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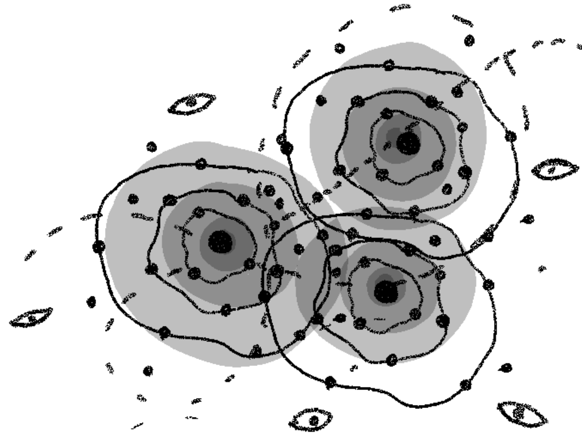
Playgrounds of Resistance:

A Patchwork Ethnography of Sex Workers' Sociopolitical Collectivisation in South & West India

Jo Krishnakumar



Thesis submitted for the degree of PhD in Anthropology and Sociology

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Abstract

Sex workers in India have long battled singular, stereotypical representations of themselves as victim-criminals, or, as ‘key populations’ in India’s HIV/AIDS Targeted Intervention programmes since the late 1980s through the 1990s. This thesis engages with local understandings of identity and collectivity that, when tied to global misunderstandings, have inadvertently consigned Indian sex workers into globally ‘easy’ theories of neoliberal market logics. These simplifications slot their lives into words like ‘choice’, ‘victimhood’ and ‘freedom’, without understanding what that might mean for people beyond certain class-caste-economic locations. Using Patchwork Ethnography, this thesis translates my interlocutors’ life narratives, exploring connections between documentary films, sex worker led collectives and networks, identity formations, and cross-movement solidarities. I focus on everyday practices of cooperation, organising, localisation and public expression that sex workers engage in within a networked society and through undercurrents of continuous violence. Through these patches, I offer a *gali* (neighbourhood)-first story that focuses on cultural practices, identity and community making that moves beyond policy and law, evidencing the world-making capacity of sex workers’ collectives, expanding the language of political progress and social transformation. By pulling at the hem of narratives taken for granted, the thesis offers a post-intervention, and post-care anthropology that centres resistance, and negotiation with systems and networks of power, care, and governance.

Keywords: Care, Networks, Activists, Collectives, Visibility, Caste, Sex Workers, Collective Identity, India

What have I got from the organisation? Look, what do you get from a family? There are positives, as well as negatives – it's the same in organisations. Every family has fights, it's not like there aren't any, but there's also love in those fights. That's what organisations are like too. My understanding has changed a lot. Now, if people from my community even hurl a few fits of abuse at me, I listen and laugh it off. I've been so hypnotised, that my patience has increased by working in SANGRAM. *They've increased this limit. So, I can absorb it. Do you know how a sponge absorbs water? This is how they've made me. This is why it is a family as well; there's love in the family but there's also fighting, and there's a lot of backbiting. We're the ones who backbite, we're the ones who fight and we're also the ones who love.*

Ayeesha

Andariki Namaskaram

Hello to everyone

I use Telugu, a tongue not mine but a greeting that now rolls off my tongue because of the times I used it in the years I spent talking to/working with my interlocutors. It is a reminder to me of who I am talking to, who my 'everyone' is and that it is important to say hello to them before I begin.

Acknowledgments: The Patchmakers

The name I get to write on the cover of this thesis is mine, but it took a big, international, multimodal family to write.

I write for my friends across movements, especially at the National Network of Sex Workers (Kiran tai, Ayeesha tai, Devigaaru, Lalitha chechi, Gokilamma, Meera, Meena, and Aarthi), SWARM UK and SWASH Japan. My allegiance lies solely with the people who have trusted me with their lives, stories, and friendship. My gratitude to the many filmmakers, academics and activists mentioned in this thesis who spoke to me like they would to a friend.

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Thank you Aiman, Krishna, Pooja, Hema, and Praveen for your help in transcribing interviews keeping context and tone intact. Sadie, Sumi, Bee, Paro, Lyman and Arshi, thank you for reading draft after draft tirelessly, telling me everything you loved and everything that made you curious. All my students at SOAS, especially RGS 22-23 and 190 23-24, who saw me through every tear, happy dance and deadline. Thank you for thinking with me.

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To my best friends, Teenasai and Vignesh, thank you for being my support system through the highs, lows, and mids-every movie we watched to celebrate, every margarita shaken after every chapter written – I am here because of you.

And finally, my dear reader, I appreciate this is a long, and elaborate thesis- but I promise you, it had to be, I dare not expect that trying to capture this beautiful world requires any less words than it did eventually.

PS: Much of the thesis was written by Inji, a black cat, who should be given an honourary doctorate for her ethnography on human ethnographers.

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Notes

My thesis is not about sex work, but about how sex workers care, collectivise, celebrate, and assert their identities. Since sex work is seen as a 'polarising debate', and a thesis like this invites all kinds of assumptions (I did not get thesis funding because I wanted to talk about self-determination and collectivising efforts of adult consensual sex workers. Similarly, I kept being refused ethics clearance as I refused to speak to the police about trafficking while conducting my fieldwork, even though I do not work with people who were trafficked). These issues are representative of the inherent biases in our understanding of sex workers. I add further detail in the context sections of the introduction. The principles I mention below are learnings that are important to foreground so that I, and my work in this thesis and beyond it, can remain accountable to the countless people who have taught me across the queer, trans, feminist, sex worker rights, disability rights and anti-caste movements.

Defining Sex Work: Sex workers are adults who receive money or goods in exchange for a range of consensual sexual services or performances, either regularly or occasionally. Some sex workers work for survival, others for money, for access to resources, or even because they like providing sexual services. A friend and sex worker once said in the context of politicians, police personnel, activists, and journalists who argue that sex workers are bad women who represent the rot in Indian society: “people who are against sex work don’t want to cancel sex, they want to cancel work. They will still want us to have free sex, that is how they control us. Asking for money changes that”.

Decriminalise, Destigmatise, Decarcerate: Sex Workers are not inherently criminals because they 'sell sex'. Sex worker and activist-led research has proven that decriminalising sex work makes it safe for sex workers to access resources as workers, enter, stay or exit as they please without being blackmailed, stigmatised or harmed in any way by perpetrators in their professional or domestic circles. Conflating trafficking with sex work does not aid victims of trafficking nor adults consensually in sex work. Sex work in India is negotiated along caste, class, religious and gendered lines. Criminalising, forcefully rescuing, and shaming sex workers will not end gender, caste, and class-based violence but will further push already vulnerable populations underground. By decriminalising sex work, reducing harm, and working in solidarity to annihilate caste systems, there is a future where sex work and caste-based, forced labour do not intersect.

Work, Exploitation, and Empowerment: Sex Work is no different from other formal and informal labour and workplaces. Some sex workers find their work empowering, like any person who finds a job they like and that enables them to do things they like, empowering. A lot of people do not entirely choose to work all the jobs/aspects of their jobs in any workplace. Most workers today would say they are 'exploited' in different degrees within the capitalist economy – no matter the pay or happiness with the job. Sex workers do not have to be empowered for them to be seen as a labour force. They do have to fall in the criminal-victim binary to have access to safety and support in the workplace.

On 'Choice': The sex workers' network I worked with for this thesis say that, "In the context of India, 'choice' is a cruel mirage thrown at marginalised populations by the privileged class to look down upon workers whose work and livelihood depend upon complex survival strategies. Often, morally

acceptable work that is actually hazardous to health – working in mines or working acids, caustic substances, disinfectants, glues, heavy metals (mercury, lead, aluminium), paint, pesticides, petroleum products, and solvents in industries never have to deal with the word choice". The workplace needs to be a safe place to work whether the worker is there by choice or not until the time they can leave, or while they stay

A note on language: Throughout this thesis, I use terms and phrases in Hindi, Telugu and Malayalam used by my interlocutors and that appear in films/texts. I have translated these words and phrases in the most appropriate way of interpreting them without their spoken context, and accompanying facial and body gestures. I provide the actual terms in the language they are spoken in for readers to make their own interpretations.

I have tried my best to be reflective of the experiences, life histories, and stories I have seen, listened to, and participated in. This thesis is only a small piece of the work I hope to do in solidarity, allyship, and love for the people of the various movements I belong to in India – all of us, tied together in our fight for autonomy and the right to work, love, and mobilise.

Worlds, Spaces

Words, Places

Introduction, Methodology, Context, and Literature

Introduction

It is a windy, sunny summer day in London in 2021. A year after working as the communications coordinator with the National Network of Sex Workers in India, I sat in one of the many (virtual) planned and unplanned board meetings we had in a month. The meeting was attended by representatives from each of the eight states that formed the network. After having concluded on the agenda points for the meeting, representatives from supporting, non-sex worker led NGOs left. I stayed on as the note taker and facilitator who knew Malayalam and Hindi to translate for the collectives from Kerala.

A minute after the 'non sex workers' left, screens that were earlier blank with corresponding names illuminated into faces. "*Arre Gauri! Tujhe toh dekh ke kitne hafte ho gae!*" (Oh Gauri! It has been weeks since I saw your face!), Kiran exclaimed. Gauri, who was leading a collective in Tamil Nadu grinned, and responded in half-Hindi half-Tamil that she missed Kiran too. Kiran, attempting Tamil, said the same, to which Gauri laughed in appreciation. Many such exchanges later, we had officially traversed into the 'catching up' part of the board meeting, arguably more important than the board meetings themselves. It was in these unofficial and in-between conversations that I would also hear "*yeh kaam khatam hi nahi hota*" (this work never ends only with 'only' added for emphasis on the length and intensity of the never-endingness). For some, the *kaam* (work) they find difficult (even annoying, and interruptive) is to write reports for funding organisations, maintain Excel sheets on the condoms they had distributed, assess the impact of their collective-led peer-support work in order to receive more funding, manage Targeted Intervention projects at the district

level, and most recently, counter the impact of the pandemic on the community with collective-led grocery and medicine distribution.

Much of their 'other' work never turned up in impact reports – supporting the mental health of sex workers in their area, putting together social events to encourage collective building and support, or bridging gaps with other movements like the feminist or anti-caste movement. *Kaam* further meant managing crisis intervention for an onslaught of issues that sex workers in India face today: rapid gentrification of previous brothels, eviction, brothel blockading, media personnel entering and videotaping women in brothels, criminal cases being levied on friends and family, police harassment, client violence, lack of access to health and documentation and so on. For most people on the board, as leaders of entire state and district-wide collectives, it was a mix of all of these issues, and some more, keeping in mind that many are sole earners for their families, sometimes single migrant women in new cities, and some living with HIV.

"Did you hear what happened in Karad, Jo?" Swati asks. The solemn look on the faces of my (by now) friends told me it was nothing good. They were surprised I did not know about it, being the person coordinating communications for the network. "Someone burned down all the houses of the sex workers there". I took notes, and later in the night, began writing a report of the crisis to add to the archive we had of the work that the collectives had been doing, all while thinking, another day, another problem. *Kaam khatam nahi hota.* I was starting to get the sentiment, and even think like my colleagues/friends.

I missed parts of the catching up simultaneously being spoken and translated in multiple languages. My note taking could hardly keep up, and I started feeling a pain in my wrist until my attention snapped back on

hearing my name. "*Tu jayanti ko aaegi na*, Jo?" (You will come for Jayanti no, Jo?), Kiran looked at me through the camera. I smiled and nodded "Yes", a new conversation had begun between someone else by then.

Six months later, I sat with Ayeesha, the coordinator of the network in an auto rickshaw to the SANGRAM office in Sangli, Maharashtra, and asked her whether she ever takes a break. Ayeesha, Kiran, Gauri and the other state leaders were continuously doing everything, everywhere, and all at once. I had never seen them stop, not in person, and not online. I imagined they had a few moments of peace in between - Kiran with her cat, Ayeesha with her boyfriend, Gauri with her calls to her best friends.

"Jo, *kaam toh karna hi hai, par naachna bhi hai*," Ayeesha replied (work must always be done, but we must also dance). I smiled, almost quizzingly at first and she laughed.

A few days later, we danced during Ambedkar Jayanti on the streets, almost culminating everything we have worked for in the network, asserting both our identities: queer trans body and sex worker body.

The Problem

Indian sex workers struggle with their representation in national and international media, research, and popular imagination not only as women who 'have no other choice' and are worthy only of being saved but also as 'criminals' that engage in 'immoral activities'. India has had a longer, leftist tradition of sex worker collectivisation that is often ignored. Modern Indian sex worker-led collectives that focus on health, rights, and community-led peer support trace their inception to the AIDS funding from the 1990s onwards that NGOs in India received as well. In this context, many sex

workers became leaders of collectives, activists, and representative voices within NGOs, government-led initiatives, and in the media. While ethnographic and feminist research has focused on the political economy of sex work, much less work has focused on the work and care in activist networks, the negotiation of localised identity and global health categories, and the strategies sex worker-leader-representatives use to continuously run crisis intervention groups, and work within the bureaucratic landscape of internationally funded NGOs, all while they battle increased personal and structural violence on the basis of their many identities.

This thesis analyses how sex workers experience and negotiate care as they politically collectivise under the umbrella of a national network. The thesis does this using a patchwork of ethnographic encounters with sex workers who have collectivised into political, self-led groups to intervene in crises spanning eight states in South and West India. It focuses first on how sex workers experience and respond to documentary film on their lived experience in India with particular attention to these responses being a site of collectivisation (patch 1). Secondly, through my work with the National Network of Sex Workers and its associated collectives, the thesis explores what it means to collectivise beyond public health care initiatives regulated by the state to become collectives of social care focused on rights building as well as everyday crisis intervention in the face of ongoing, continuous violence on caste, class, and gendered lines (patches 2, 3, 4, and 5).

Questions that emerged as I worked through the study:

1: How are sex workers represented in documentary film in India, how do they respond with their own representations of themselves? How are these responses sites of political collectivisation? How does the funding, creation,

and social life of documentary film affect narratives about Indian sex workers?

2: What is the nature of sex workers' collectivisation in India? What does a national network spanning eight diverse states look like? How do sex workers use democratic practice in their work, and how do they gain recognition as citizens of India?

3: Within this network, how do individual sex worker leaders conceive of their work, activism, and the larger collective? How do words like sisterhood, solidarity, activism translate on ground? How does the personal identity of the sex worker negotiate all these different parts – care, motherhood, leadership, activism, work?

4: What is the care work that goes into collectivising? How do people with varying ideas of collectivism and crisis intervention work together in collectives? How is the collective identity of the Indian sex worker made?

5: How have sex workers used their collectives as spaces of community care through celebrations and commemorations? What is the identity of the sex worker-activist among local understandings and global misunderstandings of categories, debates, structural and narrative violences?

The following sections will first introduce the overarching methodology of the thesis, followed by the context in which sex workers collectivise in India, ending with a short review of academic literature with which I frame my thesis.

Methodology

My research is located in four spaces that form part of the sex workers' world in India.

The first is at home, at present, in London, where I analysed documentary films on sex workers in India from 1986-2015 during the Covid-19 pandemic, making public memory my site of exploration. The second is a digital location as part of the National Network of Sex Workers, a network of NGOs, State Federations and Sex Workers' Self Led Collectives in West and South India, including the networks' various forms of communication: WhatsApp, Zoom, and Signal. The third are the two cities of Sangli (in Maharashtra) and Vijayawada (in Andhra Pradesh), sites of sex worker-led collectives where I was invited to host workshops on personal networks and leadership. The fourth, and final location is a neighbourhood of brothels in Sangli's Gokul Nagar during the celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti in April 2022.

Introducing Patchwork Ethnography

I approached the thesis project with a sense of methodological democracy (Toulmin, 1996), rejecting any fixed definition of what my project should have looked or felt like. Instead, I thought about what I could do to minimise the harm that was already being felt by the community from generations and generations of media persons, academics, writers and more extracting knowledge from them, as well as the additional harm they were facing from an absent state for anything beyond the control of their bodies. The harm is often furthered within institutional ethics committees who (in my case), did not understand the cultural, social or political context of the community, but instead had me running in circles to prove that I

would be safe from the ‘pimps’ that I *would* surely encounter, and how I planned to have the state police involved (another harm-causing entity in the lives of my interlocutors)[1]. Participatory Research scholars have written about the narrow frame and timelines of institutional ethics that undermine methodologies (like participatory research) that seek to value the perspectives and autonomy of the communities they are engaging with (Allen, 2009, p. 407), and are in total opposition to the care, respectful communication, trust and rapport it takes to do ethical research with already harmed communities (O’Reilly, 2009).

For this thesis, I draw from the valuable insights of the authors of A Manifesto for Patchwork Ethnography (2020), Gökçe Günel, Saiba Varma[2], and Chika Watanabe on an ethnographic practice that breaks the boundaries of the relationship of the researcher with their field, of the discipline with the researcher and of what ends up being “counted” as knowledge, as study, as work, and as a valuable contribution to the discipline of anthropology. With Patchwork Ethnography, my work connects with previous work in activist (an identity I cannot seem to shake off) anthropology and towards an anthropology of liberation (Harrison, 1991) and care for each other and the communities of which we are a part.

Patchwork Ethnography became relatable when I was stuck at home without access to my field. At the same time, I restricted my access to a

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[1] For more on sex work research and the trouble with institutional ethics committees, see Huysamen and Sanders (2021).

[2] Saiba Varma’s monograph, The Occupied Clinic (2021), has been met with critique from Kashmiri and Indian scholars (Research Ethics in Kashmir, 2021; RAIOT, 2021; Tahir, 2021) for ethical and methodological reasons even though it is deeply critical of the Indian state. For her thesis and subsequent monograph, Varma conducted research with patients receiving psychiatric care for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) in Indian Occupied Kashmir. The critique levied against her brings to light that she (1) did not disclose to her interlocutors that her father is an ex-RAW (Indian Research & Analysis Wing) officer and (2) that not having disclosed this information put her interlocutors in a position where they could not take part in/refuse their involvement with informed consent. Varma has since apologised and released a statement (Varma, 2023).

‘field in crisis’. The image of going into the field with my notepad and pen repulsed me. The workers I wanted to speak to were also going through the same pandemic I was going through, but their daily life was worse than mine. While I had to deal with the claustrophobic feeling of living on a student’s income in a strange new country, my interlocutors at home had to not only fight financial instability caused by the demonetisation drive a few years ago but also the physiological disability from chronic illness, slow and erratic public health care, as well as the demonisation of their homes and workplaces at the hands of academic and media houses far away from their lived reality (NNSW, 2020a). It made sense then, for me to add my efforts into what sex worker communities were already doing, rather than asking for the field – people and all – to fit into my research.

Keeping my research project aside, I got in touch with the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW), a network of sex worker collectives, NGOs and allied individuals to offer my skills as a communications coordinator during the COVID-19 pandemic. As an activist-organiser, adding to the work capacity of a group (or in this case, a network) was within my comfort zone. At the time of joining, I did not know what I would write my thesis on, given my discomfort with accessing what I hoped would be my interlocutors and field. Meanwhile, I was watching documentaries on sex work in India to draw out patterns on what is said and left unsaid, and who the documentary form serves in this case. Working with NNSW brought clarity from the community on what stories they wanted to be told. Combined with my theoretical interests and personal preoccupations with identity formation, the nature of activism, and the question of representation, the thesis is an uneven middle ground.

For my ‘in-person’ fieldwork, I chose two collectives that are a part of NNSW: Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP) in Sangli, Maharashtra and Me and My World, in Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. While doing her fieldwork in Tokyo, Chika Watanabe (2021) realised that she was going back and forth between the NGO office where she studied and ‘home,’ making her ethnographic field experience not as continuous or immersive as imagined when every day was broken into working hours in the NGO office and personal time at home, and attending NGO events in the field. My experience with NNSW was much like this, whether offline or online.

Nothing that the authors of the Patchwork Ethnography manifesto say is ‘new’. Everything it challenges are problems anthropologists and its critiques (both inside and outside of the discipline) have been talking about: the lack of a ‘field’, the lack of time to spend years on the field, issues with childcare, disability, family obligations, gendered experiences, precarity and other unspoken/hidden factors. Solutions are often different methods of finding the field: multi-sited fieldwork, digital ethnography, auto-ethnography or ethnographies of ‘known’ fields, participants, and communities. Patchwork Ethnography, however, offers a solution that focuses on the researcher instead of ‘the researched’ as previous methods do.

> Patchwork ethnography begins from the acknowledgement that recombinations of “home” and “field” have become necessities, more so in the face of the current pandemic; we refer to ethnographic processes and protocols designed around short-term field visits, using fragmentary yet rigorous data, and other innovations that resist the fixity, holism, and certainty demanded in the publication process. It refers not to one-time, short, instrumental trips and relationships à la consultants, but rather, to research efforts that maintain the long-term commitments, language proficiency,

> contextual knowledge, and slow thinking that characterises so-called traditional fieldwork (Faubion 2009; Pigg 2013; Adams, Burke, and Whitmarsh 2014), while fully attending to how changing living and working conditions are profoundly and irrevocably changing knowledge production. Patchwork ethnography is not an excuse to be more productive but an effective, kinder and gentler way to do research because it expands what we consider acceptable materials, tools, and objects of our analyses (Faubion 2009; Pigg 2013; Adams, Burke, and Whitmarsh 2014 in Günel et al, 2020, para 4).

While acknowledging the changing nature of an anthropologist's field, patchwork ethnography also asks for an epistemic change in how we access knowledge. Anthropologists have always wondered and experimented with ways of knowing – through the body and embodiments of the knowledge being absorbed (Jackson, 1983; Lock, 1993), through drawing, graphic narration and making (Ingold, 2013), through practice and apprenticeship (Coy, 1989, p. 2; Goody, 1989, p. 254-255), through recording experiences of one's own culture (Turner & Bruner, 1986). Patchwork Ethnography takes this bodily knowledge further, paying attention to acknowledging and accommodating how researchers' complex lives shape knowledge production. What does the researcher's body do to process observations and participation off, before and/or after the field? What stops constant engagement with the field and how does it affect what is felt, written, shared about the field? It detangles and questions what counts as knowledge and what does not and transforms realities that have been described as constraints to research into openings for new insights. This is coupled with feminist methodologies of knowledge like standpoint theory (see Harding, 1987; Hill Collins, 1990; Naples & Gurr, 2014) that argues, knowledge stems from social position – but here, not just of the subject whose knowledge we must privilege but also the researcher whose

knowledge and personhood mixes into the research being undertaken making it a political act (Letherby, 2002).

A similar, queer methodology of interdisciplinary work that brings together different methods often at odds with each other is offered by Jack Halberstam in *Female Masculinity* where he defines a queer scavenger methodology that "uses different methods to collect and produce information on subjects who have been deliberately or accidentally excluded from traditional studies of human behaviour" (Halberstam, 2018, p. 13). It ties into larger understandings of "DIY feminist" methodologies that are born out of reaction and response to crises[3] In this way, in their 'strangeness' of being pieced together, the patches in my thesis, my self and my respondents centre varied experiences and a framework of care for these experiences.

Patchwork Ethnography put me in conversation with my world of interest before I could reach it. It opened spaces for me to care about my research and research with care during a pandemic. Throughout these patches, in a natural progression of friendship and knowing, I was 'on-field'. Once I had all this knowledge, I could stitch them together to reconstruct the world of questions and explorations I intended to ask and know much before the pandemic. In short, my goal remained the same, my methods bent, broke and zombie-d their way to the end. In retrospect, I realise that all I did was respond to a pandemic in the most DIY way I knew how.

Chua (2015) reflects that being anthropologically present in 'the field', any field, means establishing a co-presence with others, curating parts of the ethnographic self (the one that breaks into dance at any moment, for

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[3] See Chidgey (2009) and Kempson (2015) for examples of how 'Doing It Yourself' plays out in social movements, and pedagogical practice, spilling over to feminist research practice.

example) to add to the dramaturgical encounters of my respondents and self continuously anticipating, posturing and play acting the (imagined) expectation of the other (Chitralekha, 2017, p.157). Much like 'Patchwork Ethnography', this anthropological self calls to attention how different parts of the self are invoked, suppressed, removed or reworked by the anthropologist and others. Ethnographic interactions are no different to the social negotiations one makes in different settings, and there is never a singular authentic self (Chua, 2021).

Doing fieldwork in patches removed pressure from *me* during the pandemic; as an immigrant in a new country, I was experiencing a temporal crisis (Cardoza et al., 2021) to *be intellectual* while battling precarity at work, recreating security and a home, and managing mental/physical health without known, or new communities of support. Thinking of smaller patches of field(s), different methodologies and entry points into my questions about sex workers' collectives gave space to me in all my expansiveness along with my collaborators and their extensive experiences. My prior training as a journalist drove my interest towards documentary films on sex work as my field when I couldn't talk to my collaborators. I could still engage with their stories before I'd have the chance to do another patch of fieldwork and speak with them in person.

The pandemic forced me to rethink boundaries – borders, personal, home/work and political. The frameworks I then designed were informed by the people it talks about, not the researcher or the research. By the time I travelled to Sangli and Vijayawada, many of the boundaries I'd assumed (of the researcher and researched) changed to boundaries requiring further exploration: friendships, kinships, love, care, work – outside the realm of doing a PhD in solitude.

To introduce a piece of how my mind worked during this tumultuous time, this is a note I wrote in my personal journal:

> I write my 'fieldnotes' in my 'field home' at night. It is 7:45 PM in my 'home' time, which my computer understands as London, on the right bottom corner of my laptop, and it is strange to see the 29 degrees Celsius written on its left. It is 12:15 AM in India. My field home is my grandparent's house in Hyderabad. It took me three days to convince them to let me stay awake; I had to use the jet lag excuse. It was partly that, but also the silence of the night to be able to think. The excitement in the house because the oldest grandchild has returned after their 'voyage overseas' is felt in the house. Day 5, the electricity is in the air; more fruits, more things to eat; plans are being made; opinions for laminate being sought for furniture being renewed. I am eating a cut guava, just after clicking a picture of it for my Instagram story update on not liking how rare guavas are in the UK. I am supposedly on fieldwork, but I am at home. I am in the field because I am still working, off-time office hours with NNSW, and planning my physical workshops. I am at home because of the guavas being cut and put in front of me; I wouldn't care for myself this much. I am home, I am meeting a friend of 9 years tomorrow and we are going to what looks like an Irish Pub in Hyderabad. I am on the field, writing fieldnotes, and being heavily involved in the lives of my respondents work-wise and after work. In my head, the countdown has begun. It is the 2nd, I am leaving on the 9th. I need to get drawing materials ready for the workshop. I need to go over my plans again.

Each patch in the thesis shares the commonality of being about sex workers, daily life, and work (not only of the sex workers, but NGO workers, documentary filmmakers, and myself), with a distinct methodology and group of people it is in reference to as participants. As much as I would like to take credit for how each of these patches have been stitched together, there was always a flow of things pushing me to do what I did: a pandemic that made me watch films, a repulsion to parachuting to my field that pushed me to work with a network of organisations from outside the nation

they were based in, and my growing friendships in the community that pulled me to India for the final months of fieldwork and its many experiences.

Patching Together: Privileging knowledge of those with lived experience

Within my thesis, I make a political choice to tell the story of the collective through the life histories of the leaders within it, looking at storytelling and oral histories as a decolonial project of knowledge sharing and making (while many feminist researchers have done this, Guha (2019) and Paramanand (2022) are current examples within sex work research).

