on without the traditional stereotypes, of the pimps and traffickers. Women *can* survive independently doing this work. The women who came and talked to you are mostly independent now. At least whatever little they have, they have from their own savings [Ajeet Singh, Personal Interview].

Whether or not this sort of independence can be brought about on a larger scale is another question – and one that broader ethnographic evidence regarding sex work answers in the negative – but only time will tell.

## APPENDIX A

### Statements of the Minor Girls Removed From Shivdaspur Brothels

Source: People's Union for Civil Liberties (2006).

**1. My name is Laxmi**, name of my father is Bharat Bhai Thakur and name of my mother is Yamuna Ben Bharat Bhai Thakur. My house is near the Station, Kashi Nath Barf Wala Ka Ghar, Udhwara, Surat. My father drives a vehicle. We are four brothers and seven sisters. Brother runs junk dealing business. One year ago, Munna Yadav residing behind Kathi Markandey Bawa brought me here after marrying me but in-laws did not keep me and refused to keep me in their house. Name of father of Munna is Hardwar. He took me to Bangalore. He and I had money with us. We stayed in a hotel and I having faith in him gave my entire money to him, then one month before he brought me to Shivdaspur and sold me here. I reside in the house of Jaya didi and Sunil. I do not like this work but this work has been got done by me forcibly and on refusal I receive beating. I have to entertain all the persons visiting in one day. I want to go to my house as soon as possible. I used to provide earning of minimum Rs. One thousand per day and sometimes two to three thousand per day.

**2. My name is Sharoon Kathun**, my father's name is Ansar Mulla and mother's name is Supia Bibi. My house is located at Nutan Chowk, Lakhi Chowk, Kantapur, Kharda Police Station Madrapur where we reside on rent. I came here 8-9 months ago. I used to do household chores (cleaning utensils etc.) in many houses. Agent who brought me here in the name of arranging service for me is a residence of Santoshpur. I do not know his name. When I had quarrel led at home, I came with him to work as maid. I live in the house of Rehmat and Afzal. Rehmat keeps the beautiful girls of his choice at his premises and sells others to other agents. I tried twice to run away from the premises of Rehmat but I was caught from the road and beaten up with rods. Afzal keeps hunter made of thick dish cable and she beats with that hunter. I have been forced for flesh trade. I used to get beating in case of earning less than Rs. One thousand in a day. One earning more money in a day gets appreciation and next day not earning more, one gets beating. They take entire money and even extra money given by customers. They beat us on spending something on us. I do not want to go back there. I want to go to my home.

**3. My name is Tehseen**, my father's name is Mehboob Ali. My residential address is Sehnaz Begum Ganj, Mamoo Khan Ka Hatta, near Moti Jheel, Kanpur. One lady/agent living near my house brought me in the name of visiting the house of her maternal uncle and after getting down at Station asked Auto driver to the place where prostitutes live (brothel). Whereupon I asked her as to where she was taking me, to which she told that her maternal uncle lived there. I got suspicious and I would have gone back from Station itself but she lured me. I have studied up to High School

level. I came on the last Bakrid. I have three sisters and three brothers. I live in the house of Rehmat. Here I was being asked to start entertaining visitors (flesh trade) and on my refusal I used to get beatings. I do not act on my own desire in this work. On asking to allow me to back to home, owners say that we have spent Rs One lakh on you, have bought you for Rs sixty thousand and they have to pay Rs Forty thousand to police and you can go to your home after paying that amount.

**4. My name is Reena alias Sushma.** My father's name is Hamid and mother's name is Jeba Bai. I have step father. My house is in Piyali Chatui Para, Orissa. Boy named Vappi brought me here about 1½ years ago on the pretext of marriage and before that he kept me for 14 days in his maternal aunt's house (Mausi), her name was Deepa but name of that place was not told to me. They used to speak in Hindi and Bengali. I live in the house of Badal and Dashrath. Islam and Sunita are my employers. I use to receive beating in case of not earning money by offering myself for sex. My employer says that grab the money, wrist watch of visitors. They take away the entire earning. Employer says that she had to spent lakhs of rupees on me. On coming here they change names of all. They say that in case any one ask, do not tell your place of residence.

**5. My name is Ratna Biswas** and my mother's name is Gayatri. I have three brothers named Kanu Vishwas, Balai Bishwas, and Devasheesh Biswas. My residence is in Shivmorali Manyapota, Police Station Chakdra, Chadoira, Distt. Nadia. I have come here just 14-15 days ago on last Durga Puja. One lady named Jhooma Chakraborry residing in the house of my maternal uncle brought me in the name of arranging work for me in the house of her sister, Saraswati is my employer. Khokoon is her son, she has another son whose name I do not remember but Sapna Das is his wife and she beats me black and blue and asks me to do this work. She also takes away extra payment customers give me. I was arrested during police raid and that time my employer showed me as a married woman after applying Sindoor (vermilion) and Mangal Sutra. The entire family of employer live here and they all live on my income. They ask me to grab money, belongings of visitors.