I believe strongly that sex workers are the experts in their own lives and experiences (NSWP, 2020a, p. 26), and while anthropology as a discipline has historically worked with experts with lived experiences across communities to talk about their own words, points of view and solutions, sex workers are yet to be considered experts on their lives. I follow the lead of many sex work leaders, academics, and activists to argue my thesis to epistemologically privilege sex worker's voice through my thought and writing.

A lot of the knowledge we prefer and authorise as the 'main' source is knowledge that had the epistemic privilege to go into print (Naples & Gurr, 2014). The knowledge of the community itself, based on intensive fieldwork the workers do themselves and their life experiences often do not make it to academic spaces. Sometimes because of safety concerns, other times because it is not considered 'academic enough'. However, sex worker activist-academics, allies, and sex worker leaders have tried changing this by questioning method, ethics, and relationships on and off the field (for examples, see Bowen, 2021; Connelly & Sanders, 2020; Daryani et al., 2021;

Laing et al., 2022; Simpson, 2022). However, while sex work researchers without lived experience have led these important discussions on what ethics means on ground, less work has been done to ask sex workers what ethics means to them, and how it can be practiced in collaborative projects. There is more to be done with sex worker-led collectives as well as individuals on the topic of who selects, how they select research topics, how it affects respondents, to what extent are communities a part of the research, and whether there are enough disruptions even in research that ends up creating binaries of palatable stories, tokenistic narratives, and uncomfortable truths (Holt & Connelly, 2022).

I take a feminist de/anti-colonial approach to the knowledge in this thesis, privileging locally produced and daily-lived knowledge (Haraway, 1988) of women usually featuring in popular gendered and colonial discourse as 'repressed brown women in need of saving' (Bhambra, 2014; Lugones, 2010). I act as someone intimately involved in this movement, capturing and editing. I explicitly know and state that my work is an edit, and I am conscious of the power struggles inside the work and try my best to alleviate them. I hope to have handled the narratives that my collaborators have shared with the same care and tenderness with which they have been told to me. I do not have a right to the work and lives of these women. These narratives to me, a friend of the movement, are sacred in the way that these stories are, and I understand this as I 'analyse' them with my knowledge and experiences to argue this thesis. Their knowledge is in their body like the knowledge I collect is in mine. In this, we dance together as I learn this knowledge that they have. I work and do with them how they work and do; they learn me, and my knowledge. In this, we are intimately tied together with, before, and beyond this thesis.

Friends, Women, Participants: On Anonymity

Throughout this thesis, I use the words friends, women, and participants at different times. Friends are those I am close to in the network, my direct colleagues and participants who became friends/friends who became participants. I use the word "friends" also to denote my closeness to the fight we lead together for feminist rights, and the intimacy of my relationships with the movement and its workers, not wanting to conceal the subjectivity with which I write this thesis.

I use "participants" for those I did not develop friendships with but are participants in my work. The word "women" is used by peer leaders, NGO workers and people close to the collective for large groups of women (for example, the NNSW India WhatsApp group). It is an informal word for community, and I use it only when it is in the conversations I refer to.

Some are anonymised, and some prefer not to be. Sex workers, especially in the Indian context have worked hard to not be a faceless, nameless mass of women. Within this perspective, some of my interlocutors have asked to be named, and credited for their effort.

The Patches

The next two sections provide context and review of literature on sex work research and ethnography.

The first patch thereafter, **Humein Bachane Walon Se Bachao**, explores how communities of sex workers are constructed in public memory through documentary films promising "reality", to see how 'makers' of artefacts of movements (journalists, researchers, and others wanting to document) affect sex workers' identity, movement making, and how the sex

worker identity is shaped through publicly available information funded by sources with vested interests in how this identity is constructed. In this patch, sex workers respond to these constructions of themselves through their own films, written responses, letters, and talks, essentially collectivising against violent narratives.

The second patch, **Playgrounds of Resistance**, is an introduction to the National Network of Sex Workers, India, exploring the existence of a national network for sex-working individuals in India, and what that looks and feels like on the outside moving to the inside as an employee within the network. By working with NNSW, I look at how the idea of community is introduced, strengthened and negotiated between old and new members concentrating on how political assertion works for a criminalised and vulnerable group of people.

The third patch, **Sangatan Humari Shakti Hai**, layers the identity of individual sex workers onto the identity of being members of their collectives, exploring the nature of the collective, trust and personal networks through two workshops on leadership conducted in Sangli, Maharashtra with Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP) and in Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh with Me and My World, both collectives associated with NNSW.

The fourth patch, **Ek Saath Badho Ya Ek Saath Maro** uses interviews with sex worker leaders across the National Network of Sex Workers, to explore with them what it means to lead collectives, why/how sex workers become activists and leaders, and what it looks like for them on an everyday basis to act on words like collective, sisterhood, feminism, etc.

The fifth and final patch, **Naach, Gaana, Khana** is an account of joy making in Sangli, where I celebrated Ambedkar Jayanti in the *gali*[4] with the collective. Through these celebrations, I evidence how sex workers reorder their relationship to the 'public' – not just within their local communities, but also imagined communities they are in conversation with: non sex workers, along caste, class, racial, and gendered lines.

Together, these patches are different parts of the same world that the sex workers I work with exist in, but this is not a sex worker story. This is the story of communities, individuals in communities, and how they move according to multiple, often conflicting political rhythms. Some of these rhythms are self-constructed, some by the NGO, some by a network, and some by outsiders who "just want to understand". Coming into these rhythms or getting out of them is a complicated affair.

Context

Sex workers appearing in this thesis represent sex workers in collectives in West and South India. Since I worked with a sex workers' network spanning eight states, with district and state-wise representatives, I had access to crises situations as they come, along with responses in real time. For some patches, I worked with specific collectives, focusing on localised strategies and negotiations. The people I worked with were primarily cisgender women, with a few transgender women and men who have sex with men (MSM) within board meetings, and larger collective spaces.

[4] I use this spelling, instead of the more widely used "gully" because *gali* in Hindi and Marathi do not have an emphasis on the second syllable of the word. A *gali* is a narrow street or lane in an urban, crowded area.

Who, and where are the sex workers of India?

Sex workers in India work in brothels, on the street (called floating or flying sex workers), in lodges/hotels, at home, or through escort-based services. There are also women who are sex workers through 'hereditary professions' (some examples are *Dommara*, *Kasbi*, *Bachara*, *Nat* communities)[5], *nautch* girls (erotic dancers), cam-girls, women who provide 'phone-sex', and women who use dating applications and online sites to solicit sex. However, not all sex workers in India today belong to communities that have historically been involved in sex work (Sahni et al., 2008) as a form of caste or tribe-based labour. Other groups historically attached to sex work, like *Tawaifs*, have long sought to be distanced from sex workers even though sex work may or may not have been a part of the labour they exchanged for money; much like non-*Tawaif* sex workers[6]. This is because of how the law and stigma against sex workers affect those even 'seen' as sex workers (Dewan, 2019). There is also a hint of a "whorearchy" in the Indian context with how different sexual labourers are categorised based on levels of contact they share with clients: street and brothel based sex workers who need to be saved, as compared to bar girls, escorts, women working in

[5] Ethnographic studies of nomadic/tribal communities (like *Nat*, *Dommara*, *Kasbi*, *Bachara*, *Bedia*, *Kanjar*) that practice performance and sex work hereditarily have mapped views of sex and sexuality among traditional communities in India (Swarankar, 2008). These communities have specific rules and regulations regarding sex work formulated for its members. Through colonial legislations like the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, communities lost access to diverse ways to earn money and sex work became a primary source of income. The juxtaposition of community-sanctioned sex work as compared to migrant sex is an important one because of how the sexuality of sex workers depends on the structures they practice in. The presence of these communities raises interesting questions on how societal structure works, how the political economy of sex work functions in the communities and whether the 'exploitation' of women and concepts like 'agency' and 'violence' are experienced differently within community-sanctioned sex work.

[6]Tawaif, meaning "courtesan", is a word used to refer to performers, or 'women of culture' who used to dance, sing and act in the Mughal courts of India. The word increasingly became synonymous to a sex working artist in the public imagination, and is now used to mean 'prostitute'.

massage centres and courtesans who are looked at as a ‘necessary evil’, further categorising sex workers into “bad” and “worse” women[7].

According to NACO estimates in 2022, India has about 800,000 (8 lakh) sex workers. Urban-rural locations and workplaces vary state-wise – Jharkhand has more lodge and home-based sex workers, while Maharashtra has more brothels and street-based workers and so on. State and social regulation, safety within families, geographical surroundings, and the distances one must travel for work dictate where and when sex work can happen. Brothel, lodge, and home-based sex work is safer than street-based sex work. Street-based sex workers face multiple levels of violence from state actors, local goons, rescue organisations and other violent actors. A significant number of 'hidden' sex workers in the country face challenges accessing essential safety measures (condoms, mental health care, collectives, community support) due to the stigma associated with sex work. Additionally, many are excluded from welfare schemes, forcing them to continue working discreetly.

In India, most sex workers are migrants from other states, and some are cross-border migrants from Nepal and Bangladesh. Both sex workers and migrant labourers share the perils of being highly surveilled and criminalised populations, making them and those falling in between more vulnerable. The rights of sex workers are intricately linked to those of migrant, informal labourers, who also struggle for the right to work in safety and security, especially in the absence of proper documentation.

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[7]Whorearchy, a term coined by sex workers (Fuentes, 2022; Hutton, 2020; Knox, 2014; McNeill, 2012), describes class distinctions among sex workers based on the nature of services and mediums- full contact sex workers on the bottom, and non-contact sex workers on the top.

Sex workers are doubly discriminated against in the context of social protection. While short-term measures such as emergency relief are rolled out during times of distress, the right to social protection is missing and, sometimes, actively denied to sex workers, primarily due to the lack of identification documents. Since many women leave their homes to practice sex work or travel outside residential districts, they do not have any identification documents. This, in turn, prevents women from accessing social protection programs, opening bank accounts, or accessing small loans, rendering them vulnerable to taking loans from private money lenders at high interest rates.

Contextualising Sex Work in India: Marriage, Patriarchy and Survival

In the context of India, sex work is the exchange/provision of sexual services for money, goods, or other benefits. Sex work in India, like in many other parts of the world, exists within a complex web of social, legal, and economic factors, which this context section will cover. The practice itself spans various forms, including street-based sex work, brothel-based sex work, escort services, and online platforms. This thesis specifically works with cisgender women in brothels, some of whom also do street-based sex work.

Sex work in India intersects with deeply ingrained patriarchal norms around marriage, sexuality, and desire, often highlighting contradictions in how society views gender, morality, and sexual autonomy. Patriarchy, in the Indian context, involves the social, cultural, and legal subordination of women, which impacts everything from sexual behaviour and marriage to public life and work. In this environment, sex work becomes a highly contested space, shaped by and challenging these dominant social structures.

In many parts of India, marriage is viewed as the cornerstone of social legitimacy, particularly for women. It is often tied to concepts of family honour, purity, and sexuality. Desire and sexuality are considered legitimate only within the bounds of heteronormative marriage, which means that women's sexual autonomy is tightly controlled and channelled through marital relationships. This normative framework posits that women's primary role is to fulfil sexual, reproductive, and emotional needs within the institution of marriage; premarital sex or extramarital relationships are seen as transgressive, especially for women and sex outside marriage is often stigmatised and devalued, whether by single women, widows, or sex workers.

In contrast, sex work exists outside of these "moral" frameworks. It involves the provision of sexual services in a way that undermines patriarchal norms about sexual propriety, suggesting a different kind of legitimacy for female sexuality. For many in Indian society, sex work is seen as the opposite of the idealised vision of womanhood rooted in chastity, domesticity, and motherhood, which is promoted through marriage. The idea that women could provide sexual services undermines these *patriarchal* constructions of femininity and sexuality.

A lesser-known fact about sex work, and sex workers in India, as created by the meta and construction of sex workers, is that sex workers are home breakers with no family of their own, since they have been "discarded". This is not true, as most sex workers in India are also married, working women. For example, I worked with sex workers in Kamathipura in 2017, and they were all married, particularly called a "mother population" because they all existed within families who also lived with, or not far from where they worked. Sex workers marry because it is a form of companionship (for more

on love, power and intimacy in sex workers' lives, see Cornwall and Majumdar, 2024). Similarly, Hussain and Dasgupta (2023) provide a framework to understand how sex workers also form alternative kinship networks by befriending the wives of their clients (babus); something we also see in Mira Nair's India Cabaret (1985), which I unpack in the patch on films in this thesis.

Patriarchal views in India often dictate a double standard for female and male sexuality. For men, sexual desire is often considered natural, but for women, it is seen as something that needs to be controlled. Women's sexual expression is only acceptable within the confines of heterosexual marriage. Sex work exposes this double standard because sex workers, typically women, are often punished for acting on their sexual autonomy or desire outside of patriarchal control.

However, while the dominant social narrative marginalises sex work(ers), it also paradoxically fetishises and commodifies female sexuality. Sex workers often become the subject of male desire and are expected to fulfil fantasies that are otherwise repressed or restricted by social norms. In this way, sex work in India both reflects and challenges patriarchal understandings of women's sexuality, reifying and subverting the ways in which female bodies are objectified and controlled. Interestingly, trans women are *expected* to be sex workers in India because their femininity is also fetishised; but they are less likely to be offered saviourism from sex work as cisgender women may be.

Patriarchy in India is closely intertwined with ideas of family honour and female virtue, which are often linked to the concept of a "good" woman being chaste, modest, and sexually reserved until marriage. When a woman becomes a sex worker, she is often branded as a "fallen woman" or one who

has deviated from the accepted sexual and moral code (also understood through the psychoanalytic concept of the Madonna-Whore complex). This stigmatisation is both personal and communal. Many sex workers are not only ostracised but also labelled as "tainted" or "dishonourable," which often extends to their families. The societal marginalisation of sex workers in India highlights the extent to which patriarchal control over female sexuality is bound to ideas of family reputation, which is primarily the responsibility of women to uphold. This idea of moral purity is central to the sexual division of labour in India, where women are expected to control and restrict their own desires, while men are often free to express theirs without judgement. This is particularly evident in the context of sex work, where the sex worker is often viewed as the "transgressor," while the male client's desires are either ignored or validated. At the same time, there is a gendering of clients that takes place- where the construction of a client is always male, and the construction of a sex worker is always female- even though there is a big community of male, trans, and queer sex workers in the country (mostly hidden under the state's laws both controlling sex work as well as homosexual activity).

Surviving through Sex Work

In a highly patriarchal society like India, where women's economic autonomy is often limited, sex work is primarily gendered and comes to be seen as a form of economic survival for women who have limited options. Many women who engage in sex work do so due to economic desperation, often coming from marginalised communities, lower caste backgrounds, or facing societal exclusion. In this way, sex work is often viewed through a lens of victimhood, where women are seen as either victims of trafficking or poverty.

This is linked to the way patriarchy controls women's economic independence. Marriage offers economic security through the ownership of labour and the resources of the husband, but sex work is viewed as a "deviant" form of female labour that disrupts traditional gendered economic roles. Here, sex work exposes gendered inequalities, showing that patriarchal society often denies women the opportunity to access decent work, forcing some into survival sex work.

However, it is important to note that some women choose sex work as a form of economic autonomy or agency, where providing sexual services may represent a way of negotiating power within the strictures of a patriarchal society. In this sense, sex work is a tool for resistance and economic survival, allowing women to step outside traditional economic structures controlled by male authority (more on how this works in real life can be understood through the life narratives in this thesis).

Sex work in India sits uneasily within patriarchal understandings of marriage, sexuality, and desire. While it challenges dominant views about women's sexual roles and autonomy, it also reinforces social hierarchies based on gender, caste, and class. At the same time, sex work provides opportunities for resistance and subversion of the very norms that seek to control female sexuality. As the debate continues around the legal and social status of sex work in India, it remains a powerful site where the contradictions of patriarchy, gender, and desire are constantly being negotiated.

Workers, Sex, Labour: Sex workers speak

> One thing we believe and do is that we call our work, work. No matter what other people, society, or the family want to call it, our work is work. If we do not call it work, then no one else will believe it either. We earn money for our children, for our family, for our needs. It does not matter to us who calls it work, but we do understand it as work.

Kiran, Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP), Sangli

Sex Workers in India have been collectivising before 'sex work' as a term was introduced in their context (e.g., Arondekar, 2009; Dewan, 2019; Tambe, 2006, 2009a) both through formal organising as well as individualised resistance to regulation (Vijayakumar, 2018). However, few studies exist in India, or outside about how sex work operates as a political identity, and what sex workers do with this identity in their everyday. Even fewer analyse sex work activism (beyond sex and work itself) and collective identity formation (apart from Lorway et. al., 2009 and Vijayakumar, 2018).

Sex workers in India have a clear understanding of words like 'choice', 'profession' and 'occupation'. An example is provided in this statement read out by Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP), a collective of sex workers from Sangli, Maharashtra at the Speaking Tree Womenspeak: Asia-Pacific Public Hearing on Crimes Against Women:

> We disagree with the formulation that prostitution is a profession. We make a distinction between profession (*vyavasay*) and occupation/business (*dhandha*). For instance, if we are presently occupied by making money out of sex, then that is our occupation for a short span of time. The nature of the business itself is time-bound. Therefore, by using the term profession, we are necessarily being pushed into a category for a lifetime. We are women who are practising this time-bound business of prostitution for a short and specific period in our

> lives. Please remember that when we are not making money out of sex, we are engaged in other income-generating activities (VAMP, 1995).

Sex worker networks and collectives continue to face stiff resistance from abolitionist groups that have mounted campaigns against the articulation of sex work as work and criticised the move of NHRC. They continue to conflate Adult Consensual Sex Work with Sex Trafficking even though governing bodies in the country have differentiated ‘prostitution’ from exploitation. Networks and collectives actively partake in moderated conversations with these groups, advocating fiercely through their work to change the understanding of sex work from stigma to fact and ground reality. Against the backdrop of the pandemic, the call by many such abolitionist organisations to shut down sex work, brothels and rehabilitate sex workers has once again been raised. Instead of aiding sex workers, such efforts further push them into distress. Abolitionists in the country have access to more funding and networks fuelled by the Global Sex Panic[8] providing more opportunities to talk about trafficking and saviours than the self-determination of sex workers.

Rachana Mudraboyina, a Trans-Bahujan[9] sex worker says that words like ‘prostitution’ and ‘prostitute’ are English words that create a forced, colonial identity, put onto sex workers in India to bring them into the fold of those worthy of being saved by their ex-colonisers, once again[10]. Her analysis of these words brings to mind how I describe, in my patch on sexy

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[8] A sex panic, as described by Judith Walkowitz in her history of the Contagious Diseases Acts in Victorian England in *Prostitution and Victorian Society* (1980) is a period of time or instance of heightened societal concern or fear regarding sexual behaviour, often leading to moral outrage, legislative action and social stigma against particular ‘deviant’ groups (gay men during the AIDS crisis, sex workers, transgender women and so on). These panics often involve exaggerated or sensationalized narratives about specific sexual behaviors or communities, leading to increased scrutiny, condemnation, or even persecution.

[9] self-identified.

[10] In a webinar about caste and sex work, 2022.

documentary, the gaze of white-saviourism on sex workers in India bordering on soft-colonialism and control through hegemonic, repeated narratives of poverty instead of action to end the poverty.

Meanwhile, terms like 'sex worker', first coined by sex worker-academic Carol Leigh in 1978 quickly spread through self-determination movements that sex workers were already leading around the world. In India, it gave women a new word to call themselves beyond reclaimed slurs. Today, some sex worker-led groups use a newly coined word, '*Laingik Shramik*' *or* '*Laingik Kaamgaar*' (a literal translation of the word sexual (*laingik*) and worker (*shramik*) to reflect and better explain their demands and needs to the 'outside world'.

Even before the HIV-related mobilisation of sex workers into peer-led collectives, groups of sex workers viewed themselves as responsible women who were the breadwinners of their families, had lives beyond sex work and treated their work like anybody would treat the work they did to earn money for their family. Durbar, the sex workers' union in Kolkata, views sex work as manual labour, as a service satisfying a social need, as therapy and entertainment. Sex workers then identify their work as 'useful' for society and having certain valuable economic skills (Kotiswaran, 2011a). Instead, the domestic and the public are separated from each other in the case of sex workers who are called 'public women' and looked at as women of the streets, leading to little work on the domestic lives of sex workers, their networks, social and personal lives, lives at home, with/without others who do the same work etc except in terms of *the brothel*, a popular spectacle.

Some of the recommendations that sex worker networks, and specifically the national network I worked with, have made to equip workers combat

stigmatised views follow (paraphrased from multiple sources the network has written and published on their website):

> Sex working individuals advocate for women in sex work as 'workers' and to be accorded due status to accrue the necessary assistance from the government. They must be recognised as unorganised and informal sector workers. There is an urgent need for legal aid assistance for sex workers who want to pursue justice via the courts against unethical researchers, and academics who are bent on creating an abolitionist bias against people in sex work. There is a need for government assistance to sex workers through relief packages, sensitive schemes and policies that do not treat them like victims of exploitation but as women stranded due to an epidemic, and these need to be accessible to all sex workers across class, caste, gender, disability and other axes of marginality. Children of sex workers must be recognised as a special category requiring all forms of assistance during the COVID crisis – including education assistance aid, and schemes that will assist marginalised children. This is what sex workers need, instead of a rescue model that infantilises them.

(Ill)Legal, (De)Criminalisation: Sex Workers as Victim-Criminals

Sex workers in India today call to decriminalise sex work in all its forms, along with supporting actors who make their workplace safe (Pai et al., 2014). The legal status of sex workers in India is governed by the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act (1956), amended as the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act (1986). Also called the ITPA, the law says that sex workers can 'conduct their trade' in private spaces, but not solicit in public spaces, engage in any form of 'pimping', 'hotel services' or 'rings of sex workers' (translates to brothel-keeping). So, while trading sex for money (or other things like shelter, food, and drugs) is 'legal', activities surrounding it that make sex work happen are illegal. These definitions though, are vague. For example, even rickshaw drivers known to sex workers that ferry them safely to and from a job is called a pimp and

criminalised, women living together for safety and community are criminalised, even a hotel manager keeping a look out for the worker to do her business in safety is criminalised.

> Historical accounts of sex work have traced the origin of its (the ITPA) mode of ordering to colonial India by pointing out how, in the mid-nineteenth century, "prostitution" became a part of official discourses in a form that resonates with the contemporary moment. Among other things, the resonance also lies in how the state takes on the role of a high-handed penal force and attempts to segregate sex workers from others — earlier it was the British soldiers, now it is pretty much everybody else. Although the Indian state has changed its form — colonial to post-colonial — this focus on prostitution as exceptional has remained intact. From disease control under colonialism, the postcolonial state's attention has now shifted to trafficking, a framework through which the conduct of life as sex workers has been prescribed and proscribed. (Dutta, 2018)

The ordering and control of sex workers started with the Cantonment Act of 1864 (to control women in British cantonments) and the Contagious Diseases Acts of the 1860s-1880s (to control 'common prostitutes' that lived outside of these cantonments) imported from England to control venereal diseases by regulating the sexual relations of British soldiers with 'common prostitutes' in India (Tambe, 2009a, p.xx-xxii). Under both acts, Indian sex workers were required to register themselves compulsorily, undergo medical check-ups, were prohibited from entering certain areas and could also be incarcerated if found to be infected with venereal diseases (Banerjee, 1998, p.67).

Following their implementation, and to be regulated, prostitution not only fell under colonial governance but also gained legalised status in India. This period of regulation and legalisation of prostitution in India gave way to calls for its abolition owing to a growing global discourse around 'white

slavery' or 'white women bonded in prostitution', leading to the League of Nations passing conventions on human trafficking during the 1920s. After gaining independence in 1947, India became a signatory to these conventions. Continuing this historical trajectory, the UN General Assembly adopted the Convention for the Suppression of Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others in 1949 (Shukla, 2013). Dutta (2018) explains, succinctly how the ITPA affects sex workers, their personal networks, as well as their access to public space:

> The ITPA criminalises '[p]rostitution in or in the vicinity of public place' and also assigns culpability to '[a]ny person who carries on prostitution and [even] the person with whom such prostitution is carried on.' In this context, a public place is understood to be 'any place intended for use by, or accessible to the public and includes any public conveyance.' Place — as the statute further clarifies — includes an 'educational institution,' a 'hospital,' a 'nursing home,' 'any place of public religious worship,' and also any area that is within a 'two hundred meters' distance of such places. In effect, these provisions work to sever sex workers' being and belonging from the public almost in its entirety. A sex worker's non-commercial familial relationships, likewise, are also ordered: anybody, including a husband, 'living with, or to be habitually in the company of, a prostitute,' is a trafficker; a sex worker's child 'over the age of eighteen years who knowingly lives [...]' on her earnings, is also a trafficker. Thus, the state through the ITPA renders almost all aspects of a sex worker's life the subject matter of criminal legislation and, therefore public law. Interestingly, such characterisation by the state resonates with the popular and patriarchal descriptions of the sex worker as *rastarmeye* (woman of the streets), *bajari meye*, and *bazaru aurat* (both meaning woman of the market): both street and market being subject matters that a public sphere is commonly understood to be constituted of (p.230).

In the language of law, trafficking and migration with or without sex work continue to be conflated, which lead to everyday policing and raids,

especially of racialised groups (women from Nepal and Bangladesh are at higher risk of being surveilled and arrested in raids), further driving sex workers underground with no access to health or harm reparation services if they are at the receiving end of violence from state actors, partners, clients, families, etc[11]. It interrupts the livelihood of sex workers who may be depending on the job for the day for their earnings, they are assumed to be complicit in trafficking, victimised and restricted from the freedom to travel. Sex Workers also report that being in a rescue home is worse than being in a space stigmatised and demarcated as "immoral" (NSWP, 2011). What is usually glossed over is that sex workers have often been the first responders to trafficking and ask for self-regulatory boards to stop the entry of minors into sex work (Durbar, n.d; NNSW, 2020b).

Reordering the Law and Defacto Decriminalisation

Through these laws, the state has given itself the role of the paternalistic guardian that rescues sex workers from themselves (and sex work) forcing on them rehabilitation and criminalisation 'for their own good'. The sex workers collectives in this thesis, however, have a different understanding of rights and instead, see the state and its actors as those meting out injustice that the collectives advocate against. As Dutta (2018, p. 231) says, the state is also seen as a valuable resource in rectifying its own wrongdoings.

Even under criminal law, there are social norms, actors, customs and ways of working that illuminate an on-ground reality of what Kotiswaran calls "defacto decriminalisation" (2008, p. 599) – the law does not translate to the

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[11] The Bombay Dance Bar Ban of 2005, for example, stripped 75,000 women who traditionally came from sex working communities in Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh of their source of livelihood (Dalwai, 2019). The ban was lifted in 2019, but it still pushed more women into full-service sex work from bar dancing.

ground, not implemented for a number of reasons, creating gaps and loopholes for workers to strategise their relationship with the state actors whose job it is to control. Kotiswaran further says that it is not enough then, to decriminalise sex work in India.

> Laws on prostitution seem to attract the attention of more than only those involved in the transactional nature of the service because of all the metonymic functions the body of the prostitute seems to have. Prostitution and the 'management' of the service through law and law enforcement catches the imagination of the whole spectrum of politics, ranging from social reformers, NGOs, public health officials, feminists, labour organisers, religious missionaries, military officials and in more contemporary times, retail businesses that flourish because of red-light districts, communities of people that thrive within real estate businesses, municipal corporations, criminal organisations, academics, and sex workers' unions themselves (Tambe, 2009a, xiv).

Sex workers were not until very recently recognised as informal labourers and still do not have safeguards offered by labour/trade unions but can seek rescue/rehabilitation by national organisations or NGOs in spaces called "sudhargrah" directly translated to betterment/rehabilitation homes – usually under-serviced, often becoming a space of further ill-treatment of those who need them (trafficking victims) or those forced into them (adult consensual sex workers). This happens because the base paradigm for these rehabilitation homes to exist is to "correct deviant behaviour" leading to moral policing, intrusive health "care", and the approach of women being helpless, vulnerable victims devoid of agency that require surveillance and saving (VAMP et al., 2018).

Most recently, the Anti-Trafficking Bill of 2021 entered the picture on governance and sex work. Sex Working collectives were given less than a

week to respond to the draft bill with their comments, making translation, communication, and collecting information across the country a difficult process for collectives. While it directly affects adult consensual sex workers, it also does not actually protect trafficking victims, leaving tremendous scope for misuse against sex workers, their clients, and third parties assisting them. Some problematic parts of the draft bill are: the removal of the assumption of innocence which impacts the right to life and liberty in Article 21 of the Indian Constitution; making the National Investigation Agency (NIA) – created to combat terror – investigate and enact punishment under the bill; the inclusion of the death penalty, stringent bail provisions, and denying the accused the right to anticipatory bail, violating basic rights provided by the Indian constitution. Vagueness here is also the enemy of those who end up accused, where there is no specific understanding of who is being trafficked, by whom and in what way.

In July 2022, the Supreme Court of India issued a highly progressive directive stating that sex workers are not to be harassed and abused at the hands of the police and that sex workers who are victims of sexual assault must be provided with facilities available to a survivor of sexual assault, that the state governments do a survey of all ITPA rehabilitation homes to see if there are sex workers detained in any without their consent; the Press Council of India issued guidelines for media outlets to not photograph, video or reveal the identities of sex workers, detainees of raid operations or clients as these are punishable offences under Voyeurism (Section 354C, Indian Penal Code). Measures that sex workers employ for their health and safety (condoms) should not be used to criminalise/arrest them, and all state legal service authorities are to carry workshops to educate sex

workers about their rights and what is permitted under the law (Budhadev Karmaskar v. State of West Bengal and others, 2022).

Feminist/women's movements and sex work in India

To understand sex workers collectivisation in India, it is important to understand their relationship to various strands of the feminist movement in the country (see Appendix A for a summary of legal systems and positions taken on sex work globally).

In India, most radical feminists support the complete abolition of sex work on the international front but support legalisation on the national front. Here, conventional legalisation would mean medical testing of sex workers for public health programmes, and zoning and registration procedures to surveil the demographic and its migratory patterns. Indian feminist theories mirror the existing Anglo-American theories of sex work, but as mapped by academics Prabha Kotiswaran (2011a) and Ashwini Tambe (2009a), a few differences arise.

Most feminists (both with sex work experience and not) understand sex work as a highly complex web of commerce and actors (Kotiswaran, 2011b, p. 246) which cannot be responded to with an overarching theory of exploitation. Here, sex work not only has liberal connotations of sex and pleasure but also a cultural-nationalist perspective on how colonisation has affected Indian morality (and continues to do so). The abolitionist stance (especially by radical feminists) in India has been interrogating the role of poverty and caste-based inequality and violence in sex work, arguing that pro-sex work activists (and sex workers themselves) ignore structural inequalities within the sex industries. However, sex workers and advocates argue that (solely) abolitionist views that only understand sex work as

‘slavery’ mask conservative, patriarchal ideas about gender, sexuality, and women’s work in India (Kapur, 2007).

Conversations from an abolitionist perspective have almost always remained about caste inequality, with no opportunity for conversations on occupational violence, safety at work and health inequality (to name a few) to take place since sex workers are seen solely as victims. Moreover, the development discourse about HIV and human trafficking has reinforced ideas of ‘prostitution-as-risk’ and ‘prostitution-as-violence’ (Shah, 2014. P. 24-25) implying that “once women begin selling sexual services, they irrevocably inhabit the identity and stigma of prostitution, which is imbricated with extreme HIV risk”, and a second “conceptual silo around the livelihood histories of women selling sexual services who are produced as already powerless” (p. 25). Even though constructed as powerless, these women under the health intervention and developmental framework of the state become women who must uphold responsibility for the health of the family and community around them. Indian feminism, in this anxiety to appear non-western, as Ratna Kapur (1999) terms ‘cultural nationalism’, has ended up conforming to colonial ideas of Indian women being submissive figures lacking any form of agency.

A useful academic typology is summarised by Kotiswaran (2008, p. 581) for these positions as structuralist/individualist (Halley et al., 2006), abolitionist/sex work (O'Connell Davidson, 2002) and subordination/autonomy (Hernández-Truyol & Larson, 2006). According to Kotiswaran, structuralists and abolitionists view sex work as subordination where sex is commodified, coerced on women and an act of violence; sex workers are victims lacking agency and are ‘slaves’ to institutionalised violence, and so must be rescued. Individualists and those pro-sex work

argue that sex workers are autonomous individuals, indifferent to the commodification of sex, understand choice, work, and agency and use it to negotiate their relationships within institutions as individuals.

The post-structural understanding of sex work views it as a multivalent, heterogeneous field of meaning because sexual activity is an extension of the self. If sex work is purely performative, it can also be understood as a source of agency, depending on the control the sex worker has over the transaction (Bell, 1994). Post-structuralists understand it as work undertaken against the backdrop of often constrained choices and view sex workers as agents who do, even if in exploitative situations, have the agency to negotiate their terms and their bodies. But, the bulk of feminist theorising around sex work and trafficking, says Kotiswaran (2008), "falls largely between these two oppositional camps while remaining sympathetic to the concerns of both" (p.581), otherwise called "middle-ground feminism" (Halley et al., 2006) that continues to harass sex workers under the guise of anti-trafficking, and has no real-life support for sex workers in terms of policy or capacity building. Most liberal viewpoints conclude that there needs to be an adoption of an empowerment framework aiming to give sex workers skills and opportunities to manage their own environment.

Sex workers see themselves as sex workers first, and women later, because much of the feminist movement has not extended support for sex workers' rights organisation.

Sex Worker, Queer and Trans Activism in India: Notes on Positionality

The story of the 'movement' in this thesis begins with Mumbai Queer Pride, 2017, where a ten-minute conversation challenged my comfort with the word pride. Mumbai Pride is India's biggest pride parade, with the average

number of people on the road exceeding 15,000. We would march in the popular, old part of Mumbai (the south), disrupting everyday life for its citizens who peer out of their windows or watch from the roadside.

The night of the parade, my partner and I were sitting on the footpath sipping hot tea and waiting for the 5:00 am train back to my grandparents' house. This was when I met Angel. She asked us for a light for her cigarette as we all stood facing the sea. I asked her whether she was returning from Pride. She laughed, "there is no place for people like me at Pride," and moved on with the conversation into what we were doing, astrology, and the beauty of the night. I could see that she had come to the promenade to solicit; our discussions were framed by the fact that she had some free time with us on our bench while she wasn't talking to potential customers. At first, I didn't understand what she meant by 'people like me'. A lot of brain-racking went into understanding that she meant sex workers, transwomen, or trans sex workers. This sentence was only 30 seconds out of the 10-minute conversation we had with Angel that night, but it is one that stayed with me for the next six years. Angel's view of the Mumbai queer movement and the community I called mine, broke my heart and stirred questions over several years of my work within the queer/trans movements and the sex worker movements in India. I didn't ask Angel why she thought there was no space for her. Deep down, I knew the answer and didn't think to dig further.

*

When I went back for my Master's thesis in Bangalore after pride, this problem of belonging and not belonging, ideas of 'safe spaces' and their exclusions pushed me to the library, where I was disappointed to find work on sex work limited to sections on victimology and at a maximum, at

loggerheads with the women's movement. Much less on everyday interaction, political economies and the creation and recreation of the self when one is home-less/has had to leave and on multiple margins (specifics of which I provided in the literature review).

Angel did not feel she belonged in the ‘safe space’ of the Mumbai queer community because of several reasons: trans people already face exclusion from the mainstream queer movement in India, and both class and caste divides make the movement comfortable for a particular type of audience: those with immense financial and social capital to speak a specific language of queerness, dress ‘as queers do’, and have access to how quickly queer culture keeps evolving as a global category of identity, eventually suffocating and excluding those without the same language and access to information.

Caste and Sexuality

India is a country strongly governed by caste (Jyoti, 2017), and the Indian Queer Movement has historically been ‘led’ by upper caste, upper-class people, with most NGOs receiving funding for their work while being led by people from similar communities due to the immense social and financial capital they come from, even though they have been marginalised for their gender identity and sexual orientation. While there have been studies noticing the ‘rural-urban-semi urban’ divide within the queer movement and extension, the ‘community’, less has been said about how historical marginalisations like caste push forward this class divide further strengthened by a form of ‘respectable’ queerness (Khubchandani, 2019). This respectability politics carries itself into NGO spaces where there is much more to lose: funding that is funnelled conveniently to English-speaking projects, power at the helm of the NGO given to the English-

speaking upper class and more often than not, ‘upper caste’ persons leading to even the deaths of those who do not occupy the same spaces. These ‘trans-friendly’ groups do not have space or time for people from gender and sexual minorities from rural areas, nor is their solidarity extended to Dalit/Adivasi/Poor/Rural trans and queer people (Revathi, 2016).

Covert violence in these spaces of ‘unity’ and ‘togetherness’ against historically oppressed people translates into how sex work is viewed, pushed further towards the margins by upper class/caste queers within the movement. The queer movement in India is a Dalit Bahujan movement (Surya, 2016). However, for the *savarna* queer elite, caste is often a negotiable matter and only comes up when one must make a space ‘intersectional’, but not when one must give up power, remove themselves from places so that more people can enter or when historically available opportunities must be given up. Sex workers, trans folx and other queer people from Dalit communities have been at the forefront of the queer movement, historically and intrinsically tied, whether the queer *savarna* elite invites them to parties and prides or not. Dhrubo Jyoti (2017) notes, “The caste-queer struggle has been carried on for centuries, if not more, by lower caste trans persons, who have never been lauded for their contribution”, much like the black trans women who began the struggle for queer people around the world at and before Stonewall.

Following on from my lived experiences of caste and queerness and my negotiations with social movements, my academic preoccupation with caste and sexuality began in 2017, as I wrote a proposal for my Masters’ thesis. I wanted to explore how men with privilege in the caste society (*Savarna*, Brahmin men) might be engaging in sexual encounters with Dalit women in Kamathipura, a red-light district in Mumbai. This interest

especially came from trying to understand how purity and pollution, as defined by 'caste' rules, differed when it came to sex work and sexual violence. While men from 'upper' castes could not marry women of 'lower' castes because they were considered 'impure', they could have sexual intercourse with them. Naively, my question was how that was acceptable – where did this notion of purity go when it came to casual intercourse, and eventually and in many cases, sexual assault of Dalit and Adivasi women? Because of this project, I understood who owned businesses in Kamathipura, where money travelled, and how both service providers and clients understood caste when it came to sexual services. More importantly, it is here that I heard, for the first time, sex workers talking about their work, their self-determination and the issues they had: gentrification, eviction, police brutality, client violence, and rescue when it was not needed, or asked for. Ever since I worked in Kamathipura, I had a different approach to how I viewed sex workers and social mobility – from solely being about victim women and their sexually abusive clients, to women at work reconfiguring their social locations, and taking their networks with them as they go.

The sex workers' movement in India has been led by poor and working-class sex workers (Kotiswaran, 2011a). Almost all sex workers' organisations that I have worked with have been historically tied to the queer and trans rights movement in India, even though there have been attempts to bury that history, not only by 'respectable' queers, but also by abolitionist sections of the women's movement, and some parts of the anti-caste movement. The term 'sex worker' was inspired by growing queer/trans collectivisation amidst increasing sexual regulations by the state in the USA and around the world. No matter how different groups/individuals who do sex work relate to the term, it has played a central role in organising efforts

in a way it did not before the 1980s (Vijayakumar, 2018), and has grown in synergy with the country's queer and trans rights movements (Lakkimsetti, 2016; Puri, 2016).

Understanding and writing about these intersections as we speak about the sex workers' movement in India are vital not only because the sex workers' movement is not a monolith and because of the various identities the sex workers in this project occupy and hold but also because of the space I occupy as a researcher and often, friend and supporter of the movement. I am a dominant/oppressor caste Shudra trans person in queer/trans spaces who have had access to most *savarna*, elite areas, being educated and 'accepted' here. These intersections are vital to note because the hatred and disgust for sex work and workers, along with the juxtaposition of the fetishisation and glamourisation of sex work when it is convenient at the same time, moves along with the class and caste struggle Dalit, Bahujan and Adivasi groups have historically fought. Through these identities, I both live within, as a 'native' of these movements and struggles, but also try to step back and analyse complexities close to home at the crossroads of the movements I am a part of.

I think of various points in my life as pressure points to reach this PhD thesis: questions on caste in my master's level, Angel's critique of the mainstream queer movement, my discomfort with whatever I was watching, Kamathipura and being around it, seeing it every day as I passed by the streets. Sex work, and workers never left my subconscious. In their existence in patches, these thoughts gave way to my patchwork ethnographic method even if I only found it because of the pandemic. I have been thinking about sex work for so long, that a 3-year PhD project does not do justice to every question, every thought, and tension.

Familiarities and Infamiliarities: A Review of Literature on Sex Workers, Activism, and Collective Identity

Reading without limitations placed on discipline, geography, and types of sex work has brought me to the conclusion that sex work, the experience workers have across the globe, and the narrativisation of sexual labour in research have many similarities (not only in legal systems or social stigma but also response and resistance to state and non-state violence). This section takes the reader through some existing frameworks through which sex work research and sex workers have been viewed. I review the larger frameworks that researchers across disciplines have used and then introduce the reader to a few frameworks that I have found useful for my analysis[12].

Globally, a lot of work done on trafficking, migration and spaces of sex work (streets, brothels and communities) are studied both formally and informally within victimological or (sexual) health frameworks, because women forced for any reason into selling sexual services are victims and the AIDS epidemic, having historically affected the health of sex workers and their clients, is an important concern. However, both these lenses pathologise sex workers, only viewing them as victims, solely to 'quantify' complex experiences of choice, willingness, intimacy and labour. If there are studies on private space, it usually also is a sensationalised version of the stories researchers collect from their field(s). Many of these studies are not conducted through a feminist lens, and so do not concern themselves

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[12] Despite the fact that sex workers possess agency and understand their own lives, they are mischaracterised as victims of trafficking instead of being recognised as individuals engaged in voluntary work. Although my research focuses on care work in activism of adult consensual sex workers and not victims of trafficking, it is crucial to analyse the conflation between the two.

with the social intersections of these women, their public/private space and how they share it with the women who choose to do sex work willingly, for example. Work on family, personal networks, collectivisation and being a sex worker in the present beyond law, policy, and tied to histories of sex work) is not studied as much as entry into and exit from sex work is studied.

Current scholarship surrounding trafficking and sex work within feminist and activist thought has one thing in consensus – anti-trafficking laws around the world have not helped in assisting victims and have especially negatively impacted migrant sex workers in most countries with such laws. Scholarship looking at sex work from a critical political economy perspective are still very few (Kotiswaran, 2014; Strauss & McGrath, 2017). Some (for example Butcher, 2003 and Sanghera, 2012) have recognised linkages between trafficking and migration, without dissolving each concept and crisis into each other. Instead, migration in search of work, and the desperation that comes with it have been used to understand the fertile ground it creates for traffickers and unscrupulous agents who are ready to exploit and profit from this need. Within the concept of 'illegal' migration, 'agency' and 'voluntariness' of the migrant population or individual are recognised as important themes (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2006). According to proponents of this perspective, trafficking can be identified as one possible outcome of the transversal migration process and one form of "clandestine cross-border economic activity" (Segrave & Milivojevic, 2005). There have also been recent attempts to view trafficking as an interaction between "gender, immigration, economics and globalisation" (Berman, 2003). Scholars maintain that the same processes giving rise to gendered migration flows are accompanied by increasing coercion and exploitation of women's bodies and the movement of women's

bodies, with or without their consent, as a source of profitable incomes (Segrave & Milivojevic, 2005). In this case, it is less useful to think of migrant populations in search of labour as only victims within a capitalist society, but instead, as those negotiating and resisting within the system with the choices available to them.

Shah (2014) argues that understanding sex work only through the 'work lens' might not be enough to capture the complexities that arise in the exchange of sexual services for money and/or other goods (p. 75). Sex workers use words like '*dhandha*' (business) to talk about what they do; activists and academics also argue that a word like *dhandha* might be more useful to engage with the complexities of sex and work (Seshu & Ghosh, 2005; Kole, 2007; Menon, 2009, p. 102), that sex is not special, or sacred and is a source of power and income against power structures (VAMP & SANGRAM, 2011) that would otherwise not let them be socially mobile. Even if it were special, like in the case of *Joginis* and *Devadasis* who have been conditioned to believe their sex work is a service and sacred ritual to the Goddesses and Gods they are 'married' to, why must it be not paid and treated differently than any other sacred form like dancing or singing (Jameela, 2010)[13].

Dasgupta (2014) writing about Durbar, the sex workers' union in Kolkata has analysed sex workers' silence and their refusal of language as a way of recovering the agency otherwise lost in the dichotomies of sex work and trafficking debates. Kotiswaran has suggested that 'it is at the intersections where sex becomes work and work demands sex that sex work needs to be

[13] Ramberg (2014, p.176) points out that popular discussions around agency are inadequate to understand *Devadasi* and *Jogini* systems as transactional forms. Sex worker's experience with and understanding of these words should also be of interest to those researching the intersections between sex, labour, and religion, to name a few.

understood' (2011, xiv). Nivedita Menon (2012) critiques the loose use of words like 'commodification' to abolish sex work when all persons under capitalist work conditions have commodified either their skills or things that are saleable. This point is further elucidated by Sahni and Shankar (2013):

> Sex work is not the only site of poor working conditions, nor is it particularly prominent in terms of the employment of minors as compared to other sectors. For those coming to sex work from the other labour markets, they have often experienced equally harsh (or worse) conditions of highly labour-intensive work for low (and most often lower) incomes. It is from these background cases, that the significance of sex work as a site of higher incomes or livelihoods emerges (p.45).

These are just some of the ambiguities of sexual (and by extension, reproductive labour) that get lost in overly simplified accounts of victimhood or romanticisations of agency within the capitalist economy. Feminist historians in India have analysed accounts of self-led resistances by 'prostitutes' and *devadasis* working collectively for their interests well before the term 'sex work' was used globally (for example, Arondekar 2009, 2012; Tambe 2006, 2009a). Since the AIDS crisis in the 1980s-1990s, this activism has grown in scale and through formal collectivisation with the term 'sex worker' taking centre stage in organising efforts, both in India and transnationally (for example, Bindman & Doezema, 1997; Gall, 2007, 2012; Hardy, 2010; Jameela, 2010; Kaiwar & Gothoskar, 2014; Kempadoo, 2003; Kempadoo & Doezema, 1998; Mgbako, 2016; Sukthankar, 2012; Vijayakumar, 2018).

(Some) Earlier Ethnographies of Sex Work

This section provides a quick review of ethnographic work done on sex work and/or 'prostitution' that has provided me with a rich bank to ask questions to, get inspired by and push the boundaries of what we can know from ethnographic explorations of political economies. I have purposely chosen ethnographic studies that do not conflate sex work with trafficking, and that are reflective of their position as researchers, while also caring and paying great attention to detail so that the ethnography does not flatten the experience of an already marginalised group. These are the ethnographies that have inspired me.

Svati P. Shah's (2006) examination of Kamathipura underscores the skewed narrative surrounding sex work in the area, shaped by biased journalistic and public health portrayals that moralise the profession, highlighting the forced erasure of sex work in Kamathipura within contemporary debates on migration, trafficking, and urbanisation, shedding light on the neglected aspect of the sex workers themselves, constituting a significant portion of the population. Employing urban anthropology and multisited ethnography, Shah delves into the complexities of lived experiences, offering a comparative analysis through different perspectives. Notably, Shah explores the 'normalising' gaze directed at sex workers in the *nakas*, emphasizing the dual perspectives from both passers-by and fellow workers, demonstrating intricacies of social stratification and its impact on networks within the sex work industry. This insight is particularly pertinent to my study as it underscores the importance of understanding how neighbouring workers perceive one's work in shaping networks, extending beyond the confines of sex worker communities.

Ashwini Tambe (2009a), in *Codes of Misconduct*, provides a rich historical study of the existence of European prostitutes in Kamathipura, offering a reading of caste and race otherwise rare in sex work research. While talking about the intermediary status of European prostitutes, she talks about how they also resisted deportation and were looked at as a necessary evil within state-regulated brothels. She further describes the administration during the colonial period who did not want to allow interracial relationships between European prostitutes and Indian men or vice versa. She elaborates on the relationship that existed between the police, the law and the mistresses who were, through being 'in charge' of the prostitutes also in charge of their sexuality, through the favours asked of them, the corruption that they had to work within.

From her analysis of Sonagachi and Tirupati, in *Born Unto Brothels*, Prabha Kotiswaran (2008) offers a 'work position' arguing a postcolonial feminist theory of sex work that views sex workers as agents within the industry who have some negotiating power, and also emphasizes the protection and promotion of their rights acknowledging that sex workers are not merely 'rational economic actors' but 'people who are cognisant of the structures of oppression that they are embedded in' (p. 187). Further arguing that India has a socialist and 'strong leftist tradition' (p. 11), Kotiswaran chooses materialist feminism as a methodological model to theorise sex work in order to create not only a new Marxist vocabulary for redefining sex work as reproductive labour (p. 10) but hoping that such a model can help build a collaborative relationship between sex workers and feminist theories in order for them to work towards 'redistributive reform' (p. 17).

Megan Hamm (2012) conducted an ethnography of an NGO in Shivdaspur, a small red-light area on the outskirts of Varanasi to put an end to brothel-

based prostitution in the area. With her analysis, she maps the interaction of the NGO with the sex workers in the area through 'raid-and-rescue' tactics and education programs (with most focus on the former), describing the ways middle-class founders of the NGO conceptualise and treat women they seek to 'aid' through the lens of their values, morals and priorities, conceptualising the sex workers they are 'aiding' as outside the boundaries of what is considered acceptable for women, excluding real life experiences of the sex workers – marriage, family, support systems, and even the public exclusion of sex workers from an NGO-sponsored concert meant to showcase the artistic talents of sex workers and other marginalised communities in the area.

Simanti Dasgupta (2019), analysing the spectacle and the detritus left after raids in Sonagachi's brothels uses a postcolonial framework to place Indian sex workers' rights and opinions at the core of the study, beyond existing Western interpretations of sex work. Moving away from current literature focusing on police raids of brothels as a tool of state violence, it explores raids in relation to the brothel as a home and space where the sex workers live, and collectivise for their labour rights. Through her work, she asks for the raid to not be viewed as a spectacle, but to be seen as an ordinary form of violence, followed by the extraordinary experience of rebuilding by the sex workers who return, signalling reclamation and subversion of the state's apparatus to undermine the labour movement that the workers have undertaken. Focusing on post-rescue experiences of sex workers, Pankhuri Agarwal (2021) argues against the notion that those 'rescued' from bondage are completely free, paying significantly less attention to the role of the state and NGOs in producing conditions wherein people remain vulnerable. Through a multi-sited ethnography of sex workers, migrant workers and law enforcement officers, the study reflects how workers once rescued are

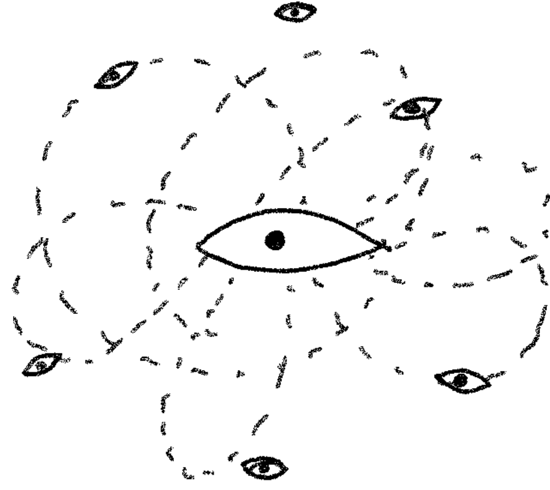
not transported to freedom but remain in the confines of long legal proceedings seeking justice in a bureaucratic system that renders them as 'nobodies'.

My research is set against this powerful bank of work that has been done, both formally and informally by academics, activists, and sex workers that have helped me create a framework of understanding what conversations have been conventionally had (on sexual labour, work, decency and morality) and what conversations are yet to happen (power struggles in the NGO, fatigue in activism, continuous crisis intervention, and the intricacies of knowledge creation). My review of literature suggests that there are not enough qualitative (especially ethnographic) studies conducted on sex work, sexual labour/commerce and the multiple worlds that exist in one place that function as work and home, especially when sex worker identity meets with activist identities.

Vijayakumar (2018) observes that not opening conversations about ambiguities of language, like in the way people who exchange sex for money/resources might not identify with a common sex worker identity, keeps us from valuable research that could take place when activism, collectivisation, meaning making are the object of analysis. There are few studies (for e.g., Grant, 2014) done thus, about why someone calls themselves a sex worker, even if they have exchanged sex for money/resources before the entry of this phrase – is sex worker a political identity that is worn by workers? Important aspects of social movement mobilisation and influence are not investigated only through network thinking, description and in terms of social connectedness, which is why this thesis starts off by just asking simple questions on what it is to be a sex

worker in India today, with all the related identities and ambiguities that come within the world of being a sex worker.

This thesis adds to the growing bank of work that Vijayakumar points out, attempting to understand the identity of sex workers within collectives. I intend to do this by being a part of the conversation with existing literature and the current scenario, functioning as a translator and friend to my respondents. I would like to acknowledge that much less work available in India has come from academics with sex work experience, who, even if they do have such experience would worry about outing themselves because of the stigma they face. For this reason, this thesis still relies on the alternative sources of information sex workers around the world have maintained because they cannot speak with, within, or through traditional institutions.



I

हमें बचाने वालों से बचाओ

Save us from Saviours

“Humein Bachane Walon Se Bachao[14]”: A Genealogy of unSexy Documentary

> To be a whore is the most demeaning thing, but playing a whore on screen wins you an Oscar.
>
> Juliana Piccolo narrates in *Whores on Film* (2019)

Documentary film is both advertised and consumed as an accurate portrayal of reality, or as John Grierson proposed in the 1930s, “a creative treatment of actuality” (Nichols, 2010, p.5). When it comes to 'complex' topics like sex work, reality is often blurred by social stigma, bias, narrative, and funding power.