**6. My name is Archna,** father's name is Jagdish and mother's name is Mukta Das. My house is in Daimond Sadur Hat, Calcutta. I came here three months ago. Agent who was a lady brought me on the pretext of taking a round of the area. On asking to let me go to my home, I was forced to indulge in this work after giving me beating. I do not work of my own desire in this field. On asking for going home, owner says that you have been bought for Rs Sixty thousand and they have to pay Rs 40 thousand to police, you may go after paying that much money. On trying to go home, they chase and catch me and do not allow me to go anywhere.

**7. My name is Rukhsana,** my father's name is late Kalim and mother's name is



Geeta. I am resident of Shivdaspur itself and do dancing, singing.

**8. My name is Sulekha**, father's name is Bhavishya Das and mother's name is Minka Das. My house is in Pratap Pur Mastya Station, Nadia. I came here two years ago. I was working as maid doing household chores. Here I do dancing, singing. The agent told me that he would arrange work for me in the Orchestra and after bringing me here, he sold me. I want to go to my house. Geeta is my employer who beats me and takes away money.

**9. My name is Gudia** (fictitious name). I cannot go back to the house of my parents. I have come here one year ago. I do dancing, singing, washing, cleaning work in the house of Rehmat. One boy brought me in the name of taking round of house of his aunt. I want to go to the house of my elder sister who resides in Gorakhpur in case she wants to keep me. Her house is in New Colony, Chilampur, Bagha Bawa Ka Sthan, near Arman Tailors and her name is Munni and she is doctor. We do not know what would happen? Where would we go from here?

**10. My name is Khursheena**, I have studied upto Third class. Jaidev is my husband, I do not know the names of my parents. My house was in Harihar Para, Barhampur, Bengal. Where I earlier used to live and do household chores, the owner of that place used to beat me. From there Jaidev and my mother-in-law Aazpan Begum brought me in Tanker then in bus and then in Train at this place. Father-in-law has died five years ago, I do not know his name. I have been in Varanasi for the last one year twenty days. 8 months have passed since my marriage with Jaidev and he drives tempo. My two storey house is in Shivdaspur. My husband's house is in Bengal. On 25th four persons forcibly picked me in which my clothes got torn. House of husband is behind the school. I do not know Ajit Sir, Gudia. I am pregnant with three months pregnancy. My husband earns and looks after me.

**11. My name is Chameli**. My father's name is Babloo Mandal and mother's name is Mehzan. I am not educated. My father runs tube well. My house is in Sahadia village, Police Station Dokul, Karimpur, Distt. Murshidabad. I want to go back home. I had gone to Station to go to my house. One woman from Kishangarh Station brought me here on the pretext of service and sold me here. She left me after saying that she is bringing cold drink from the shop. They also force me to do this dirty work and beat me. I came here five months ago. Boys came and rescued and did a good work. They (boys) did not use any force on me. Send me to my home.

**12. My name is Seema Mukherjee**. Father's name is Sapan Mukherjee, my mother has died. I am the only daughter of my parents. My father is D.S.P. in police, I have studied upto VII class. The neighbour, whom we used to call Uncle, had dispute with my father over house and his name is Vimal Mukherjee and he made me

unconscious by giving prasad and brought me here from Calcutta. I cannot recollect what happened on the way, first I was kept here at the premises of Bhatta. I was told to apply make up and stand outside. I refused for this whereupon I was beaten up mercilessly. Only one month has passed since coming to this place. I use to start weeping off and on and every time they use to beat me. I have been living at the premises of Rehmat. When police came, Rehmat asked me to run out of house. From outside, I have talked to my father. Number of phone of my house is 223791. My father is posted in Lal Bazar and he has got the Government flat bearing No. 130 and name of building is Ashoka Building. My house is in Calcutta. My father would come one day with huge force and would take me from here. Now I would not live here. I was running away from my home when two days ago one person caught me at station and brought me here.

**13. My name is Nasreen.** I am Musalman. My house is in village Ulem Para, Sontejpur Station, Calcutta. My mother used to make ladies bag. I was going to get payment of that work when near the station one woman and one man said let us come, we would arrange the job of a maid. Told me that if I did not accompany them, they would hand me over to the police. Being afraid, I came with them. Here they force me to do this dirty work and on refusing to do, they beat and snatch away entire income. In case I keep anything with me to meet out my expenses, they beat me. Not many days have passed since the time I have come here, I have come here only one week ago. Raid conducted whereupon Afzal made me to run away from field side. Police arrested and brought me.

**14. My name is Shabena** (fictitious name), my father's name is Khokoon and mother's name is Sabera. Siraz, Sirazul, and Ezaz are my uncles. My address is Village Sangadanga, Police Station Aamdagga, Post Office Badansa, Distt. Howrah, Calcutta. I came to the house of my married sister in Shoshepur and was going alone from there when Raja caught me in the bus, Raja said come, I will marry you. Raja brought me to Shivdaspur. He sold me here to Tulsi. Tulsi pushed me into this trade. One year has passed since I have come here. 2-3 men used to come daily. The earning used to go to owner. I have a six months old son. I was not allowed to go out. On falling ill I wanted to take rest for two-three days but owner did not allow me to take rest. She forced me to entertain visitors just after two days of my delivery. I want my son and want to go to my parents.

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