This patch problematises the representation of sex work in documentary film, arguably the first means of engagement many people (including me) have with sex work and sex workers in India. I focus on a few films that have created and solidified the narrative surrounding sex work in India, analysing how these films have been funded, filmed, edited, and consumed, creating a social life of the film that affects the communities it seeks to portray years after their release. By looking at sex work as represented in documentary films from 1986-2015 and tracing the story of the narrative, I draw conclusions to how harmful, skewed stories of sex workers in popular documentary leads to the gentrification of sex workers’ spaces in real life, becoming a form of structural violence. This patch further focuses on the responses to these films by sex worker collectives using letters, short

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[14] “Save us from those who want to save us” (translated from Hindi to English); a popular slogan among sex workers in Maharashtra, India.

videos and their own films to take control of how they are represented, asking “who gets to tell the story of the sex worker? And what stories do sex workers get to tell?”.

I do this by tracing the journey of two ‘main’ films and the ripples caused by their release. The first discusses *Born into Brothels* in the context of where it was made (Kolkata, in the east of India), what came before – story and plot, and what came after – response and thought in multiple sections of the public imagination of sex work(ers). The second event is the making and release of *Prostitutes of God* five years later, set in a different part of the country (Maharashtra and Karnataka, in the South West of India) and its eerie similarities of conversations and responses it elicited to *Born into Brothels*. I argue that the social life of these documentaries post their release are connected to each other, creating a world of narratives that must be understood in connection with each other and the larger industrial complex they feed.

Finding, Watching, Looking (Away): Methodology

For this patch, I analysed 21 films that intend to talk about sex work in India[15]. I divide these films according to geographical, thematic and narrative focuses, paying more attention to films that have been shaping the grand narrative of sex work in India (i.e., *Born into Brothels* and *Prostitutes of God*), and using other films to further my argument about how films reproduce or aim to challenge each other’s narratives (i.e., *Selling of Innocents*, *Land of the Missing Children* and others). I analyse how sex workers use film to respond to harmful narratives (i.e., *Sangli Talkies*, *We*

[15] I use ‘sex work’ here for ease of explanation of the methodology. As will be clear later, the films I analysed represent what they call ‘prostitution’, ‘trafficking’, ‘ritual prostitution’ even though the meanings of many of these words in the films itself remain vague and loosely used.

are foot Soldiers, and *Save us from Saviours*), questioning the problematics of representation, and the social lives the films have taken through the audio, the visual and the discourse within the film between the documentary filmmaker and those subjected to the film. To keep track of the connections that the films had with each other in terms of location, places and people, I used visualisation methods by hand and through computer programmes, displayed at the end of this patch once the reader is familiar with the films and their content.

To further my knowledge about the films beyond its final content, I interviewed 5 filmmakers about their experience making the film, editing, and their relationships with their interlocutors. I approached the interviewing process as someone wanting to know more about why people choose sex work as a topic to make films on, and what negotiations were made during the filming, editing, and post-release process. My research and methodology has been an exchange, rather than me being a passive recipient to the film, and the interview material I collected.

This critical project is scaffolded with questions on entanglements of representation, elicitation of information during the interviews, and the production of narratives through film: who decides how someone gets represented? Where are the films getting produced from? How is space constructed?

In film, space for the viewer is the four lengths of the camera shot. We see what the camera sees. We do not see beyond its lens, with so much that can be left out and so much that can be intentionally put in. How do we control what is seen and left unseen? What is deemed important by the ethnographer/film maker who is also the maker of the space and how do we leave that control to the people to whom this space belongs

traditionally? How is violence perpetuated through these edits? What are the relationships shared between the makers of films and how does the politics of representation work? What is expected of workers in these screenings?

To systematically make watching films a part of my thesis, I first listed all the films that I had knowledge of and had watched at least once before.

1. *Prostitutes of God* (2010), a VICE documentary by Sarah Harris
2. *Born Into Brothels* (2004), by Zana Briski

To find more, I put up a 'story' on Instagram and asked peers from NGO networks and friends for more:

3. VAMP's *Response to Prostitutes of God* (2010), VAMP Sangli
4. *Tales of the Night Fairies* (2002), by Shohini Ghosh
5. *In the Flesh* (2003), by Bishakha Dutta
6. *India Cabaret* (1986), by Mira Nair
7. *Save us from Saviours* (2010), by Kat Mansoor
8. *Naach* (2008), by Saba Dewan and Rahul Roy
9. *Soma Girls* (2009), by Nandini Sikand

Once I had a list of films, I watched all of them and then wrote to the filmmakers. The filmmakers told me about other films that existed, both made by them, and those they had heard of[16]. My list now had a few more films:

10. *The Other Song* (2009), by Saba Dewan

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[16] Although I analysed all of the films mentioned, some of them are left out of the writing of this patch because they did not add anything new to the argument. For example, *Zeenat*, *Rai Dancers* and *The Day My God Died* all follow similar narrative patterns to *Born into Brothels* and *Selling of Innocents.* They resurface when I visualise all films.

11. *Delhi Mumbai Delhi* (2006), by Saba Dewan and Rahul Roy
12. *The Malak* (unreleased), by Kat Mansoor
13. *Here, Devadasis Feel Proud of their Culture* (2004), NDTV India
14. *Sangli Talkies* (undated), mini films of up to 5 minutes by SANGRAM
15. *The Selling of Innocents* (1997) by Ruchira Gupta
16. *Land of the Missing Children* (2008) by Sam Wiley
17. *Rai Dancers: Swirling in Travails* (2013) by Capt. Ruchi Vijayawargia
18. *Sex, Death and the Gods* (2011) by Beeban Kidron
19. *We are the Foot Soldiers* (2011) by Oishik Sircar and Debolina Datta
20. *The Day My God Died* (2003) by Andrew Levine
21. *Zeenat- Ek Ankahi Daastan* (2015) by Kuldeep Chaudhary

Eventually, I stopped looking for films, but some still made it to my list when I told people (activists, movie makers, friends) about my project. A lot of the films that joined later would have not made it into my list without the previous network I had built with the movement and its friends. Listing down these films had already led me to start making connections between years, places, and people. Most of the films my peers and I knew were those that were advertised heavily, some we had watched in college. The 'sex' aspect of these films made them easy to market.

Figure 1: Thinking about documentary films on sex work.

Meanwhile, the 'work' aspect of the films we had not heard of made them harder to find. On Google, ‘sex work’ showed me films allied to labour organising, while ‘trafficking’ and ‘trade’ brought up more, varied results. It

is important to note, even though I was not looking for trafficking narratives, most films about Adult Consensual Sex Workers end up being tagged as films on trafficking because of the conflation of both. Some did not have the keywords 'sex'/ 'work'/ 'trade'/ 'traffic' in them, and so were impossible to find until someone who had watched it told me about it. There were also some short films and episodes within larger documentary series – *Lindsay Lohan's Indian Journey* (2010) had an entire episode (which I read as a documentary) dedicated to sex trafficking but not categorised as a film on trafficking.

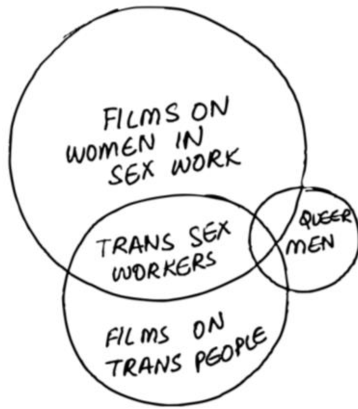

Figure 2: Characters in documentary films about sex work.

Another trend I tried to understand was 'who' the 'characters' in the films were. Many films focusing on cisgender women also included transgender women in their storytelling, often as a singular 'anomaly', along with queer men/men who have sex with men (for money or not). Everywhere the camera went, we see trans women living in close proximity to their cisgender siblings, forming support networks holding their lives together. However, I did not include films primarily about trans women (focusing on trans sex work) but instead, chose films on sex work (which included trans women in sex work).

While the documentary films I collected fall (un)tidily into many known documentary categories, some films, uncategorised as documentaries (responses to documentaries, news pieces and digital storytelling projects) fall into them as well. For example, NDTV India, an English language news channel published various video reports about the sex workers of Sangli: one shows a flood response, another a theatre performance, a third answering difficult questions on the *devadasi* tradition. Such news snippets

are not usually categorised as documentary, but its style, and practical usage of portraying the disaster and response comes under both the expository and reflexive categories of documentary filmmaking. Moreover, it ‘documents’ the life of the sex workers (arguably) better than a lot of categorised documentaries might. Meanwhile, a film like *Prostitutes of God* by VICE, a news and media agency was both marketed and consumed as a documentary. Reality is an important aspect of choosing and analysing film policy and practice. Thus, I use a liberal understanding of ‘what’ a documentary is to analyse a larger scenario of what exists when film talks about sex work to portray ‘reality’.

A note on how I analyse these films: anthropological inquiry on documentary film has mainly been about the method of filming ethnography as an alternative to ethnographic description (focusing on representation of those on the other side of the camera) but less about mapping how these films capture, portray and lead to the consumption of reality, what reality is in film, and relationships shared by those that are not actors, but real people in cinematic performance (barring MacDougall, 2019)[17]. None look at anthropological study of documentary film outside of its making process, as a thematic ecosystem in a 'kinship network', connected, in conversation. Shah (2006) and Cornwall (2016) have compared 2-3 films but not beyond background context of why they were made and how they were received. To this growing literature, I contribute

[17] There has been work on the cultural complex of large cinematic industries like Hollywood (Powdermaker, 1950), the socio-technical process of cinematic production and material culture (Grimaud, 2003), professionalisation processes, precarity, spirituality and every day social uncertainty in Bollywood (Ganti, 2012), Hollywood and Hong Kong (Martin, 2017), cinema as a site of dreams, and the entry of the cinematic into the every day through Tamil cinema (Pandian, 2015), and occult films in Ghana and the relationship between religion and technology (Meyer, 2015). On the topic of movie-going, Srinivas (2016) has worked on active audience and the ‘choice’ aspect of movie going, while Mantecón (2017) has worked on a historical ethnography of movie going, and an anthropology of publics, the city and screen arguing that there is little attention to film analysis and production. There is less on sexuality or pornographic material barring Hoek’s (2014) work on the Bangladeshi film industry and ‘cut-piece’ pornographic film placed in between action sequences in theatres.

by looking at sexography, or documentaries on sex work as DeVilliers (2017) put it, in Indian cinema using interviews, content analysis, and visualisation methods to draw out narrative-structural violence, and why film matters.

Figure 3: I often took screen captures when I was doing interviews before my interlocutors joined me in my personal meeting room on Zoom. A second after these images, my face would break into a smile for the interview. Sometimes, my cat Inji would join me.

For sex work and film, it almost becomes a necessary task to connect background, response and narrative reproduction because these films are seen as solitary pieces of work even though many happen in the same space, some in the same time, becoming longitudinal studies of the same community but never looked at in relation to each other (barring a few, like Rangan's (2011) conceptualisation of the political economy of *Born into Brothels*). In this ecosystem, I argue only some archives get to keep their claim, while responses, news pieces and community-made documentations are not only less popular, but also taken less seriously as an appropriate view of reality. This becomes especially important when there is a social life that the documentary takes of its own in these women's lives.

Sex Work and the Work of Documentary

In global cinema, a sex worker character has been used to narrate multiple stories: the sexually promiscuous – belonging to no one – woman as an object of desire; a 'disposable' woman, expected to be hurt on screen or

who changes herself for love, pining for the hero to love her back; the woman 'saved' from herself, representing violence against sex working individuals, disease and the confusing nature of work, money and capitalism; using humiliation as a tactic that can categorise women into 'good' and 'bad'; to fuel moral panic, construct victimised narratives surrounding trafficking, alcoholism, addiction and crime rings in 'third world countries'; to push ideas that love and sex work cannot co-exist; to juxtapose with domesticity (Mulvey, 1975).

Popular imagery of sex workers denies any multiplicity in narrative – women are almost always shown as street workers belonging to 'lower classes', pushing the idea of desperation enough to 'sell your body' leading to a pornographic obsession with degradation (De Villiers, 2017, p. 72), as well as using gender and sexual minorities to add to the dramatised image of the sex worker. More so, inherent sexism, ethnocentrism, and a colonial gaze on migration constructs men as migrants and women as trafficked victims, steered by a huge anti-trafficking, and anti-sex work lobby as part of their moral crusade (Kempadoo, 2012). Sealing Cheng (2013) notes, these tendencies reinforce the 'victim subject' in sex work, especially in the colonial imagination of the 'developing, third world', where portraying the victim-subject narrative invites remedies and responses but do little to promote women's rights. Instead, they highlight the sexual victimhood of women, promoting carceral state politics to criminalise designated 'villains' in this world – 'pimps', 'brothel owners', 'buyers', and 'bad parents'. In this language of human trafficking, the former are collectively known as 'victims of trafficking' and the latter, 'traffickers'. The framing of these increasingly fixed groups motivates other groups (rescue organisations, the police, every day citizens participating in surveillance of workers) to be the 'guardians of peace' in the lives of sex workers, while delegitimising and marginalising

their negotiations and organising work, thus normalising an invisible violence to the already present forms of violence in sex workers' lives (Ghosh, 2006).

However the image is cast, every single person who has watched a film/read a book, has an image of what a sex worker looks like, talks like, where she (usually a she) lives, and who surrounds her. There is a clear construction of 'who' a sex worker is: a street working, fishnet-stocking wearing, cigarette smoking, sexually 'forward' woman. In India, this woman, still street working, is a sari-clad, red lipstick wearing woman in an urban setting. It becomes vital, then, to look at and challenge the grand, meta narrative of how sex workers are constructed in cinema[18].

In documentary films, the sex worker becomes the protagonist, but the taste of what we learnt from fiction stays on our tongues. Feminist scholars (Brooks, 2020; Doezema, 2001; Kempadoo, 2001; McClintock, 1992; Wojcicki, 1999) have, in detail, spoken about the white gaze on sex work (and other survival work, poverty and development), the HIV/AIDS epidemic and the subsequent rapid NGOisation that left out workers, their labour, and voices from interventions concerning them.

Doezema (2010) deconstructs the idea of the 'sex slave' in modern narratives by comparing its construction to that of the 'white (female) slave', an 'innocent woman' kidnapped, trapped, and sexually abused by a racial other – 'the black man'. The metaphor reminds me of Ashwini

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[18] In his larger project on challenging dominant structures, Foucault (1971,1977,1978) argues that grand/meta narratives tend to suppress alternative stories and perspectives and instead reinforce dominant power structures and ideologies of, in this case, purity, pollution and deviance. By relying instead on local, micro-level power relations and examining how they operate in everyday life, there is a better chance of understanding the complex realities of the political economies people exist in. Grand narratives are repeated in so many mediums that they become The Truth.

Tambe's work on the social geographies of Kamathipura when the existence of white sex workers in the 14th lane of the red-light district sent moral shock waves among the British officers stationed in Bombay, leading to British sex workers being deported back to Britain to keep brown men away from accessing them (2019, p. 154).

Both metaphors of the 'white female sex slave' and the 'white prostitute that needs to be controlled' have been used at different points in time to push political agendas, rendering the 'slaves' themselves unlistened to, and only worthy of saving. Doezema (2010) connects these constructions to the era of UN anti-trafficking protocols for whom both these metaphors work as reasons for stricter border control, a tight rein on sexuality and a moral crusade to save women living and negotiating with gendered practices. By understanding the definition of trafficking through analytical concepts of 'myth', 'ideology', and 'consent', tracing historical circumstances that produced the idea of the trafficked victim, we can understand why it makes a compelling story. What makes the truth about trafficking such a compelling truth to believe? Where do these truths come from? Who believes it and why? Why must it be questioned?

These melodramatic constructions of the white female slave speak to fears, sexual dangers, deviances, and social order, making the domestic/home the safest place for women to be, where they belong. The sex slaves in these narratives need not be based on lived experience or empirical evidence, but it works politically for certain arguments, policies and governments, creating a clash between good intentions, social work, reform and lived realities of women. A consenting adult engaging in sex work is not as compelling a story as a woman hidden in a ceiling that someone breaks to rescue her. Saving these sex slaves is a 'sexy' thing to do, while questioning

the root causes of trafficking or fighting for migrant rights seems ‘unsexy’ (Plambech, 2011).

The 2000s saw the number of films made on trafficking (and, in extension sex work) explode manifold in India – sex trafficking was in the news more, found its place in the Bollywood underground/mafia narrative, and more filmmakers wanted to explore the ‘seedy brothel’ scene (Shah, 2013, p. 563). ‘Realistic’ accounts of sex work feature rural poverty, bonded labour, the gross exploitation of Adivasi, oppressed caste/Dalit and migrant women, urban red-light areas, disease, police brutality, corruption, the ‘men in control’ like pimps, and the children of sex workers (Sunder Rajan, 1996). Here, sex work is framed as a ‘social evil’, a ‘heinous crime’ and ‘abomination against humanity’ while sex workers are described as ‘tragic’, ‘public property’, ‘outcasts’ and ‘innocent souls’. Entry into sex work also always uses verbs like ‘preyed upon’, ‘deceived’, ‘forced’ (Datta, 2005), leading viewers to the conclusion that no ‘self respecting Indian woman’ would ever opt for sex work, even in the face of the worst form of poverty. In many instances, the process of reporting about sexual commerce means the reiteration of a generalised set of elisions between prostitution, risk, and disease (Shah, 2006).

In these realistic documentaries, sex work is not a livelihood option, but a moral abhorrence. This representational strategy of the sex worker as the oppressed woman to whom “things are done” works to maintain a notion of a powerful subject versus a disempowered other, where the identities of the oppressor and victim are naturalised, fixed subject positions rooted to gender, caste and class roles. It fixes a false dichotomy of choice versus force, taking away any power, and saying that she may have been lured,

forced, kidnapped, drugged, raped, threatened and perennially the product of someone else's action (Datta, 2005).

Scholars have explored how planned initiatives of South Asian narrative building meet racist, orientalist undertones in development stories, eventually leading to development funding in South Asia[19]. Shah (2006) calls the construction of the anti-trafficking narrative around Kamathipura a 'spectacle', Cornwall (2016) compares three films made about or by the sex working communities in Sangli to break down the 'White Saviour Industrial Complex' being pushed down the throats of women in developing countries, Vance (2012) theorises the effect of these narratives on law and policy, calling films that neatly arrange empirical data like interviews or archival information along a predetermined plotline, calling them 'melomentaries' (melodramatic documentary). The sex worker in these narratives is used as a "metonym for the critique of capitalism" (p. 205) investigated through styles like cinéma vérité to uncover reality. Most films, thus, are formulaic – hyper-observant, carefully recording the surroundings in which such a trade is possible, and interacting with those involved through recorded interview techniques designed to elicit responses.

Part 1: Funding Games and the Urge to Save Brown Women and Children

I sat on the blue couch in my house in London five months into the Covid-19 pandemic, having completed my upgrade from the MPhil to the PhD journey but having no idea where to do my fieldwork, since, the people and the places of my field were struggling to make ends meet while creating

[19] Recent work has explored the narrative conventions, tools and techniques used to make human rights interesting, and palatable to diverse audiences (for example, see Hesford & Kozol (2005), Slaughter (2007), Sliwinski (2011), Hesford (2011) and Goldberg & Moore (2012)).

their own care systems. In this period of uncertainty, I turned to what I knew best and found comforting: media analysis, learnt during my first degree in Journalism, and the class I enjoyed the most within it, *Understanding Cinema*, where I first watched Zana Briski's *Born into Brothels* (2004).

The film took the class – and me with it – to the *galis* I dared not ask my parents about: where 'bad' things happened to women who stepped outside their homes, found boyfriends and fell in love. These stories had been narrated to me since childhood: young girls were kidnapped and put into places where they would only be victims for the rest of their lives because they did not listen to their parents, were not obedient or did not follow the rulebook outlined precisely for them. "Be a good girl and don't talk back", the conversation ended the same way many times. In this socio-cultural context where sex is a taboo, and sex workers are 'family-less, morally depraved women', Briski's *Born into Brothels* tells its audiences (middle and upper class families in the USA and India) what they have heard before: 'prostitutes' are bad mothers, their children are in crisis, only white women (and their money) can save them, so act now, donate and do your bit. Since this message is also repeated in advertising campaigns pasted in bathroom stalls and lamposts all over London, New York, Paris, or Berlin, it is not surprising that Briski's film eventually won the Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature of 2005. In retrospect, it is important I start this patchwork ethnography of sex workers' collectivisation with film; my thesis exists because films that stigmatise sex workers exist, which is how and why sex workers have responded, collectivised, and taken control of their stories.

Documentary films on sex work in India also focus on the children of sex workers to appeal to the moral conscience of the audience: children of sex workers are bound to be 'existentially trafficked' along with their mothers, and as Ruchira Gupta beckons in *The Selling of Innocents* (1996), "these children will become a generation of sex slaves", unless the viewer swoops in to save them, of course. Filmmakers making films on what they call 'sex slavery' in this time from the late 90s to the early 2000s focus their energies on saving the children, because the mothers are 'too far gone', using the language of sustaining a better world for the children, which was already in the public vocabulary since the Rio Summit in 1992. In this way, the fates of the children of sex workers and sex workers themselves become intrinsically tied in documentary film.

The first three films I analyse in this patch focus on sex workers, but through their children. The first film, *Born into Brothels* (BiB), based in Kolkata's Sonagachi, acts as a locus of anti-prostitution films in the country due to its popularity and reach. *BiB* is not the only film to focus on the children of sex workers to weave an anti-prostitution tale vilifying their mothers; two other films add to this narrative: *The Selling of Innocents* and *Land of Missing Children*. This is followed by the response of community organisations to *Born into Brothels* in the form of a film, *We are Foot Soldiers*, ending with three films made by activists and supporters of the sex workers' movement: *Soma Girls*, *Tales of the Night Fairies* and *In the Flesh*, and a discussion on how the films speak to each other from the dual lens of the saviour and the saved.

Born into Brothels (2004), The Selling of Innocents (1996) and Land of Missing Children (2008)

Born into Brothels (2004)

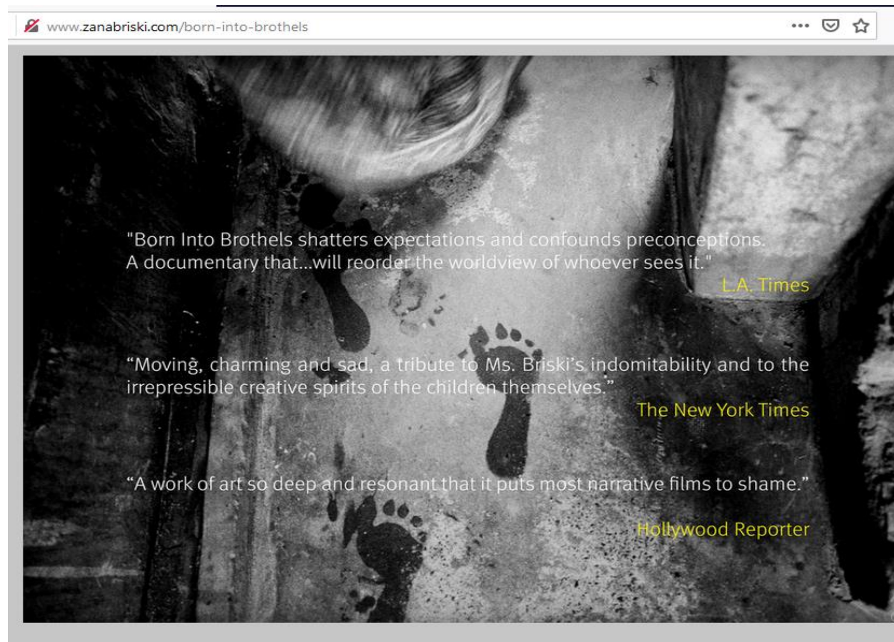

Figure 4: A page on Briski's website and the accolades Born into Brothels received by US-based, internationally renowned news agencies.

The tagline for Zana Briski's movie *Born into Brothels* (BiB) on her website states, 'Zana spent ten years on her project in the brothels of Calcutta where she photographed, filmed and taught photography to the children of prostitutes. Her film won an Academy award, an Emmy and 33 other awards. She founded *Kids with Cameras*, a non-profit which transforms the lives of marginalized children through learning the art of photography'.

The film in question is a multiple award-winning documentary that won the hearts of audiences worldwide for depicting the lives of the children of sex workers in India's largest red-light district, Sonagachi in the Eastern Indian state of West Bengal. Briski uses a version of photovoice, giving the children point-and-shoot cameras to record what they see around them. In

preparation, Briski ran a photography class from 2000-2003 for a small group of children: Puja, Shanti, Kochi, Suchitra, Manik, Gour, and Avijit[20]. The documentary is interspersed with what Briski sees in Sonagachi, ending on a hopeful note with one of the children given a passport and tickets to leave the red-light district and their families, in a rescue-by-removal fashion.

> As a New York-based photographer, I became interested in the lives of these children in 1998 when I first began photographing prostitutes in Calcutta. Living in the brothels for months at a time, I quickly developed a relationship with many of the kids who, often terrorized and abused, were drawn to the rare human companionship I offered.
> (Briski in a 2004 article for Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine)

This excerpt is important for two reasons. First, it connects Briski's work to what Shah (2013) evidences – 'concerned photography' turned onto social issues in 'developing countries'[21]. Secondly, the tone with which Briski speaks about her participants, positioning herself as a beacon for the children, while ironically using participatory methods like Photo Voice based on shared power between parties involved. In Briski's version of participation, the children's photo-voice hangs between a narrative neatly

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[20] In an interview with a news portal, and in many such interviews, Briski and Kauffman talk about giving cameras to children in marginalised situations as a way for them to 'regain their sense of self and to liberate them'. Ironically, photovoice is a popular tool that stems from participatory research, meant to build on Paolo Freire's ideas of empowerment education, of knowledge collectively accumulated and understood by the participants of the research while representing individual perceptions and ideas through individual images (Budig et al., 2018).

[21] Shah (2013) traces how documentary film on sex work (like *Born into Brothels* and *Selling of Innocents*) are a product of twentieth-century photojournalism in the USA, conceived by organisations like the International Center for Photography (ICP) founded in the 1960s, dedicated to 'Concerned Photography' – a movement to shape the future of documentary photography from focusing on class and war to 'social issues' – has heavily influenced photo-journalists-reformers from the US coming to work in India. This imagery of reform and social work was supposed to awaken the self-interest of the privileged so that they feel sympathy for the poor and work towards reform. However, this reform was not aimed to question social systems that made social deprivation possible and tolerable, but to stop it from threatening the health and security of polite society (p. 560).

planned and showcased by Briski and Kauffman, a pseudo-participatory endeavour upon the lives of its subjects (Rangan, 2011).

The movie begins in a narrow, dim *gali*, with a naked child running ahead of the camera. A few scenes later, there is a lightbulb surrounded by flies, and rats scurrying into walls. There is dirt surrounding the people of Sonagachi, and thus a call for them to be rescued. Despite the film's grim atmosphere of the brothels and surrounding *galis*, the children construct narratives of their life and its characters: their mothers, families and friends, along with everything they see around them. This duality continues in the capturing of the day to day. Briski, meanwhile, is edited into the film asking the mothers to send their children to school. The children call her 'Zana aunty', the only person who can rescue them from this horrible present and a worse future by intervening and putting them in a boarding school, away from their mothers and family.

The film's tone provides a neatly constructed image of the suffering child, that Kleinman and Kleinman (1996) call an aesthetic of suffering used in fundraising –commodifying suffering to attract viewers. Sircar & Dutta (2011) apply this concept to *BiB* and ask whether this actually ensures the rights of the children in question or do fixations on suffering only lead to a specific type of compassion (removing, rescuing and putting into boarding schools) for certain categories of children (of sex workers). The singular story makes way for people to save children from their 'incompetent surroundings', engaging in the primary motif of (western, liberal) children's human rights: 'a life free of labour and exploitation' with opportunities to 'play and learn' in creating what Patricia Uberoi (2009) conceptualises as the 'customised child' – taught civility, and culture in their new home, with new foster parents' carefully built lives, away from their 'bad homes' (p. 88).

To engage an audience, a child must look sad, enough to be pitied, and cute, enough for their lives to be changed. This singular storytelling promises self-worth to the watcher, for being the one to take the child out of their misery (Sircar & Dutta, 2011).

Sonagachi Resists

As Briski constructs a doomed future of the children unless rescued, the film conveniently fails to recognise that since 1992 – twelve years before *BiB* was released or before Briski and Kauffman's project started in 1998 – sex workers had been organising education initiatives for both, workers who could not complete their education due to violent households and stigma, as well as the children of the workers to be educated in safety. Having begun with literacy programmes for peer educators, these initiatives quickly led to a hostel opening in 1998, vocational training, and primary school buildings in the area (APNSW, 2016). Even if Briski started working on the film 10 years earlier, these initiatives were already running. A Frontline news report investigating the facts of the film found that all the children, while happy to have the creative opportunities the film brought them, were already going to school. To then portray their mothers as cruel women not wanting to 'liberate themselves and know themselves' is a disservice to her participants.

After the film's release, Briski co-founded an NGO called *Kids with Cameras* to encourage similar projects in different parts of the world and also set up *Hope House*, for children to be rescued into in Kolkata, away from, as the website says, the 'squalid rooms and chaotic conditions of the congested

red-light district'[22]. Not a lot of information is available on how *Hope House* is run, or whether it has been useful for the community. Swami (2005) connects Briski's 'missionary enterprise' with similar attempts to 'remove, rehome and re-educate' Adivasi children in India, questioning her motives for disregarding what the children and their parents were already doing in Sonagachi:

> It was clear she was far from being a solitary saint among the wretched of Kolkata...If Briski wanted evidence that the children of Sonagachi could beat the odds and give meaning to their lives, all she had to do was turn to Mrinal Kanti Dutta: the son of a sex worker, Dutta was a key figure in the mobilisation of the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee. Others have made lives for themselves elsewhere: but there is space for none of this in Briski's missionary enterprise (para. 4).

BiB never claims there are no NGOs working in the area, but simply cuts them out of Sonagachi's visual narrative, cultivating a story instead, that the area is bereft of anything other than brothels, businesses, pimps and madams (Shah, 2013, p. 555). Workers with *Sanlaap*, an organisation with markedly different views on sex work from the women's collectives are present, but not referred to, introduced, or spoken to. Instead, these employees are seen walking around filling forms and interpreting information as though they are not from an organisation working in the area.

Among all the films I watched, *BiB* had the most accurate subtitling, although the reason for it seems sinister if scenes with parents scolding their children, using commonly used curse words are to be seen as 'verbally

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[22]In 2007, Jason Eskenazi, another American filmmaker, used the idea in Jerusalem to document the Israel-Palestine conflict for a photo voice project.

abusive'. Sex workers are already seen as crass, 'street' women. Subtitling then becomes a political choice feeding into the stigma sex workers face. They must first push themselves to be respectable, to be respected by others. In their natural state of being, in Briski's world, these are bad women with bad language. It springs into my mind the question whether other pro-sex work films were smoothening any language that was captured so that the workers could be viewed favourably.

Partha Banerjee, who interpreted the dialogues for the film, eventually wrote to the head of the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences protesting the film's nomination for the Academy Award, making it one of the first pieces of critique against *BiB*. Banerjee offers an 'insider's view' into the filmmaking process, calling out the 'mix of reality and fictitious shots' Briski used to carefully weave a narrative of destitute children waiting to be saved, and eventually saved by her. He also notes that the final track of the film lending it a melodramatic tone was directly lifted from Satyajit Ray's *Apu Trilogy* Soundtrack with no credits (Banerjee, 2005). The person who is translating for Briski as she films also remains invisible, as she takes centre stage. Banerjee's pleas, along with complaints of various activists, sex workers and academics were ignored, *BiB* went on to win accolades, and is still considered one of the most significant documentaries on the intersectionality of sexuality and poverty in urban India.

I argue thus, that Briski enters and walks around the *gali* carrying her whiteness and a superiority with it that does not come easily to those not from the US, and do not look like her. The entitlement with which music is lifted from films made in India, and the blatant erasure of her India-based team of translators, gatekeepers and assistants leads me to the same conclusion: one can only do such things when you carry yourself with

immense racial, economic privilege that you are never questioned, but instead win an Academy award. In the film, Briski is a saviour, like the missionaries who came in the 1700s looking for 'nothing but to uplift' without questioning who she might be to uplift anyone, or what happens after that particular (filmed) moment of upliftment, as Banerjee comments in his letter.

My critique of *BiB* stems from Briski's refusal to talk about (in the film) or hold herself accountable (after the release) that she bypassed Sonagachi's existing, vibrant sex workers' rights movement to show the mothers of the children as singularly abusive. Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC), Sonagachi's sex worker collective protested the movie upon its release primarily because it ignored collective struggles, portraying sex working mothers as incompetent, uncaring influences in the children's lives while also misrepresenting some of the key actors in the film as sex workers' children (Sircar & Dutta, 2011). This was dangerous not only for the narrative violence it perpetuated, but also because it increased the number of raids, worsened stigma, and actively separated families, while inspiring more filmmakers to enter community spaces like Sonagachi to conduct more 'rescue operations'. Briski decided not to screen *BiB* in India as a result, stating she wanted to 'protect the identities of the children' though by this time their lives had already been consumables in the global market (Kapur, 2007, p. 224).

In the Indian scenario, the interest in sex workers, the presence of multiple heavily funded NGOs focused on the rescue industry, the raid-rescue-rehabilitate paradigm present in policy, and saviourism in films on sex work is connected with the country's AIDS epidemic in the late 1980s-1990s. Foreign funding for new NGOs to work with key populations, targeted

interventions and funds for documenting and reporting to international health organisations created the (then) new found interest in the 'carriers' of the disease, although not through the lens of work, economics or the lack of state care. Several academics (Shah, 2006, p. 217; Sircar & Dutta, 2011) suggest India's growing concerns with trafficking, policy changes and subsequent media response of having cricketers and Bollywood stars talk about the ills of trafficking and AIDS on TV have a direct connection to the Trafficking in Persons (TIP) report that the US Secretary of State publishes every year, which categorises countries across 3 tiers of non/compliance to the minimum standards dictated by the US government to combat trafficking in their countries, lending to a moral and sexual panic most felt in 'developing' countries. This panic is further fuelled by distorted evidence, while easily contactable sex worker rights organisations are not invited for comment (Davies, 2009).

The US also only funds organisations around the world that sign the 'Prohibition on the Promotion of and Advocacy of the Legalization or Practice of Prostitution or Sex Trafficking', a document that actively stops collectives from working with sex workers to combat trafficking or providing services to people without censure (Sircar & Dutta, 2010). Even the funding plans created by the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PERFAR) are based on the US's new goals towards the Global AIDS Act (2000) that names trafficking and prostitution as among the main reasons for the spread of HIV/AIDS. Funding then, is only reserved for films leaning into rescue programmes. Tied together with the image of saving the third world child, such narratives are funded more than films constructing reality from the eyes of those who live it. The TIP rankings, meant to indicate how well countries are combating trafficking, are instead used by Washington to make countries fall in line with the US version of anti-trafficking effort:

banning sex work. In this situation, sex worker led collectives fighting trafficking on ground that do not want to sign such declarations get named 'child traffickers' because they don't meet these standards, cutting their access to funding. Combined with the way the US considers those worthy of rescue and asylum as those who can display the need to be saved in its own context, it is not surprising how it is exported to other countries, almost a form of neo-colonialism through missionary appeal.

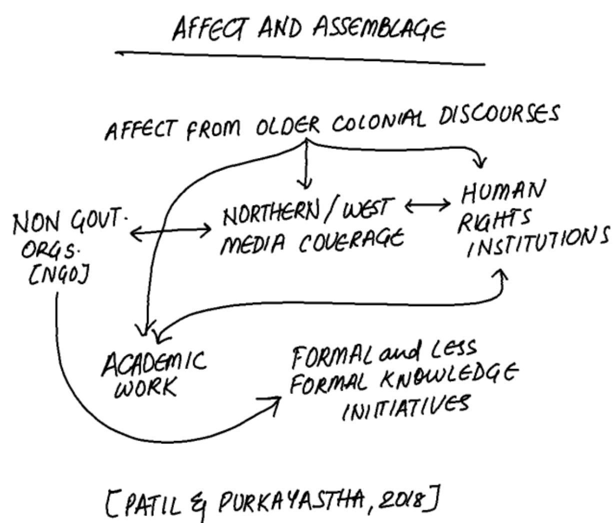

Figure 5: Affect and Assemblage by Patil and Purkayastha (2018)

Patil and Purkayastha (2018) trace a transnational economy of affective assemblage (in the context of the 2012 Delhi Rape Case) connecting the contemporary construction of India with sexual assault to a lineage of colonial racism to see how what information flows and doesn't flow shapes discourse, whose truths are circulated and/or disappear. In each historical or contemporary moment they analyse, voices from the Global North are predominantly shaping, and circulating the notion of "Indian rape culture" – an allegory for how knowledge structures look more generally in the world, arguing for a need to see emotions, discourses, academic projects, activisms, popular culture, casual conversations, and representations as situated within this broader, interconnected history of power. Similarly, looking at what we know about sex work, and how we know about sex work and everyone in its world, there are similar power structures at play.

Selling of Innocents (1996)

Ten years before *BiB*, Ruchira Gupta and William Cobben made *The Selling of Innocents* (*SoI*), a Canadian Broadcasting Corporation funded, Emmy-winning documentary, exposing the horrors of child trafficking from Nepal to India, focusing on Mumbai's red-light district, Kamathipura. The film, although directed by Cobben, curiously morphs into Gupta's story only, and eventually, the anti-trafficking NGO she went on to create – *Apne Aap* (translated from Hindi as 'by oneself'). Evidence by volunteers and ex-employees at the organisation, along with investigative reports found that the organisation has had a history of preying on the sex working community of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh where employees visit local red-light districts to elicit tragic stories from the community[23]. My analysis of the film sees *SoI* through Gupta's eyes, because, as a field producer, it is Gupta's understandings and contacts on the ground that direct what we see. Gupta is the loudest voice in the narrative as she lauds the anti-trafficking efforts of the rescue organisations conducting raids, rescuing the district's women and children from their dingy brothels[24]. *SoI* takes a different approach than *BiB* for the children's narrative agency on screen. While *BiB* at least gives the children cameras, building the narrative through editing, *SoI* uses the child as a muted method for moralised storytelling.

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[23] It is important to note that there is growing evidence of activists that make their name from anti-sex trafficking efforts (or the panic surrounding it) without caring for actual victims, like in the case of Cambodian activist Somaly Mam who not only lied about her own story of trafficking (she was not trafficked) but has gotten other young children to lie about being trafficked (Joseph, 2014).

[24] In subsequent interviews, *SoI* is marketed as a film that contributes to the 'fight to end trafficking in India', an urgent call, but one that is important to think about in terms of the work documentary filmmakers think they are doing in this 'fight' through their exposè works at the cost of the people they are filming. Gupta, for reasons unknown, calls *SoI* a film she produced, not mentioning the directorial team at all across various media sources. It makes one wonder what she possibly had to gain by creating a narrative of herself as the hero in the lives of trafficked children.

SoI's filming style looks like a covert operation that sends adrenaline rushing into the viewers' minds, fuelling that deep seated need for far away audiences to save brown children living in squalor. Gupta directs through a 'voice of God' narration – large (and shocking) numbers of children are being trafficked with their visually scattered and out of context traumatic shots to reach out to the viewer, and tell them what will happen if they don't step in and save the innocents. A type of melodramatic narration to drive action, but also to entertain and absolve (Vance, 2012). Unsurprisingly, Gupta does not mention or discuss Kamathipura's women or their own efforts against trafficking, but does show how condoms are distributed in the context of AIDS; keeping the women and their work unaccounted for. Both the adults and children on screen are smiling, talking freely to Gupta on screen but this doesn't translate to the narrative spun in the edit of the film. The film is interspersed with interviews of known anti-sex work activists and academics, Jean D'Cunha and Vinod Gupta of *Savdhan*. Gupta focuses his segment on counting the number of girls he has rescued, performing saviourism, while in the next scene Ruchira Gupta 'shows' the viewer how a trade happens as she pays a father for his daughter to be taken 'for a job to Mumbai', never mentioning sex work, only alluding to it. Gupta quickly moves on, talking about other pressing topics connected to prostitution and India: *Devadasi* women, HIV, and calling older sex workers disease ridden. *SoI* perpetuates the conflation of trafficking and sex work, hurting both victims and workers.

***Land of Missing Children* (2008)**

While *SoI* showed its audiences how existentially trafficked the lives of sex workers' children are, *BiB*'s 'Zana Aunty' offers prospects beyond the limited ones available for the children (Sircar & Dutta, 2011, p. 340). *Land of Missing*

Children, produced for BBC Channel 4 starring Sam Wiley fulfils the need to see images of saving after quenching the thirst of looking in the earlier films.

Beginning with a scene of Wiley breaking into the roof of a brothel and two young girls emerging, as he beckons to them softly, the film is an even more frustrating watch than *SoI* because Wiley walks around the streets of Nepal and India expecting people to be answerable to him on his crusade for the 'truth of trafficking'. Ruchira Gupta, who 'field produced' *The Selling of Innocents* is also the associate producer of *Land of Missing Children* (Shah, 2013). As the film follows Wiley's inquiry about sex trafficking of children across the Nepal-India border into India's various red-light districts, it seems to be made solely to confirm the biases Wiley (or maybe Gupta) has entered the scene with. For example, he has a clear idea of what a 'developed city' should look like, and Kolkata is not it.

Figure 6: Sam Wiley calls Calcutta "a swampy morass of a city" where children are sex slaves in the film. In the first 15 minutes, we see Wiley speaking to some people whose children have been trafficked across borders. The film then travels through Nepal, Sonagachi (Kolkata) and Mumbai trying to 'recreate' known trafficking routes to understand what is happening in the major cities where young children are trafficked into.

To the sound of the sitar in the background (no surprises there)[25], Wiley meets three organisations he thinks can give him answers, but we never learn who Sam Wiley is, asking the questions. The first, *Bhoruka Community Organisation*, based in Kathmandu is working to reunite parents with children that have been trafficked or are missing. Wiley adds some context here, talking about how a lot of parents find it easier to sell their daughters than raise them since they are seen as a burden in many South Asian countries. In Kathmandu, he stands in the middle of a crowded street and sighs exasperatedly, “this is the land of the missing children”. Wiley continues his journey through Kathmandu and stands on a road to stop the camera (viewer). He tells us that a woman saw him and kissed his feet to rescue her daughters. Like the saviourism in *BiB*, Sam uncle, like Zana aunty, are here to save their daughters.

As per his planned route, Wiley crosses the border to India and goes to Sonagachi, West Bengal where he encounters the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (also referred to as Durbar), a sex workers’ union. He walks on the streets of Sonagachi with a hidden camera since the union asked him not to record, which he sees as a 'challenge', insinuating that the union is 'obviously hiding that there are underage girls', giving himself permission to 'uncover the truth of the union' rather than request to film[26].

[25] Sitar-concentrated music numbers are heavily used in documentaries on India to denote that the characters are in India; the sitar has also come to be positioned along with similarly dramatic visuals of India (crowds, *galis*, traffic, yellow skies, colours and often eventually poverty stricken people).

[26] Many sex worker led collectives have strict rules on visitors photographing and videographing sex workers, especially on the street because it historically has been done so without permission, care for privacy, and in a way to shame those on the street (worker or client). On 19th May 2022, a three judge panel in the Supreme Court of India passed an order after invoking special powers under Article 142 of the constitution to uphold the rights of sex workers in the country under Article 21 of the Indian Constitution (the right to a dignified life). Speaking about the engagement of the media with sex workers, the court said that the media should take “utmost care not to reveal the identities of sex workers, during arrest, raid and rescue operations, whether as victims or accused and not to publish or telecast any photos that would result in disclosure of such identities” (Budhadev Karmaskar v. The State Of West Bengal, 2022).

At Durbar's office or on the street, we don't see a proper conversation with the workers, but rather an interrogation. Wiley ensures the viewer treats Durbar with as much suspicion as he does, when he doesn't translate what the union members are saying but instead summarises in English. Wiley then goes on to teach union members what rape is, what slavery is, refusing to believe they have self-regulatory boards in place since 1998 stopping children entering sex work, and goes on to mock the union, calling the person speaking to him the 'boss' of the union repeating a 'party line'.

In contrast, Wiley's conversations with the police and the Rescue Foundation (RF) that he meets next in Mumbai are translated word for word. Returning to the site of the raid we experienced at the beginning, Sam is shocked that many of the girls he helped rescue have run away. The answer to why saved women run away from their saviours might be a question to consider for his next documentary. Validating the planned raid on 'illegal brothels', as they are called by RF, he marks it is the end of a Channel 4 investigation. There are no more details on what the investigation was trying to find, and whether the raid was the end outcome. Numerous facts and figures from the United Nations are littered across the film with little attention and context paid to them. What do those facts and figures mean in India and/or Nepal specifically? What is the role of other social structures and is it good enough or is it just to introduce facts from the world into localised contexts? During the raid, Wiley says, "the madams stop the girls from leaving", however it is taken for granted that some people are just called madams without the viewer being told how that information was derived. Who decides who is the madam? How did he find these madams? Are women who don't fit into Wiley's victimhood mould categorised as madams? Many women fight Wiley's attempts at saving them, but there is no inquiry of why they might be fighting rescue. Does a

pimp-madam-prostitutes hierarchy help the women trafficked or the rescuer?

The politics informing all three films are the same, even though *SoI* is an activist intervention, *Land of Missing Children* a journalistic one and *BiB* a creative intervention[27]. *BiB* still has a liberal appeal as Briski confesses she is not a social worker or activist, but a photographer, although her motives are as politically motivated as in *SoI*, *Land of Missing Children* or the way the law works against sex workers in India.

> Interventions in the name of protecting the rights of children of sex workers, irrespective of whether the pursuits are governmental, activist, philanthropist or creative, work in the same way to disenfranchise the children, given that they are seldom considered agents whose voices are primary in determining the policies that can protect their rights best (Sircar & Dutta, 2011).

Missing contexts, missing children

My inclusion of *BiB* in this thesis is not to go over framewise details of the film or its critique. *BiB* has received extensive critique across disciplines (see Basu & Dutta, 2010; Brouillette, 2011; Leuzinger, 2022; Rangan, 2011; Sengupta, 2009; Shah, 2005; Smaill, 2010) for its missionary-style rescue operation, skewing the idea of Sonagachi for an international audience through a singular narrative of despair and pain in a place with a history of political mobilisation. Sengupta (2009) also compares *Born into Brothels* with a fictional film like *Slumdog Millionaire*, noting striking similarities in the reception to both films' 'gritty realism and noble aims', critiquing

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[27] Equally melodramatic and made around the same time as these films is *The Day My God Died* (2003) by Andrew Levine and narrated by Hollywood stars Tim Robbins and Winona Ryder. It features the same spaces (Bombay, Calcutta, and Nepal) as the *Land of Missing Children*, the same raids, and even the same organisations (Anuradha Koirala of *Maiti Nepal* from *SoI*). The only thing Levine's movie does worse, is pull in US-based social workers from the International Justice Mission to talk about the 'state of women in India'. Sonagachi-based organisation *Sanlaap*, who were not mentioned, but appeared in *Born into Brothels* make an appearance in this film too.

primarily the version of slums and slum dwellers being forwarded through these narratives[28].

Leuzinger (2022) compares *BiB* with other photography projects that bank on the image and work of 'empowering through photography', while Rangan (2011) focuses on 'child media advocacy and empowerment of child subjects as a juxtaposition of the 'coerced sex worker', especially in opportunities pushed as passing the mic, or in this case, the camera to the 'native'. Sex worker collectives like VAMP put out a monograph titled *Brothel Born and Bred* to *BiB*'s singular narrative of the child of the sex worker.

Academically, *BiB* has been featured in or has been responded to, critiqued, understood, and picked apart by at least 13 papers (not counting reviews). Six documentary films that I know of/have watched were made in response or inspired by *BiB* apart from a few hundred news articles, reviews, blog posts about the film. These numbers tell us something about what we look for, what we hope to see, and how we look at sex workers, sex work, and everyday practices of a community we do not want to otherwise engage with because they exist in deviance from moral society. Rangan (2011) argues there exists a political economy of *BiB*, where the viewer is a node, situating *BiB* in a genealogy of auto ethnographic film, leading to a tradition of media empowerment projects. This brings me back to the point of child rights being used as a Trojan horse for anti-sex worker documentation and legislation. Even if they should not be put in the same understanding, as the children of *Amra Pradatik* of Sonagachi will tell you in the section following, children remain an accessible route to display innocence, hope, and

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[28] The ' yellow filter' that appears on these films is a trick used in photography and videography, to portray heightened levels of tension and 'contrast' in third world countries/the global south. Both Hollywood films as well as regional cinema have been guilty of using the filter to create this sense of danger and risk. Such scenes are mostly set in crowded Indian market places and you occasionally see a number of sex workers dotting the streets of Mumbai (Chowdhury, 2020).

arguably more malleable narrations not only because they are both taken seriously and not seriously at the same time, but also living in hopelessness, fragility and unfreedom since their lives are always 'in control' of another.

Born into Brothels is not about the children or the sex workers, but about Zana, just like how none of the films in this section were made from the love for human beings and to pull them out of (sexual) slavery. None of the films are about them, because they are not shown any respect or care. They are merely narrative tools to tell the story of how they were saved, making it more about their saviours: the rescue organisations, the activists, the academics, the journalists – the 'good Samaritans of society'.

The Response: We Are Foot Soldiers (2011)

> A Sex Worker is shown changing her clothes. Don't all mothers change their clothes in their home? People think they can expose our mothers in this way because these women are sex workers.
> (Pinky, *We are Foot Soldiers*, 2011)

While Briski and Kauffman were filming *BiB* in Sonagachi in 2005, a child-led collective was brewing in the same neighbourhood. Amra Padatik (AP) meaning *We are Foot Soldiers* began collectivising in 2005 and registered as an NGO in 2007. It was created by the children of sex workers in the area to fight for the dignity of their sex worker mothers, and to address issues faced by children in the area.

Briski's movie was challenged by both Durbar, and Amra Pradatik after which the children reached out to Oishik Sircar and Debolina Dutta, two human rights lawyers and long-term friends of the movement in Kolkata to represent their cause. The academic-lawyer-activists worked with AP on a film with the same name (*We are Foot Soldiers*) and written material

(newspaper articles, academic articles) foregrounding their experiences as *journokomir shontan* (the children of sex workers).

The film, made in collaboration with the national TV broadcasting service, Doordarshan (giving it localised support), remains freely available to watch with the Public Service Broadcasting Trust (PSBT) in India. With their additions to the narrative on children of sex workers, they challenge the traditional 3 Rs of Raid, Rescue and Rehabilitation response to child trafficking with a counter 3 Rs of Resilience, Reworking and Resistance (Katz, 2004, cited in Sircar & Dutta, 2011).

Figure 7: Talking about watching Briski's Born into Brothels, a member of Amra Pradatik displays her displeasure at the portrayal of herself and the sex working mothers of Sonagachi in We are Foot Soldiers.

We are Foot Soldiers (2011) follows the journeys of the founders of AP, along with the then board members of the collective to talk about multiple entanglements the children experience, disrupting the neatness of carefully constructed narratives of their lives and relationship with their mothers (Sircar & Dutta, 2011, p. 346). Forefronting the children beyond victimhood, worthy only of the singular narrative of 'innocence', 'vulnerability', and

'helplessness', the film portrays them as individuals exercising political agency in the everyday (Sircar & Dutta, 2011, p. 334).

While discussing their learnings from making the film, Dutta and Sircar (2018) share how every step of the film was made post discussion with *Amra Pradatik* –what to talk about, what to exclude, how to direct the film, and where to screen it. Not only because it was the right thing to do in light of the attention *BiB* was getting, but also because it was important for these children to talk about their political views, agency to exist as children in their space, subvert notions about them, and talk about the work that they are doing all in the same film, offering multiple lived realities. Since it was directed the way the children would want to say it, the film while speaking about violence, having a specific social location and fight speaks about not being inhibited, having varied interests and their future plans, focusing especially on the trauma children face not only because they are children, but also because they are marginalised children, making the film one of only few in the documentary scene to be doing so.

The film's visual narrative is markedly different from *BiB*: the opening scene shows children marching for their mothers on the streets of Kolkata as part of collective action to repeal the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act (ITPA), a part of which threatens to remove children from their mothers' care once they are 18. These scenes of political engagement are followed by the children talking about what they enjoy doing: Gobindo plays the guitar, speaking about how he saved up to buy one for himself, Chaitali dreams of becoming a model, Ratan comes from a family and neighbourhood of fine artists who paint, Mithu loves dancing and Pinky wants to become a dance teacher.

The film, hereon is divided into smaller sections. The first of these sections provide a narration of layered violence(s) in the children's lives: Gobindo talks about applying for jobs while the tag of being a sex workers' son follows him around; Mithu talks about her mother going through jobs to support education and the marriage of her two children; Pinky follows, talking about sexual advances made towards her by her mother's partner and the police violence she has endured; Chaitali talks about getting married early while questioning whether that is not also a form of 'accepted trafficking' against children. These snippets provoke the viewer about the singular view of their lives that is hegemonically present. In the next section moves, the children break down known stereotypes about them and their mothers.

> "Why am I asked in interviews whether I will join sex work like my mother?"
>
> "Politicians call us bastards, come to our mothers at night and then don't recognise us as their children".

The film then moves into a room of children watching *BiB* together; the camera focusing on their faces intently watching what is essentially meant to capture their experience. The children come back on screen and speak to the camera: "I don't like the movie at all. It belittles us". Ratan makes a hard-hitting point, "Our lives have become consumable products in the market [...] that this is a bad or dirty place for children [...] and the only way out is to rescue us out of the brothels [...] this perspective is extremely disrespectful towards our mothers". His point also highlights the fact that while vulnerabilising children in *BiB*, it sidesteps the political awareness the children have about their lives that can only come with the everyday resilience they had to build from their experiences.

The children then focus their narrative on coming together as a collective in Sonagachi. Since its inception, over 1500 children from the neighbourhood have joined AP to understand the issues of children living in Sonagachi, survey their education and recreation levels, interests, and the violence they face. With DMSC's help, the group created dance schools, educational scholarships, vocational training courses and a football club that has been covered extensively in the news. The last four minutes of the film focus on the ITPA, the rules that affect children that they disagree with and the bigotry of child rights NGOs and those seeking to rescue but don't ask the children what will be useful to them. The film stresses on the ability of children to understand and fight for their rights, and that they only need to be given the resources and be empowered to do so. Bob Marley sings 'Get up! Stand up!', as the film ends on a story of hope the children have created for themselves. Pinky takes the viewer to her house, which she and the other children call 'Happy Home' in nearby Narendrapur, just outside Kolkata as they work as foot soldiers for a fight that has come to their doorstep.

Soma Girls (2009), In the Flesh (2003), Tales of the Night Fairies (2002)

This section analyses three films about Kolkata's sex workers made in a similar timeframe by people who either engaged with the movement over the years or wanted to tell 'another story' of the sex workers, and their children. Like *We are Foot Soldiers*, these films were also, in a way, responding to *Born into Brothels*, *Selling of Innocents* and *Land of Missing Children.*

Around the time *We are Foot Soldiers* released, Nandini Sikand and Alexia Prichard released *Soma Girls* (SG) about the children of sex workers in Kalighat, 10 kms from Sonagachi. *Soma Girls* is the story of the New Light

Creche in Kalighat, West Bengal that works to care for sex workers and their children in the area. Sikand and Prichard focus on the lives of the children, their hopes, aspirations, and dreams through dance, as well as the creator of the home, a social worker named Urmi Basu who has been working in the area through targeted interventions for sex workers, assisting their peers with HIV prevention programmes.

The film begins by describing Kalighat: a place for devotees flocking to the temple of Goddess Kali, immediately juxtaposing the goddess with the sex worker in the streets, evoking a sense of shock (for some audiences who are not familiar with mythology and cultural relevance) that such a seemingly devout space could be a 'notorious' trafficking zone. The sitar playing in the background breaks with Basu's voice introducing the work she has been doing in Kalighat. The dialogue moves on to the narratives of the women Basu works with and stories of how they entered sex work. Five minutes into the film, we see one of the homes, New Light Creche, as Basu tells the viewer about the tough lives the children face ahead of them. *Soma Girls* follows the children as they dance through the day, training as Kathak dancers, juxtaposed with Basu talking about saving many of these children, and their 'optionless' mothers, as well as a counsellor proclaiming that the children are 'just normal'. Some children talk about the perils of marriage and the importance of education and independence as women, subverting the images of third world poverty that had represented the Indian subcontinent, replicated repeatedly in fictional and non-fictional narratives (Sikand, 2015).

In our interview, Sikand told me she was approached by her co-director, Alexia Prichard, to make a film on Soma Home, specifically their work, because she knew about the organisation from her own travels. For Sikand,

this film felt like a response to *BiB*, because it too, focused on the children of sex workers and their experiences rather than their mothers: "*Born into brothels was really helpful because I knew I did not want to make that film*". In SG, the mothers have some screen time and are seen interacting regularly with their children. The film however, seems more about Soma Home and Urmi Basu than about the children, as Sikand originally wanted. There is not much clarity on whether the film talks about people rescued from trafficking or sex workers, and even though it was shot so close to Sonagachi, it does not mention or contextualise life in Kalighat with the vibrant political lives of the people in Sonagachi.

Much like *We are Foot Soldiers*, *Soma Girls* offers a multi-layered story, one of which it risks selling is the "inspiration" of the poor and vulnerable saved by a social worker who gets to frame the story of the women and children, although, the film still restricts its narrative to entries and exits in sex work, a repeated story. Urmi Basu's thoughts also reflect the raid-rescue-rehabilitate (3 Rs) paradigm that sex worker activists have been fighting against. In *Soma Girls*, Basu's voice remains the loudest because she is working at the grassroot level, giving a clear idea of how targeted interventions work. There are some undertones of the women viewing their own work as work through some dialogues, but these are highlighted as much as Basu's version of her work at New Light.

While the film provides an alternative perspective to *BiB*'s, it reinstates some of the assumptions and stereotypes about sex workers without meaning to vilify them. SG's narrative was formed entirely by the conversations the filmmakers had with all the stakeholders in the NGO, but what happens when power relations between the sex workers, children, Basu and the counsellor (two upper caste, upper class women) remain

unchallenged through narrative and thus, just represented? Basu and Ganguly (the counsellor) carry an air of reverence and respect in the film as the 'main madams' of the NGO, much like Zana Briski in *Born into Brothels*. Prichard and Sikand, due to their reflexivity, become passive spectators unable to challenge the narrative.

The potential of a well-meaning film like *Soma Girls* was cut short because of Sikand and Prichard's lack of engagement and knowledge with the sex work activism in Sonagachi (and Kalighat), giving way for a social worker to drive the focus of the film in a world where already so many films about vulnerability are made by those not affected by these vulnerabilities. It was also constricted by the need to respond to *BiB*, without which this film could just be a narrative among other narratives with its brilliant music choice, vibrant scenes, and human narrations of pain and happiness. Sikand told me that she just wanted to talk about the joy people experience, especially when they are reduced only to victimhood. As a dancer herself, she wanted to focus on the dancing girls in the film.

> We went to New Light to just talk to them. And Urmi Basu was like, 'Go meet the girls'. So we're climbing up the staircase, and this scene is actually in the film, of this house where all the girls live. And they're cranking Bollywood music, we walk in and they're just dancing, and it was just beautiful. Such a beautiful thing to witness just these nine, gay, happy sort of students, like kids, right? Just really enjoying themselves, and just without a care in the world, and that was really just beautiful to see. And it's such a joy – joy is the only way I can describe it. There was joy in who they were and what they were doing, and just the joy of little bodies running around and dancing. That was it. And for Alexia too. So I think that was always in my head. It was always in our head when we made the film that ultimately we wanted to show their joy'.
> (Nandini Sikand, in an extract from our interview)

A few years before Briski's *Born into Brothels*, two feminist filmmakers made films in Sonagachi: Shohini Ghosh released *Tales of the Night Fairies* in 2002 and Bishakha Dutta released *In the Flesh* in 2003. Both Datta and Ghosh talk about feminist and queer entanglements present in the movements they were a part of when they made their films, reflecting on their own feminist knowledge around sex work. Their work presents two vital examples of breaking away from grand narratives on sex work: providing some amount of discomfort to audiences otherwise used to viewing sex working women as 'unitary victims waiting to be saved', and not following a habitual dramatic, violent momentum in films about sex work and trafficking (Cheng, 2013); no heroes saving the women by breaking open ceilings, only sex workers taking matters into their own hands.

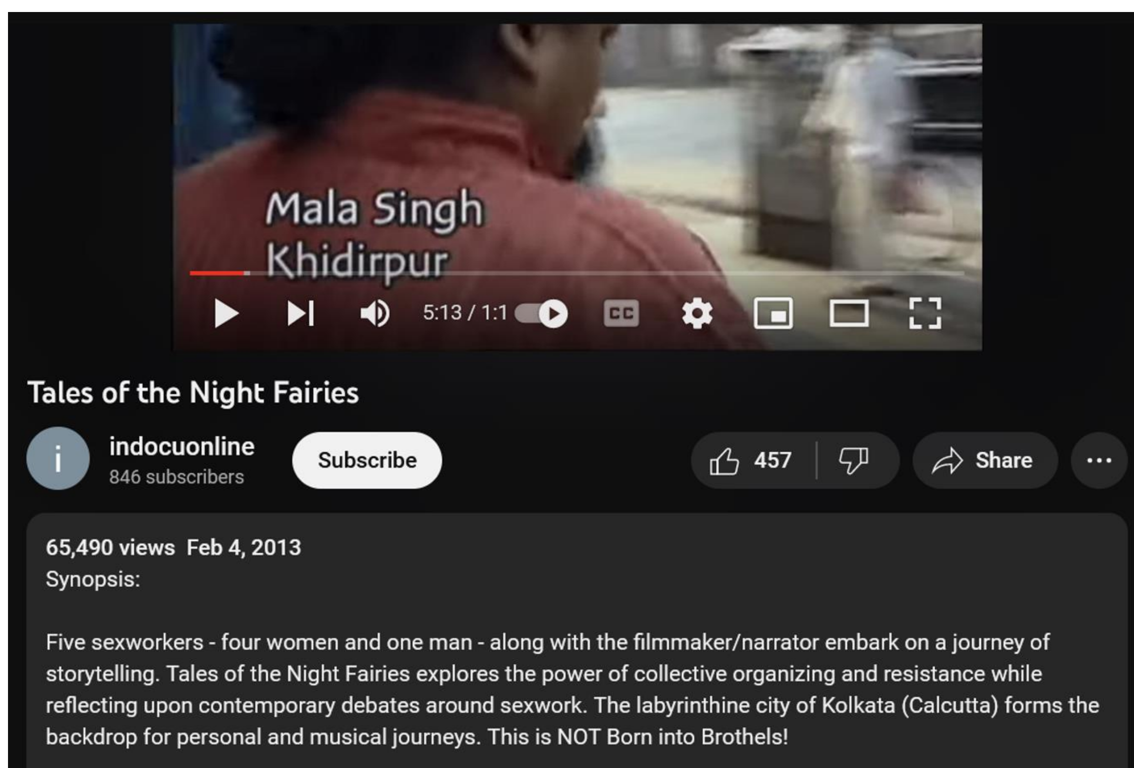

Figure 8: Tales of the Night Fairies is available to watch for free on YouTube and states in its description, 'This is NOT Born into Brothels!'.

With *Tales of the Night Fairies*, Ghosh presents 6 characters living in Sonagachi: Mala (who we also meet in *Selling of Innocents*), Sadhana, Shikha, Deepti, Uma, and Nitai. With their stories is one more character, Ghosh herself, exploring and breaking her own learnt and lived dichotomies, interspersed with sex workers' stories and lived experiences. She erases known boundaries between good and bad women, the *gali* and the city, the romantic and the real while poetically blending Bollywood scenes and songs to the narratives, complete with subtextual meanings of queerness, deviance, and selfhood. Cinematographically too, Ghosh subverts known representations of India's urban centres – like of Calcutta in *Land of Missing Children* – by showing the Calcutta of her childhood: fish markets, the Hooghly River, lit theatres, and people rushing through its colonial-modern architectural splendour.

Ghosh and Datta made their documentaries when the voice of anti-sex work abolitionists in India was only getting stronger (early 2000s), amid not enough conversation on the difference between sex work and trafficking; debates about the topic were occurring in seminar rooms where no sex worker was present (Ghosh, 2006). While Datta wanted to deconstruct the singular narrative on sex work being a moral abhorrence, Ghosh questions the nature of deviance, and who we call deviant women. After all, conversation about sexual promiscuity was not only targeted at sex workers, but any person who deviated from the norm (lesbians, tomboys, transgender people, general queers, and queens). Ghosh (2006) negotiated "pleasurably and uneasily" both the 'respectable' and 'immoral' spaces in the city, straddling both but belonging to neither.

The most important addition in the film is footage of the three-day Millennium Mela, a sex workers' festival of workshops, talks, performances

attended by sex workers, journalists, academics, and the general public. It is perhaps one of the only spaces that has ever existed in the country with such visible participation of queer and transgender people along with sex workers not only from around the country, but also the Asia Pacific region, as well as members from the 'respectable' society. A testament to the power sex worker organising, the festival served as a 'safe-er public space'/centre for people across movements (feminist, queer) to meet, discuss apart from the taking back of a space for many of the attendees amidst an active moral and sexual panic surrounding conversations on sexuality.

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Released in 2003, Bishakha Datta's *In the Flesh* was partly made in Sonagachi as well, probably filmed alongside *Born into Brothels*. Datta's film, aiming to change the perception of 'women in prostitution' by portraying them as women rather than 'solely as prostitutes', follows the lives of three sex workers: Shabana, a peer educator in rural Maharashtra; Uma (also in *Tales of the Night Fairies*), an ageing former theatre actress in Sonagachi; and Bhaskar, a young Hijra trans person who sells sex in Kolkata. Rather than using their stories to represent the entire sex working community, the film focuses on the intimate details of their lives and negotiations. Moving away from the grand theory of portraying sex work as a naturalised state of oppression, Datta understands it as a contested site of meaning (terming it post-modern framing)[29]. The film shifts from the centre to focus on the

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[29]Datta's film was not given a certificate for public exhibition on the grounds that it violates the Cinematograph (Certification) Act of 1952 that protects the public from watching films 'against decency and morality'. Knowing the state of censorship in the country, Shohini Ghosh did not submit her film *Tales of the Night Fairies* to the censor board knowing the response would be identical (Datta, 2005; Ghosh, 2006). Datta's film also faced some criticism while the film was doing its rounds at film festivals for a scene on condom wearing that was enacted by Shabana, one of the characters and her client in the film because it was not a 'document' of reality but rather a reenactment, even though it was one directed and included by the character herself.

‘fragmented, subjugated, local, and specific’ knowledge in the women’s lives. While Shabana works with SANGRAM (that appear in the next part), Uma and Bhaskar are a part of Durbar. In my interview with Datta about her motivations to make *In the Flesh*, she teases out tensions between the feminist movement, her own self-reflective work in the film, and her work with Point of View, an NGO she has been running since 1996 that challenges narratives around gender in popular culture to dismantle hierarchies between men and women on ground.

Two years after founding Point of View, Datta volunteered with SANGRAM to document their work. As she got more involved, she realised film had the power to reach a wider audience, playing a much bigger role in people’s understanding of sex work if sex workers can talk to the camera themselves rather than “perspectives of the outside world”.

We are Foot Soldiers, *Tales of the Night Fairies* and *In the Flesh*, all include substantial footage of sex workers and activists negotiating their identities in their neighbourhoods, engaging with public perception. I find it important to note what filmmakers attached to movements choose to retain in their films. As feminists, all the filmmakers are either pictured taking part in the joy of community with the workers they shot the films with by dancing, singing, and hanging out with them (Datta and Ghosh) or are invited to be a part of and record moments filled with love and joy for the community (Dutta and Sircar). Not connecting these films on a timeline as well as a social line would have you believe that in 2005, everyone in India was thinking about the children of sex workers in the way Briski was asking them to. However, through the responses we know so many narratives existed far before. They were differently marketed, serving different interests.

While all sexuality is often showcased in cinema spectacularly, sexuality in conversation with violence is shown in a particular way. Through the films in this part, I demonstrate how brothels are treated as spectacles of suffering, arresting the innocence of its children and women. We also draw a connection between looking with control – especially how narratives are carefully edited – and the censorship of what must not be seen. Briski's curiosities with *Born into Brothels* and her style of the emotion arousing spectacle seep into the next part, with similar issues arising in Sangli, Maharashtra.

Part II: Sex Workers, Courtesans, and Mistresses Tell Their (Conflated) Stories

The histories of sex workers and courtesans (*Devadasi* or *Tawaif* communities) have long been tangled. Not all films clarify that not all courtesans engage in sex work, or that most courtesans were artistic presences in courts and palaces with sexually free (read as 'promiscuous' in Victorian England) lives, tying them to sex workers when it comes to reform[30].

This entanglement carries through to filmed narratives as well: Mystelle Brabee's 2004 documentary *Highway Courtesans* talks about child prostitution in Bachara tribal communities in Madhya Pradesh through the story of one child, Bacharan Guddi Chauhan, documenting six years of her life and her struggle to become a schoolteacher. Guddi is not and has never been a 'courtesan', but 'courtesan' in modern parlance has come to mean

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[30] As we speak about the faulty equation of trafficking being the same as sex work, there also needs to be an effort to untangle the false equations between artistic histories of India and sex working women, while taking care not to exceptionalism them.

‘mistress’, a ‘kept’ woman or a sex worker, when there was a clear difference before.

A clear thread of films in India’s sexography have tried to capture the messy connections between sex work, urban brothels, *devadasi* and *tawaif* rituals, HIV, poverty, caste, and class structures. This section, about the formation of this narrative, focuses on two films made in the same area (Maharashtra-Karnataka border), Beeban Kidron’s *Sex, Death and the Gods* and Sarah Harris’s *Prostitutes of God.* We then move onto communities responding to *Prostitutes of God* and the movement within the movement to use film as a way of storytelling, especially through Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP)’s participatory film, *Save us from Saviours*.

Sex, Death and the Gods (2011), Prostitutes of God (2010)

> What are you going to do madam? Shoot a film and get her a nice job? Maybe you can do it. Husband, prostitute, prostitute, husband… what difference?

Beeban Kidron’s *Sex, Death and the Gods* turned up on my list after I wrote the first draft of this chapter, because of a random Google search. Initially, I was hesitant to watch the film because of its clickbait-y title, which in retrospect is possibly used to attract a certain kind of audience interested in the intersection of sex, death, and Gods. I include the film in this analysis because a lot of the characters Kidron has spoken to intersect with other films. Part of the BBC’s Storyville series focusing on the best international documentaries, Kidron’s film focuses on trying to understand who the *devadasi* of India are, why they are embroiled in child sexual abuse, trafficking concerns, and where the *devadasi*’s voice is in all of this.

Using a lot of old black and white cinematic footage from different movies showing courtesan characterisations in all their ‘grandeur’, Kidron

intersperses it with the narratives she has recorded with pauses, and silent moments capturing ethnographic detail. Focusing on the *devadasi* community in the state of Karnataka in South India, the 45-minute film uses a variety of sources to piece together a story, never once belittling a voice. Kidron interviews numerous *devadasi* women: some who never wanted to be *devadasi*, some who enjoy the power they have as *devadasi* within modern sex work, parents of women dedicated to *Yellamma*[31], social workers, ex-*devadasis*, an academic having done years of work on *devadasi* and modern sexuality, and a rescue foundation that works through raids to rescue women. The viewer leaves with multiple narratives to the story, although Kidron still indulges in slow motion raid images of shackled women and dirty streets.

Shobha, an ex-*devadasi* working with NGO MASS in Belgaum, appears in the film, freeing women from the *devadasi* system by cutting off the hair of old women who act as 'mediums' between the goddess and parents who dedicate their children at the *Yellamma* festival in Saundatti. For Shobha, cutting away such 'blind' religious practices will stop young girls being 'bought and sold' in the name of religion. Next, in Karad, Meena Seshu, a sex workers' activist, shows Kidron around Gokul Nagar brothels in Karad, where Kamalabai and Anita enjoy their *devadasi* status and financial independence.

Kidron explores the entanglements of caste and sexuality with the *devadasi*, with special attention on Dalit womens' work, addressing caste hierarchy and climbing up the social ladder. Professor Davesh Soneji talks about the

[31] Yellamma (also known as Renuka) is a Dravidian goddess revered by Devadasis and Jogathis in South and West Indian states of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana

devadasi as one attached to her sexuality, a woman marvelled for her artistic and sexual prowess. However, Victorian understanding of sexuality and the valourised wife of colonial understandings had no place for the concubine, the sexually free women who eventually became failed citizens of the state, lumped together under legislations that never actually helped them. Instead, the *devadasi* were outlawed and the women relying on the system entered urban brothels, while young girls continued getting forced/trafficked. Meanwhile, the artistry the *devadasi* mastered was cherry picked and called *Bharatnatyam* (a classical dance form today). The film also argues that many adult women have agency to either stay within the *devadasi* system or leave it.

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Compared to Kidron's film, VBS.tv's *Prostitutes of God* by Sarah Harris looks like a bad copy. VBS.tv, an online media company quickly growing at the time, funded a team to go into Karnataka, in almost the same areas as Kidron to film Vice's *Prostitutes of God* in 2010, part of their 'Vice Guide to Travel' TV episode. Even though Kidron's film released a year later, research and shooting of both films would have overlapped, and thus my comment on one looking severely ill-researched and violent towards its participants than the other. I do think it strange finding a supposed tale of poverty and exploitation in a travel guide, but I leave this to the reader's imagination to wonder why.

With 9,943,526 views on YouTube as of September 2021, at 11 years old, *PoG*'s reputation as a renowned film precedes it; I had heard about how ground-breaking the film was long before I started working with the sex workers' movement, learning/unlearning what I knew. Beginning the film by calling it a 'Holy Whore Story' (interestingly, the 'holiness' featured in the film angered those in the film the most), Sarah Harris, like most Western world journalists, seems entitled to 'uncover' the dark secrets of the orient. Sent with a team by VBS to document religion-based prostitution in India, Harris also posted a blog, excitedly describing her experience on conducting her 'first brothel raid' with the Odanadi organisation in Mysore, Karnataka. This is a disturbing turn of events where urban slums and in Sarah's case, south Indian brothels become tourist attractions, added to travel guides (the biggest example being Dharavi, in Mumbai). Interestingly, it is very difficult to find a footprint of Sarah Harris on the internet today, which is also why I could not reach out to her for a conversation.

Figure 9: A scene from *Prostitutes of God* (2010), directed by Sarah Harris for VICE.

PoG uses the same framework of melodramatic filmmaking as *Born into Brothels*: hyper observant, decontextualised, tangential and/or irrelevant

examples aimed to shock the audience, and mobilise horror and sympathy (Vance, 2012, p. 203). Sangli's VAMP collective had just finished responding to *Born into Brothels* with their own publication (mentioned earlier, as *Brothel Born and Bred*), when *PoG* reached their door. The film and its critique are interspersed with my conversation with Meena Seshu, a sex worker's rights activist from VAMP:

> Everyone was upset saying "they're talking about our Gods". I said, let your Gods be. So that is the other part of it. They are used to people talking badly about sex work. And also, white people never understand – there is also an understanding of the way white people or non-community or non-locals, there are so many layers to this 'non' people. So when it is a white woman, the 'non' layer is beyond comprehension. So they're more forgiving of it, but they could not forgive her for commenting on their Gods. Somehow that really upset them the most, which for me, as an observer and friends of this community was fascinating. Like the comment about bikinis. They asked me what a bikini is, and then I showed them, and they were so angry.

While Sarah travels to multiple places along the border of Maharashtra and Karnataka, meeting different stakeholders of the story, she speaks in a tone only seeming to create a hierarchy between her, someone who knows about what their reality is and them, those trapped in this reality. Sarah expected a 'seedy brothel' in Sangli but instead found a tight-knit community of empowered sex workers collectivising and working towards equal representation and advocacy with local organisations. She makes fun of her translator early on, for making mistakes in his translations for her, setting the tone for the rest of the film – heavily dramatised and caricature-ish, apart from the real voices of the sex workers, the collectives and their families talking about their lives and stories. Even though the characters in her story have clear voices, speaking about the complexity of choice, coercion, caste, class, and religion, Sarah's storytelling does not reflect this.

She guides the story through her limited understanding of their lives, often commenting on it disrespectfully (‘common street hookers’, ‘blue Gods in Bikinis’, ‘shitting on the sides of roads’), constantly infantilising the people she meets, much like how postcolonial and decolonial scholars describe the concept of the ‘other’ being built – docile, worthy of saving, infantilised (Said, 1978).

The disneyfication (Zukin, 1998), dramatisation, and dumbing down of already precarious situations and communities in Sangli aligns with what De Villiers (2017) says: not only does sex sell, but ‘selling sex sells’. The theory/critique of not having ‘serious’ visual information about sex work(ers) is interesting for another reason: sex workers, and in extension, people who work in allied performance industries are often treated as ‘uncritical’ producers of entertainment, infantilised and stereotyped as unintelligent people who ‘resort to selling sex’ because they ‘do not have the capacity to do any other job’. Meena says,

> She told them one thing, did the other. She knew where they were coming from, but she still exploited their knowledge and misinterpreted it. Every filmmaker is going to make things from their perspective. There's no doubt about it. But this was a specific conversation that was had. When she came here, she said, “I have close links to the sex worker community, I've done sex work myself'. I didn't check, and I was travelling. So she was allowed to go into the community, and she really botched it up. She had such a negative attitude about everything these people represented, their way of life. It showed in the film so clearly, so they were really upset.

In another scene, Sarah talks to two children of the Madiga caste who she says are in the ‘lowliest of professions’, while failing to talk about the complex nature of caste structures in India. She mentions untouchability, without caring to explain how caste, gender, and sex work are connected (if

this was the point she was trying to make). She connects the plight of the children, who are victims of child sexual abuse, to gender and ‘man’s need for sex’, but not the deeply entrenched and messy lines of caste, poverty, ‘caste jobs’, and Brahminical patriarchy, which was a good point, had she delved into it. These are actual issues people working within the movement are trying to contest and solve. Instead, she takes children to a shop to buy them saris (where they would otherwise not be welcome), putting them in harm's way by leaving them exposed in a society that stigmatises and discriminates against them.

Sarah was trusted by the people in her film – she is seen having fun in her scenes with trans women Pandu and Sudha (introduced as Pandu’s best friend). They show her the insides of their homes, and the famous ‘Sangli Condom Trick’ (to get clients to wear condoms). But soon after comes a scene where she is laughing at someone for getting the radio late in their house. What is laughable about poverty? She displays the house of a woman named Champa, who has made a house in her village as a symbol of her success as a sex worker, calling it ‘garish’. While objectivity often ceases to exist in such situations, it still needs to be acknowledged that this is a subjective view. She calls truck drivers horny and bored spreaders of HIV, ignoring the years of work sex working VAMP peer educators have done in the area to prevent the spread of HIV by talking to truck drivers (SANGRAM/VAMP, 2011) making matters worse by outing the HIV status of multiple people in the video.

The film ends with visiting a festival where, according to Sarah, ‘young girls are sold like cattle’, even getting a person to stage a religious ‘dedication’ ceremony. She comments about women in sex work, making them out to be pimps/recruiters of the ‘next generation’, again invisibilising the work they

have been doing to avoid this categorisation and the violence that comes with being called traffickers. In 2010, when Sarah Harris came to talk to SANGRAM and VAMP, they had already been working for 20 years and their work was well known – this was edited out.

Harris involves the voice of a social worker from Every Child Matters (an NGO), but ends up making the same mistake as most abolitionist organisations: conflating trafficking and sex work, conflating child sexual abuse and consenting adults in sex work, bringing further harm to sex worker communities as well as trafficking victims even though her film was trying to 'save' them by telling their story for them.

Sudha, who works with SANGRAM as part of Muskan, the trans sex workers' collective remembers being lied to:

> What they told us was very different while shooting, and what they made eventually was very different. The photographer and Sarah both lied to us. Sarah Harris came, she made this film, but she said a lot of sweet words and talked to us. She lied about everything that Kamalabai, Anita and Bhimavva said. She didn't ask for *devadasis*, but made it only about them. Thankfully I was new, so they didn't ask me to be in the film (for more than two scenes).

Figure 10: Sarah plays with Pandu and Sudhir, using two inflated condoms as they show her the 'Sangli Condom trick'.

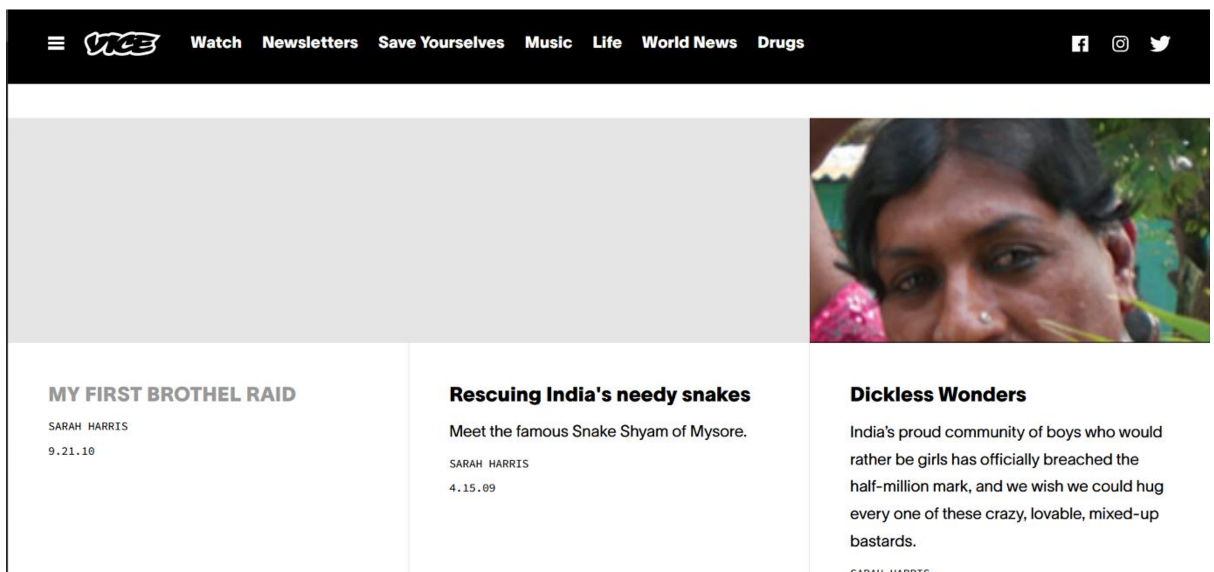

Figure 11: Harris certainly has a style of talking about the 'mysteries of India'; these are the only stories on Vice credited to Harris, all written in a dismissive, disrespectful tone, making fun of what she doesn't understand (like in PoG).

More disturbing than these portrayals is that these parts made it past an editing process, and her peers, supervisors, editors, and team members let her. This film was never about sex workers, it was about ‘prostitutes’ and ‘ancient Gods’ in what Cornwall (2016) and Mohanty (1988) call ‘under

western eyes'. If these kinds of movies were made about the violence of Western majority religions and clerics, we would be questioning all religions and their hand in sexualised morality without ridiculing people who negotiate their existence within systems.

Where *Sex, Death and the Gods* reports, *Prostitutes of God* tip toes on the brink of sensationalism. In a similar scene exploring the Yellamma Festival in Saundatti, Kidron treats those attending the festival and the women who were/will become *devadasi* with respect, asking them questions without commenting on their realities or what is better for them. Harris, meanwhile, gets some women at the festival to stage a ceremony for her, lying to them as she keeps the camera close to their faces, focusing on the youngest faces in the crowd, pushing her audience to think that if they don't step in, religious mad-people in tantra's homeland will traffic girls like their daughters – heartening, but a decontextualised and broken manipulation, making it more vital to observe how narratives differ in the same space. .

VAMP Responds to Prostitutes of God

A couple of months after PoG was released, VAMP filmed and uploaded a response on YouTube, only addressing the parts about VAMP, their work in Sangli and the people that were part of PoG/approached by Sarah – those who felt the most betrayed. At the time, says Meena, there was a video unit stationed in Sangli for a few projects that were running, so shooting and putting this video together was much easier than it would have been:

> This is not an organisation or a collective that is naive. They know about representation. They had a whole theatre show on it. In the collective, representation has been discussed to death, frankly. And then on top of that, you have this situation where we've been made fools of. I think we did not put

> into place the things that we normally do, we have an ethics committee and they go through everything. But in this case the person seemed okay. She came and said that she is a sex worker. We have always had these white women come who were in sex work earlier. So, we've had a few of them. We just took it at face value and did not question that. That was the entry point.

The four-minute VAMP response opens with Anitha, stating that she is not a brothel owner. All the characters involved then ask primary questions – what is Sarah's research background, why did she choose to laugh at the workers she was filming? Why were two young girls taken shopping? Why were the HIV statuses of people revealed without permission, or compassion? The film also mentions informed consent – the workers were promised they would be shown clips and pictures that were going in the film before being used; Sarah never took this informed consent nor did they see her again.

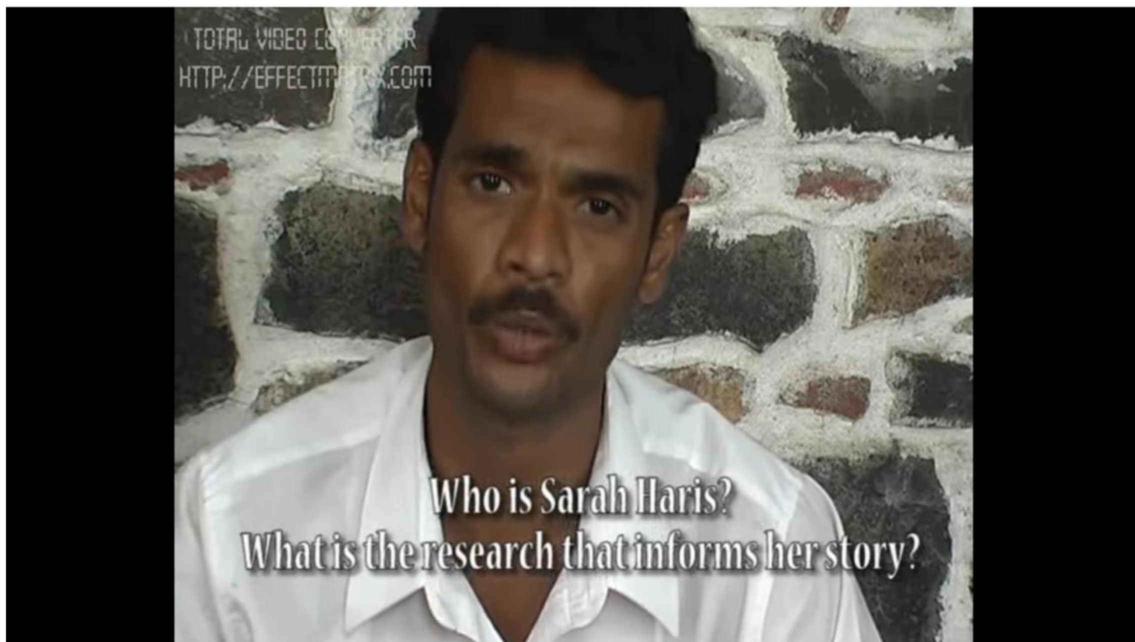

Figure 12: A scene from VAMP responds to Prostitutes of God.

Through my conversations within NNSW I realised the existence of 'the outsider' in sex worker communities is a known one. Sex workers and their communities know of the gaze on them. They know people want to make

films on them, that some people agree with their profession, while others call them 'pimps and traffickers'. But they also know they are being represented and that other people speak for them, often.

The existence of a 'community made' movie like this raises important questions about what representation means, and whether non community members can represent a community because every representation is a performance for those outside the community. Here too, the 'truth' of the community comes as *the alternative* to the mainstream. Nonetheless, it is important to see the same faces as in *PoG* contesting their misrepresentations.

Figure 13: In a scene from VAMP's response to Prostitutes of God, Meena Seshu (SANGRAM) asks the women whether they signed consent forms for the film. SANGRAM and its collectives now have a stricter code of conduct for filmmakers and researchers.

Ignoring or censoring carelessly made films does not solve the workers' larger problems, but it does give rise to a consciousness that these narratives can be challenged (often within the same medium of filmmaking). *PoG* became a metaphor for what films end up doing to communities on ground, but today, when one Googles *Prostitutes of God*, VAMP's response

turns up next to it as well, with a similar view count – a win for the collective because there is no way to ignore the narrative of those subjected to the documentary.

> I think the difference here is trying to break a glass ceiling, which is learning the tools of exercising your voice. For *Prostitutes of God*, the answer that we gave, I really thought, was like the subaltern finally has a voice. Not only has a voice, but also has the ability to, in your own media, with that same kind of reach. Because now, the minute you search *Prostitutes of God*, the VAMP Protest comes up as well. VAMP's response broke this constant voice of 'we don't have the tools or ability.

Unlike *BiB*, conversations around *PoG* kept the community response in mind. For example, two articles by MarBelle (2010) for Director's Notes, a well-known independent cinema blog regularly featuring indie filmmakers, on why Sarah Harris made the film, and how it was received, featured the response as well, although no conversations were had directly with the community. Responses to *BiB* have unfortunately not reached this level of influence, which says something about how awards influence films post production, making them untouchable in the public domain, even if heavily critiqued.

> Women in prostitution are asked to describe their condition, never asked to describe how their conditions can be changed. This privileged position is reserved for a chorus of outsiders: government officials, policemen, 'normal' citizens, and activists (Datta, 2005, p. 264).

Save Us from Saviours (2010)

For the 17th time in six months, I type in 'Save Us From Saviours', mouthing it as I go. My browser history opens it immediately, having repeatedly used it in class, shown it to friends, and forwarded to colleagues. The introducing shots are bold but the music hits my senses before the imagery, just like the

first time. The familiar twang of the *morsing* carries Shabana's voice to me and my feet immediately start tapping when the percussion kicks in. The violin, sharp and upbeat, creates the melody in the background, major chords that denote a happy story is about to be revealed. Violins are often used in many sex work based documentaries, mostly to denote impending doom or an unspeakable (read, taboo) sadness around the story or characters. No wonder then that these inviting notes superimposed with the voices of the women along with the noise of the street they are in felt like a welcome change.

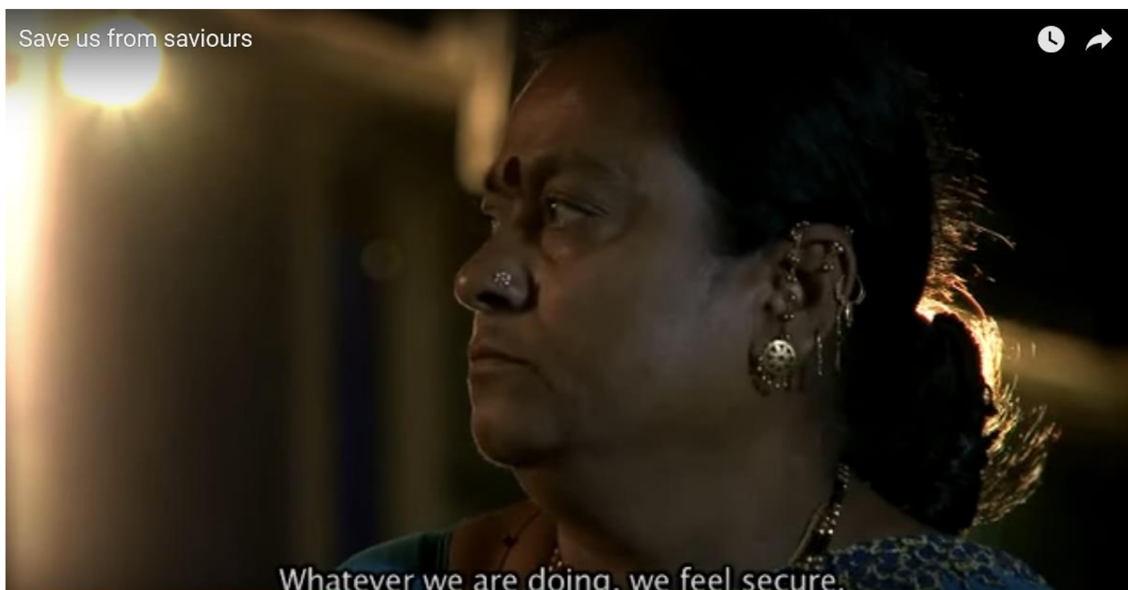

Figure 14: Kamalabai in a still from Save Us From Saviours (2014).

I look at the time counter: 11 minutes, a short movie. Shabana demands my attention to what she is saying: 'Sex Workers haven't fallen from the sky, or grown from the ground. They have come from society and should be respected'.

The main film of this section, *Save us from Saviours*, made after repeated trauma with filmmakers is an aptly titled short made by Kat Mansoor, a

filmmaker from Brighton-based independent film group, Animal Monday[32]. This section is interspersed with my conversations with Kat about the making of *SUFS*, which she (and the community in Sangli) describe as a participatory effort between the community and filmmaker, that the community is happy with.

The background beats are now accompanied by hand-held cymbals and a melody led by the violin entering and exiting the scene, keeping the mood steady, as though saying, “there is violence all around us, there is stigma, but we have taken control of what is happening around us”. The film is made for two kinds of audiences: one, that doesn't understand the lived reality of sex workers, for whom characters who’ve lived it spell out the problems, demands, and solutions, and the other being people like me, who have access to all kinds of work about sex workers, but to whom this film still feels like a breath of fresh air. *Save Us From Saviours* is an un-romantic, realistic, and honest film. But it is also happy, dancing on the ley lines of agency and control that the Sangli women experience but that which is edited out of their ‘reality’ in visual representations. In the film, they portray their version of the story for it to exist, for their work, made like an advertisement with its close-up shots, smiles to the camera, and a stop-motion technique for the audience to truly breathe the street in. It archives VAMP’s journey through its members, bluntly, when Kamalabai says, “we are better than housewives, at least we are free” and loving, when she shows the collective fighting together for a member inside a police station.

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[32] Kat Mansoor’s journey with the sex workers’ movement began in Brazil, when Professor Andrea Cornwall at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London reached out to Kat to make a series of films based on representation for an NGO called *Davida*. One of the films, *Jane Daspu* was about a sex worker called Jane, who was also a model for a clothing brand started by Davida, called *Daspu* (*das* = 'of", *pu* - from *puta* = 'whores'). I reached out to Kat after I spoke to Meena Seshu from SANGRAM, India where Kat had made a film for the organisation. I did not know of the film beforehand.

> I'd never thought that sex workers could be empowered. Like genuinely, if they hadn't allowed me to understand their group, I would never have understood that. So I genuinely think that film has the potential to broaden the minds and the hearts of masses of people. But if it's only ever made in siloed factions of people, i.e. gay people can only make films about gay people, or black people can only make films about black people, then the experience of being human gets lost a little. That's my honest opinion. It's not necessarily popular at the moment, but you know, I genuinely think the more that we can interact as groups of people to understand each other, the better. Kamalabai was like my grandma, except she was a brothel keeper. You know, genuinely, just like my grandma, you want to feed people, look after people, you're like the matriarch. But you also happen to run a brothel? It's kind of amazing. Who would have thought that I'd have warmed so much to a woman, when *Born into Brothels* was in my head before that point. That's not to say, by the way, that I think that people should walk into places and just shoot it without connection, I don't make films like that. So I think there's a duty of understanding and with that comes great responsibility, you have to genuinely be part of the process. How we can teach each other, and let someone else teach us. So I think producers and teams of people can be brought from the community, absolutely, we should be collaborating.

Kat's reflections remind me that Sarah Harris entered the sex workers' space 'as a sex worker', bringing up the argument community members (of any marginalised location) struggle with: can only a community member tell its story, and what happens when the community is weaponised to access vulnerable populations? Is a 'non community' filmmaker like Kat Mansoor a better filmmaker than a (assumed) 'community' one like Sarah Harris? What about constant learning and working with a community versus the neoliberal aspects of learning the language of social justice?

> I pitched an idea about brothels, which was probably much more in line with the other brothel film, *Born into Brothels*. I had my head turned around by Professor Andrea Cornwall, because she was like, 'Listen, I like your films, but

> the way you're looking at everything is wrong. Can I talk to you about it?' So she kind of gave me a pep talk about what she was hoping for, and what I had to open my mind to. So I made that series of films, and only one of them was made with sex workers, but it was great. It was really genuinely an eye-opening process. When I got back to London, Andrea introduced me to SANGRAM and Meena and told me that they're this group doing brilliant work in need of some communication tools.

Both these quotes from the interview illustrate how a film like *Born into Brothels* enters every single conversation about sex work and film – that is the power of *BiB*'s meta narrative[33].

Save us From Saviours centres the worker, and the collective, to a beat like their lives – fast. The lives of sex workers and their allies exist alongside turmoil; a life they have to snatch back to control. Through individual stories, the film talks about larger structural issues like patriarchy, independence, suppression, police violence, the freedom of choice and livelihood, and exploitation (a word that has become synonymous with sex work because of its conflation with trafficking) while using time lapses and stop motion edits to show time passing.

Stories of the society's minoritised and marginalised are synonymous with pain and othering, and *Save us From Saviours* does not romanticise them. The stories are there, alongside stories of courage and collectivisation through shared experiences, fighting for common goals. Kat's camera looks its protagonists in their eyes. "Our future is often ruined," says Raju, a child

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[33] Kat's work with Davida and her storytelling style for Jane, the protagonist of the 3-minute film forms an important prequel to the work she did for SANGRAM. In *Jane Daspu*, Jane controls the story by narrating it – the gaze of her makeup artist, her photographer and her filmmaker are only to support her story, the camera looks at her on her level. Kat took a similar approach with the film for SANGRAM, although, in this case the audience and her performers were completely different – culturally, through the stigma they face and the people they were trying to reach with this film.

of a sex worker. “We are people, and we are citizens of this country,” says Shabana (also present in *In the Flesh*). The rest of the film takes us through work within VAMP: sensitising the area’s police while also sticking together during raids, Raju coordinating with people in crisis, Kamalabai working with AIDS intervention, and Shabana with condom distribution. The film also shows other VAMP members problem solving at the office, and a fight at the police station against violence meted out to street workers by the police.

> I spent time with them in their community meetings (the SANGRAM office in Sangli). And I filmed a bit, and we devised the plan together. And then Meena, even though she deferred to being in charge of those meetings, or, you know, I would then sort of talk it through with me in the evenings, and then we made a plan for what we would shoot. And so that was kind of how I got to know them. I mean, I pretty much cast when I was there, but they told me, who would be the best people as well as, you know, the son of a sex worker would be a really fantastic perspective… Everybody else too were clearly meant to be for the film. So that process was kind of easy, in lots of ways.

The process of ‘making’ the film took a couple of trips to Sangli, and during one of these trips, Mansoor made another film, *The Malak* under her own production label, Halcyon Pictures, about Kamalabai and her partner. *The Malak*, which remains an unreleased film, offers a deeper understanding of the sex worker-client-husband-lover relationship, one that is complex but is forced into popular understandings of victimhood and naturalised states of man=perpetrator, woman=victim. No such visual account exists like *The Malak* – hinting at the matriarchal structure of the *devadasi* system as it was ‘intended’ and how it plays out today in the voice of a *devadasi* and her

partner[34]. Kamalabai fights the dichotomy of being 'good or bad' – pushed on sex workers like her – through shifting control and sense of ownership she has over her 'husband'.

The Malak is more traditional in its setting, and Kat's presence in it, built with trust, shines through the conversation happening in front of her – something that cannot be recorded without a certain level of love and support between the filmmaker and the performer. Kat notes that it takes time to be participatory, from the number of times she travelled back and forth from Sangli, to the collaborative nature of her edit.

> I shared edits along the way. We wrote up a list of scenes, they knew what they were going to get, there wasn't any kind of… we knew we had a scene with the police. We knew that we had a scene with Kamalabai and her husband talking about arrangements and money and all of that, which was fantastic. And then editing is not an easy process. You kind of never know exactly how the story is going to land in terms of the layout. So we definitely went back and forth a couple of times. And obviously language wise, I kind of needed that and I speak a little bit of Hindi but Kannada was tough. And then they loved it – I mean that it was just such a kind of loved thing. And I went back and actually shot the extra bits with Kamalabai and her husband. It was collaborative in the edit. But editing is sort of like, you have to sit with material with one other person in a room. And then you show people and they give you feedback. And then you go back, mix it around a bit more. Go back. So it was not done on-site. I'm not skilled enough to edit on site, unfortunately.

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[34] I take into consideration that intention can often be overwritten by action, and that the system today, as critiqued by many Anti Caste/Dalit communities is exploitative to marginalised women. However, as Kamalabai and the *devadasis* of Sangli and its neighbouring towns in Maharashtra and Karnataka have established through self-made collectives like VAMP, *devadasis* have a right to negotiate their social and economic histories and presents in a way that most helps them, and anyone looking to work with *devadasis* must first listen to *devadasis*.

Figure 15: A scene from Mansoor's The Malak starring Kamalabai and her partner.

I ask Meena whether the sex workers in Sangli like any of the many films made on their lives. She said, "They like parts of each of them." The sex workers at SANGRAM and VAMP are deeply aware of how they are portrayed on film – especially Bollywood – but with Digital Filmmaking workshops by Point of View, an NGO in Mumbai and other collaborations, more community members are using these tools to talk about themselves. It is argued that the same tools that have historically been created and recreated to further class and caste structures[35] cannot be used to break the performative aspects of being in front of the camera (irrespective of who wields the camera). But as Meena says, in the world where these films matter, an alternative, 'truer' version should exist alongside.

The next two films in this part are focus on films and narratives that do not fit 'tidily' into categories of films *about* sex workers, but communities

[35] As Audre Lorde says, 'the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house', exemplified most recently in India's Tik Tok ban that has taken away the ownership of representation from the hands of those who are usually only represented through the lens of the other (Basu, 2020; Khan, 2020).

adjacent to them – bar dancers and *tawaifs*. These films are important to acknowledge within this patch because they are consumed as films about 'prostitution'.

The Other Song (2009)

Dewan's poetic-historical documentary *The Other Song* (2009), on *Tawaifs* of Lucknow and Benares, explores their political aspirations and negotiations in the 1920s during the rapidly rising, fervent Quit India movement. During this time, there was a strategic shift for the community to go from *Tawaif* (courtesan, which was increasingly becoming synonymous to a sex working artist in public imagination) to *Gayika* (singer), in the face of sustained attacks not only from the colonial front, but also from new nationalists' connotations of morality and deviance. The community had to withdraw from the tradition and patronage that protected their art, education, and lifestyle, towards redefining themselves as a trade association to survive within the colonial political economy.

The movie begins by trying to find an alternative, explicit version of a *thumri* sung by Rasoolan Bai, a *Tawaif* from Benares, to set the stage for how *Tawaifs* and their talent was neatly cut out of the history of what is now known as Hindustani music. *Tawaifs* regularly adapted their music, their performance styles, and language to resist erasure, and sexually explicit versions of their songs remain lost today. Beeban Kidron evidenced how Bharatnatyam, as a dance form, was also cherry picked from *devadasi* culture solely for Brahmin/upper caste communities to access, while the women, communities, and their history categorised as immoral.

While Dewan never talks about sex work directly, she works with groups that tip toe on the lines of (in)decency and (im)morality. In my first

interview with Saba she asked me, “I’m confused, how do my films fit in your study?” I did not think much of it, because to me, all her films were about sex work. “None of the communities I work with call themselves sex workers. They’re conflated with sex workers, all the time, but they want nothing more than to be as far as possible from the term” [36].

Dewan’s film, and book, *Tawaifnama*, are great examples of how the sexually deviant woman in history ‘correct’ themselves, with a form of self-gentrification to be seen as respectable women, and thus, ‘different’ from the ‘common street worker’, to not be considered under the same laws that see both street workers and them as criminals.

India Cabaret (1985)

Untouched by the funding wave and interest that I spoke about earlier, Mira Nair’s *India Cabaret* (1985) was one of the first films to talk (indirectly) about sex work and bar dance in the country when cabarets were common in urban centres like Bombay before the dance bar ban of 2005. Set mostly in the bar (the dance floor and the dressing room), the house of a regular customer at the bar, and the house of a few of the dancers, *India Cabaret* captures the deeply textured reality of bar dance in Bombay. A rich soundscape of both freshly released 80s Bollywood hits and English pop songs follows the women in and out of the dressing room as they take to the stage, and strip. The women working at the bar speak a variety of languages, have a variety of accents and some even speak English to the camera, disrupting the idea that sexual commerce runs on an economy of

[36] *Tawaifs* have historically (and inaccurately) been conflated with sex workers, like *devadasis* have. Most *tawaifs* think that a sex worker should be called a sex worker if that is her primary source of income. In the case of courtesans, sex work is a part of their work, and very little. There are class connotations attached to sex work, and even within *Tawaif* communities, full contact sex work is seen as something done by women of lower status. Those who practice sex work are either young, vulnerable women or women who are too old to be courtesans (Dewan, 2019).

poor, innocent, uneducated 'victims' while the rich, English speaking, masculine 'villains' destroy feminine innocence.

Figure 16: Two snapshots from a scene in India Cabaret (1985) by Mira Nair.

Nair talks to the dancers about work, including shame, respect, money, and independence to which they fiercely defend 'the line' (of work) to say they do what they do to get food on the table, pointing out the hypocrisies of some 'viewers' (men, in this case), and non bar dancing women, who (always) have much to say about who good and bad women are in society. Scenes of a housewife discussing her husband's relationship with the cabaret, while talking about the lack of freedom she has as a woman,

expected to stay good, and at home juxtapose both: the virtuous wife, and desirable cabaret woman to show states of freedom and unfreedom.

India Cabaret is perhaps one of the only films that portrays the network of workers (restaurant workers, bar owners, rickshaw drivers) who are involved in the everyday life of the women, offering support from the time they wake up, cooking and caring for each other to night time, when they dress up and get on stage to work. Interspersed with the dance and song of the cabaret are the bar dancers speaking about the violence they face by the neighbours in the housing complex where they live, and from family in their villages back home, who shame them while eating through their earnings. None of the people in the film are treated as criminals for engaging with the cabaret, making the movie feel like a gush of fresh air as compared to the other films I watched[37]. Not many films today would have the kind of sexual energy, direct solicitation, or frank conversation – on screen – by both men and women about sexual desire and the function of the cabaret in Indian society. It is markedly different from how sexual entertainment work is framed today – as some secret world where only secret cameras can enter, where only shameful, deplorable characters engage in sexual commerce while waiting for a door to break open at the hands of their saviour.

[37] For example, *Born into Brothels* (2004), *Prostitutes of God* (2011) or *Rai Dancers* (2013).

Visualising connections connecting visuals

In the process of researching films and connecting them, I have used different styles, methods and applications to portray the connections films have to each other; I found this useful to keep my own thoughts in order since there were multiple overlapping, layered connections. At first, I put them on a linear timeline, but the connections and characters these films had in common – the most important part of this analysis – did not translate as well as I wanted it to. Below is an example of the experiment:

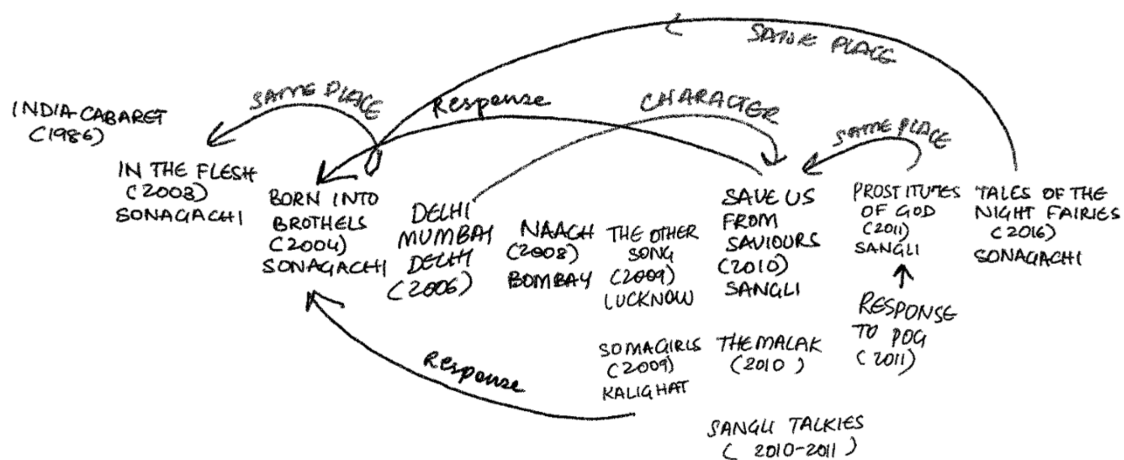
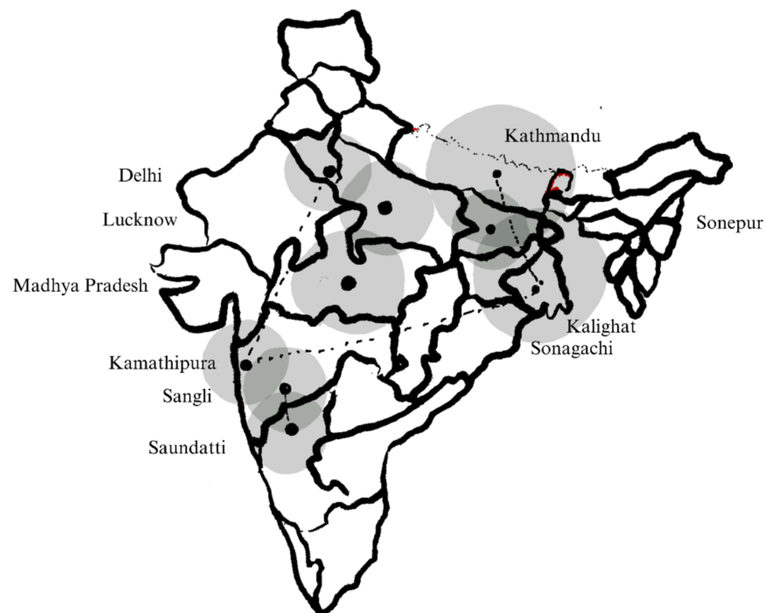


Figure 17: Attempt 1, a linear connection.

This method could not show the impact some films made, as they became 'hot spots', or loci, much like the 'red-light district/sex work hotspots' they were shot in. A map that showing the areas frequented by filmmakers, and the cityscapes the audience repeatedly saw piqued my interest geographically. I experimented with a map of India, creating circles to show an increasing number of films, and a dotted line for changing locations in similar films.



India Cabaret (1985): Bombay, Maharahstra
The Selling of Innocents (1997): Kathmandu, Nepal and Kamathipura, Maharashtra
Tales of the Night Fairies (2002):Sonagachi, West Bengal
In the Flesh (2003): Sonagachi, West Bengal
The Day My God Died (2003): Kathmandu, Nepal, Sonagachi, West Bengal and Kamathipura, Maharashtra
Born into Brothels (2004): Sonagachi, West Bengal
Land of the Missing Children (2005): Kathmandu, Nepal, Sonagachi, West Bengal and Kamathipura, Maharashtra
Delhi Mumbai Delhi (2006): Delhi and Mumbai, Maharashtra
Naach (2008): Sonepur, Bihar
The Other Song (2009): Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh
Soma Girls (2009): Kalighat, West Bengal
Prositutes of God (2010): Sangli, Maharashtra and Saundatti, Karnataka
Save us from Saviours (2014): Sangli and Kolhapur, Maharashtra, Nipani, Karnataka
Sangli Talkies (undated): Sangli and Kolhapur, Maharashtra, Nipani, Karnataka
The Malak (unreleased): Sangli, Maharashtra
We are the Foot Soldiers (2011): Sonagachi, West Bengal
Sex, Death and the Gods (2011): Sangli, Maharashtra and Saundatti, Karnataka
Rai Dancers : Swirling in Travails (2013): various parts of Madhya Pradesh
Zeenat- Ek Ankahi Daastan (2015): Kamathipura, Maharashtra

Figure 18: Attempt 2, Hotspots and ripples.

The hot spots method was visually pleasing to find mostly geographical connections, I could not include organisations, people, time, and space that made the films a social network. The final method I settled on was through a computer programme called *Obsidian*, that let me do this and make sense of the network. To the Obsidian map, I could add tabs for the timeline and for the area (although I did like how the hotspots differed in size before, like ripples caused by the films).

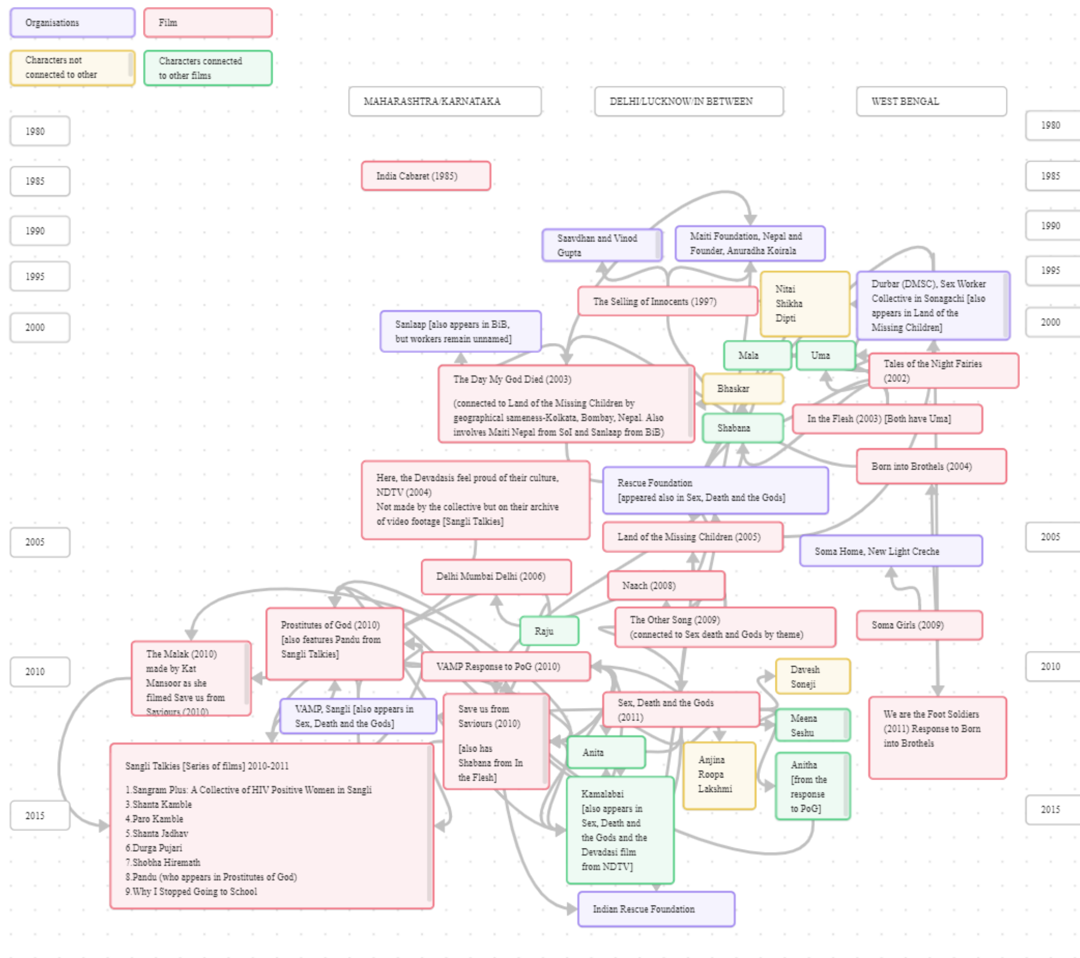


Figure 19: Attempt 3, Using Obsidian, with colours, tabs, arrows, and timelines.

Drawing this network of films also gave me clarity towards my own argument; films were more connected than what I expected. The more films I watched, the more connections I found, making it more exciting to trace the creation of narratives through the same organisations, people, and places – a visual proof of the grand narrative.

Using these networks of film-funding-filmmakers and narrative, the next part of the patch uses Sarah Schulman's idea of the Gentrification of the Mind (used to talk about how the AIDS Epidemic is referenced in public memory) to look at how films become artefacts, narrativising entire

cultures and societies, constructing histories, identities, and panicked retellings of 'deviant' communities.

A Gentrification of the Mind: Evicting Those Who Don't Fit

The film networks in this patch are connected to the material reality of the communities it hopes to represent, even if in the background. By responding to many of these films, networks of sex workers reorder the way they are (mis)represented. For many, the anger at some of these films is also what leads them deeper into the collective. Networking these films, collectives, organisations, people, and places together provides a full world, where the film is never just a film.

Violent narratives through film leave no space for discussion on better, people centred policy (Vance, 2012). While films like *The Selling of Innocents* make viewers aware of abuses related to sex trafficking, the analytical frame implicitly used in the films distorts and obscures our ability to understand the issue, let alone find interventions that could genuinely be helpful (Vance, 2012, p. 203). The spectacle of 'trafficked migrant women' eventually leads to stricter border control – Nepali women cannot cross the porous border into India without a male family member (Shah, 2006, p. 271). By focusing on the melodrama of the narrative, films tend to ignore a range of strategies that communities use: mutual aid networks, peer organising, collectivising around health and support, and decriminalisation. Worker-led interventions are rendered unnecessary and unimaginable within this construction; the most dramatically stirring videos on sex trafficking have proven to promote the worst politics and interventions. These 'melomentaries', as Vance calls them, become patronising and thus ineffective since the film's sensibilities align with the rescuer, who, even while waving words like rights in the face of the viewer and the subjects of

the film, is devoid of this rights centred analysis or tools or any empowering strategy (Vance, 2012, p. 211).

Anthropologists like Scheper-Hughes & Bourgois (2004) have pointed out that violence is a continuum. The structural and systemic violence existing within political, social, and economic systems, normalise the deprivation of rights of citizens and workers, while the symbolic violence constituted by communicative material with its own universe of meaning, lead people to blame themselves for their suffering, keeping the role of the systems and structures around them hidden (Bourdieu, 2000; Cheng, 2013). The narrativisation in popular documentaries is a form of this symbolic violence with its own propagandist framework of who is to blame for the sex workers' victimhood. Methods used for the elicitation of responses for the documentary interview, un-participatory and unidimensional filmmaking, editing, and sharing, are also forms of implicit violence disproportionately affecting people subjected to the documentary, while those making these documentaries go on to winning accolades for it.

The web of film that I am trying to illustrate points to the web of objective violence that sex workers in the country have to tackle, both implicit and explicit. These 'less serious', normalised acts of violence then lead to explicit forms of violence.

In order to help fix the struggle for just representation, researchers and documentors of all mediums could begin by asking about who gets represented and how, where films get produced and why, how space and time is constructed along with narrative, and how the process of editing is communicated as it happens.

As audiences, the questions we must ask first should be about why we are being shown certain material about sex workers – why this narrative, why now? And what does it tell/ not tell me? What is the sex worker doing? What parts of the conversation remain incomplete? Since documentaries contribute to the construction of reality, audiences should ask, why are some realities documented better than other realities? Can documentaries really be objective? Or are they subjectively created, like all other creations based on what is known by the creator? What is the nature of knowledge that presupposes the documentary itself? And in the case of sex work, what 'moral and political dilemmas' pull and push the filmmaker to depict reality as is, while also editing reality to suit these dilemmas? Why do we not have the same opinions on other places of work and political economies? How do sex workers want to be represented? Do they want to be represented only through serious documentaries, or do they want to be introduced as workers are in corporate introductory films? In the performance of film, where everyone is performing, who is the audience? Is there a truth being placed in front of an 'all knowing camera'?

Part III: A Right to the Narrative

Figure 20: A still from Mira Nair's *India Cabaret* (1985) invites those who look to reflect on their gaze.

Documentary Filmmaking as a Practice of Care

Filmmakers, especially within the documentary genre often approach making films about sex work through a self-driven responsibility of care (connected to Shah's point about 'concerned photography' earlier). The language of care is marketed along with the film as care for the communities involved, care for its people, and care for social change, development, betterment, etc. In *Born into Brothels*, Zana Briski *cares* about the children she speaks to and of, which is why she pushes to remove them from the squalor they live in. Ruchira Gupta *cares* about the innocence of the children in *Selling of Innocents*, wanting her audience to *care* for these children too. Entry within these spaces is mediated with care and rapport building, the interview to elicit response is carefully constructed, the shots that end up making the final cut are carefully edited.

However, as we've seen, this notion of caring comes within a framework of morality, judgement, control, governance, and othering. Care also doesn't seep into the post-production process, rendering subjects only capable of being data mines, and peer contact rather than those with opinions in their representation. When these frameworks of care are not created in consultation or maintained beyond the filmmaking process with the people involved, can documentary filmmaking aimed at social change be called a careful process? Can filmmakers filming vulnerable communities afford to be careless in their treatment of the perspectives, lived realities and theories of the community itself?

Considering the life of the documentary after its release is a useful way of analysing what narratives are welcomed, and what is deemed too 'out there' to be watched. The interlocutors of the film are the primary tools of communication and entry into space. It is through them that the filmmaker sees the entire world. But not all interlocutors get to see the final cut or partake in the discussions the film might generate. The politics of who stays in touch, relationships people share with their interlocutors long after the film has been aired is the key to understand the community's expectations and the nature of allyship (tying into the politics of network and collective formation in the patches that follow).

Those who have done participatory film work with the communities maintain long standing relationships with the communities, going beyond the film. Andrea Cornwall, Kat Mansoor, and Bishakha Datta retain collaborative relationships with SANGRAM and VAMP, beyond *Save us from Saviours* and *In the Flesh*. Oishik Sircar and Debolina Dutta are friends of Amra Pradatik, after making *We are Foot Soldiers*, and Shohini Ghosh has been advocating with DMSC (Kolkata) and the National Network of Sex

Workers in India throughout her work, but especially as she filmed *Tales of the Night Fairies*. Nandini Sikand mentioned that Urmi Basu cut ties with her after the release of *Soma Girls* (for unknown reasons), while Bishakha Datta involved and invited all three of her interlocutors to premiers in the country, keeping in touch until they died. Saba Dewan spent a decade doing fieldwork before *The Other Song and* involves herself in activist causes for sexually minoritised people.

There is no set blueprint on how to make a representational film, but some of the films I analysed in this patch provide inspiration. Community members making films within the community care for each other and the stories they want to tell, pointing towards a sustainable route for social change through filmmaking. Talking about care within this first patch foreshadows the care I talk about within communities of sex workers and activists later in the thesis, problematising the way care is increasingly deployed towards marginalised communities, and how it is experienced in daily life.

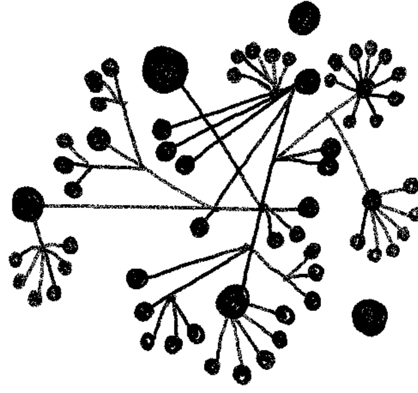
A Right to the Narrative

The politics of representation has been a ground of contention for many minority groups, since they have experienced violent repercussions of violent representations. Representation in film must be questioned, as no one film can be representative of the lived realities of the people (or even objects) it represents. There is a severe need to deconstruct the politics of what is seen as knowledge, from whom this knowledge comes and is accepted, and towards whom the knowledge is directed. This is what I have attempted in this patch.

What films would have come out of Sangli, Sonagachi, and Kalighat if they did not have to respond to the pain inflicted from these media/societal narratives? Responses to films like *Prostitutes of God* and *Born into Brothels* are necessary, but also unfortunate. What would films about marginalised communities be, without them having to correct stigmatic, prejudiced views? What stories would be said, what voices would come forth? Discussing, showing, and sharing joy in marginalised communities is as important as showing dissent, pain, and suffering. Being able to feel joy in the face of suffering is oftentimes more radical than the romanticised struggle itself. Being able to be invisible, rather than visible, is a right for the marginalised as well. Documentary films must strive to capture all these entanglements for the films on already vulnerabilised populations.

This patch has been about the politics of representation and storytelling, focusing on seeing films as more than they are – a network of narratives, people, funding bodies, and institutions speaking to each other years after release. It is because I watched these films that I found SANGRAM, VAMP, and the National Network of Sex Workers who I worked with for this thesis, eventually realising how filmed and written response, and telling their own stories is a large part of sex workers' advocacy at NNSW (and elsewhere, as evident in this patch). It is through these films that I first saw sex workers respond to the global categories they are put in – poor victim women/ 'ritualised prostitutes' – with their own stories, complete with context that is otherwise missed, or edited out.

In the next patch, I speak about the National Network of Sex Workers, my work with them, and the instrumentality of a network of local (Indian) sex worker collectives negotiating their local-global identity with international sex worker movements and groups.



II

हम लैंगिक कामगार हैं:

The National Network of Sex Workers

“Hum laingik kaamgar hain”[38]: Locating the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW), India

In the previous patch, I introduced themes of representation, collectivisation, narrative violence, and filmmaking as response, using documentary films on sex work in India. This patch is based on my work online as the communications coordinator and supporter of the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW), India during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021[39]. The patch explores what it means to network as sex workers in India’s specific socio-economic context. As an employee of NNSW, slowly learning to adapt skills for the network, the patch offers an ‘outsiders view’ into the network.

The National Network of Sex Workers as a ‘Network’

Sex workers in the country network with people who have a stake in how they experience public and private space (the police, landlords, other sex workers, doctors, NGO workers, and peer supporters) in everyday life as well as politically, through a large network of self-led collectives.

While I worked with NNSW, I travelled deeper into the network (by gaining access to its different projects), and across (through relationships with people in collectives at the state, district, and town level). Almost subconsciously, I started visualising and drawing connections between the projects I was involved in, work I was aware of that other people were

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[38] “We are sex workers”, translated from Hindi to English. The network and its members assert that sex work is work as a foremost principle, and this tenet travels throughout the network to its farthest collectives.

[39] At NNSW, a supporter is a non-sex working individual who provides and shares their skills and knowledge so that members can build their capacity to do all that is required in the working of the network. Supporters can be from NGOs, individuals (like me), or even long term partners of the network that collaborate on a project basis.

doing, and projects I had only heard of that were completed, upcoming or in progress. This was a way to understand who I was working for and with, and where the network's influence reached, especially how it was communicated in an organisation of this size. Eventually, I imagined my connections through network theories like Actor Network Theory (ANT) and Social Network Analysis (SNA)[40], starting with Riles' (2000) *The Network Inside Out*. I also wanted to think of where and how power was held, transferred, and shared in the network, and how members negotiated its power structure.

Anthropologists[41] use network thinking to describe patterns in non-kinship relations, to view networks as personal communities (Wellman et al., 1985). For sex workers, networks are both personal communities (as they say, only a sex worker can understand a sex worker), and relational communities created by shared identity and experience of violence. Power within these communities is self-organised and relational (Foucault, 1978, p. 95), constantly reproduced in the network through the connectivity of its

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[40]The aim of this thesis is not to provide an in-depth review of network theories, however, many ideas in the thesis have been inspired and encouraged by network thinkers. Social Network Analysis (SNA) theorises that people exist in networks where they share information and relationships. These patterns reveal details about relationships that stand tests of time and tension among people leading to understandings of larger structures of social reproduction of knowledge and organisation. Network analysts look for two types of patterns in the construction of the network; social groups (who is connected to who) and social positions (who is connected to the larger social structure and how they are connected) (Freeman, 1968). The latter could speak about power relations in a network, which are not otherwise easily decipherable through an assemblage of people, institutions and relationships. Around the same time, Actor Network Theory was being developed by Michel Callon (1986), Bruno Latour (1986) and John Law (1992) among others as part of Science and Technology Studies. Actor Network Theory is rarely discussed alongside Social Network Analysis, even though both approaches centre networks of human and non-human actants.

[41] Network thinking is not strictly anthropological, but anthropologists have a certain way of looking at networks that stems from our own understanding of the field, its connections and the ethnographic value of each relationship that interlocutors share with people, places and things. The usage of the term, 'Social Network' itself was used first by anthropologists. Radcliffe-Brown (1940, p. 3) used the word 'network' to describe social structures of the communities they have studied to talk about the dyadic relationships that they observed between person to person. Barnes (1954) first introduced the notion of 'Social Networks'. Mitchell (1974) says that a key point of weakness within network theory has been that there has been more stimulation on expanding concepts related to social networks than empirical fieldwork of networks themselves. Anthropologists have intuitively understood the existence of these social relations through an almost natural way of thinking of human connection through networks and knowledge exchange. Most recently, the interest in 'small' worlds (Jeong et al., 2000; Watts, 2004) and 'cultural cosmologies' influenced by concepts in physics have gained interest in network analysis.

actants. No one person holds the power in the network. In some cases, supporters with socio-economic privilege bring it in, but they let go when it comes to community-based decisions, within which the power is in the hands of those with lived experience. Power in this case, has no predetermined pattern. In his reading of power in networks, Foucault also dissolves the human individual into a diversity of 'relays, communication routes and support points' of power. As nodes in the network, multiple threads run through the individual, who in the network is not a sovereign entity (Foucault, 1975, cited in August, 2022, p. 284). In the sex workers' networks, however, individuals are sovereign entities, using the network like the network uses them. This will become clearer as I progress with the patches on how individuals see themselves within the network, and how they exercise or are burdened by power.

One of the most important concepts ANT has gifted network thinkers is of 'translation', referring to the techniques and practices establishing connections of disparate entities in a network through equivalence[42]. On first thought, this is obvious – sex workers have much to share with each other in terms of marginality. I go beyond, to enquire how a global sex worker identity (first translated into a health category for AIDS funding) took on the 'Indian sex worker' identity, for a network to form. Boyce and Cataldo (2023) similarly explored how imagined categories of people, in their case communities of 'MSM' (men who have sex with men), have been used nationally (in India) and globally as 'flat, self-evident signifiers' of

[42] Callon (1996) theorised that actors in a network go through four stages of translation to come together as an actor network; problematisation when a focal actor establishes themselves as a passage point to enable relationships; interessement where the focal actor arouses the interest of other actors, followed by an enrollment of new actors into the network with roles and duties accepted by the actors, and lastly, a mobilisation of allies in which actors are displaced and reassembled across the network in order to meet the needs of the focal actor. In this case, there is also the presence of a translator, a spokesperson who negotiates on the behalf of all actors (arguably across power structures).

heterogeneous populations. The category acts as a hub of information exchange, but also stops the flow of knowledge and information among actants.

The more I learned working at NNSW, the more I noticed how translation mattered – of being a sex worker, of tenets, belief systems, and a 'sex worker politics' informed both by global sex worker movements, as well as sobering local realities of the women who sat in on the meetings every month. Translation within network relationships requires both problematisation of the issue at hand as well as an assignment of roles to the entities related to the situation within the network (Bilodeau & Potvin, 2018, p. 176). Such role assigning, problem and solution making requires an establishment of social worlds, norms, and understandings based on which network members agree and disagree to an extent to respond (Boyce & Cataldo, 2003, p. 219).

This patch takes inspiration from network thinking as a starting point to grasp the nature of the network, before diving into what the network means on the inside in the patches that follow. The following sections are ethnographic illustrations of translation within the network, inwards and outwards.

Finding the Network[43]

In March 2020, a pandemic day, I was on the webpage of the Global Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP), panic googling, since I had no field anymore. On its Asian webpage, I found the National Network of Sex

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[43] Here, 'the network' refers to all collectives, supporters, and individual members of the National Network of Sex Workers, unless individuals and collectives are separately mentioned. For more information about the formation of NNSW, see Appendix B.

Workers (NNSW)[44], the first Indian network of sex workers' collectives I had come across. I knew of *Durbar*, a famous sex worker led NGO in Kolkata, but NNSW worked in Maharashtra and in South Indian states. Since I am from Kerala, in South India and born in Mumbai, seeing a South/West Indian based network in existence was exciting. I reached out to the email ID provided. From July to August 2019, I shadow-created posters and content for a non-sex worker coordinator working at the network earlier, who had responded to my first email. I wanted to volunteer to do more, but I had no access to the network beyond one person and an email ID. For every poster, every change I needed to make, I had to wait for a while for approvals; I did not know how these approvals were being sought and agreed to be communicated back to me.

A few months later, I happened to interview Meena Seshu about the *Save us from Saviours* film. Seshu is a supporter with NNSW and VAMP[45], one of the collectives in the network, and I asked whether they would want any support from me, a PhD student, for their inter-intra network communication tasks. Doing so was a political choice, I wanted to support the network with their work if I expected them to let me sit in on their meetings, and write about them in the thesis. A week later, I was being formally introduced as an employee. The network then became more visible to me; before, I did not know which thread (person) led where. Did the network have an office? Where was the network based? What was the role of supporters, and who was I doing shadow work for?

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[44] The Global Network for Sex Work Projects is probably the most central and widespread global network, created when a group of sex workers' activists from around the world met in 1990 at the 2nd International Conference for NGOs working on AIDS in Paris. NSWP has been involved in monumental work, like lobbying for wording in the UN Palermo Protocol.

[45] VAMP is a sex worker-led collective under the larger NGO SANGRAM in Sangli. Meena Seshu is the general secretary on the board of SANGRAM.

I worked with the network for two years as their communications coordinator and then as a volunteer for outreach, keeping them in touch with sex worker organising groups outside India. Working with NNSW and writing took me from being an outsider, experiencing the work of the network through carefully planned graphics, reports, and news interviews, to an insider, an 'apprentice' learning the ropes before I could properly lend my skills to the network. This made me an 'observing participant' of the network rather than a 'participant observer' (Woodward, 2008). I was able to draw insights from the work that goes into being a network of marginalised individuals collectivising for rights.

While I began working with NNSW, I moved on to helping the Sex Workers Alliance, South Asia (SWASA), the regional network. I was then introduced to the many wings and projects that NNSW was working on beyond the email inbox I had access to. Slowly, from only handling campaigns and emails I was facilitating groups, writing short articles with the community to be translated and written up for English media, supporting a couple of research projects, and listening to issues with funding. My primary work roles revolved around providing support with translation and transcription, planning meetings, drafting reports and documents, facilitating small training modules, adding to leadership capacity by guiding the workforce on how to facilitate their sessions, social media poster designing, designing research studies, and general coordination work among networks and organisations.

Eventually, as I built more trust over my 'understanding of the politics', I represented NNSW at a few events as their communications coordinator. I attended all board meetings with state wise collectives, intra state meetings with district wise collectives, meetings with multiple stakeholders (like

journalists, other rights groups, website designers, grant funders), and crisis intervention meetings during raids, the passing of an unfavourable bill (Anti Trafficking Bill 2021) and fundraising efforts during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Slowly, the thesis project that began as an inquiry into crisis and response, became an enquiry into how sex workers have been collectivising – in small groups, district wide collectives, state federations and a national network, further connected. to regional and global networks. Questions about crises remained; these relationships were formed and sustained despite continuous violence. Collectives functioned in an environment not conducive to the functioning. In this situation how is collective identity created through the process of networking?

Net-working

Networks have been central to the creation and sustenance of social movements, and the concept of networking has not only been used to talk about reaching political ends, but also in daily parlance to signify connection and community.

Riles (2000) defines the network as “a set of institutions, knowledge practises, and artefacts thereof that internally generate the effects of their own reality by reflecting on themselves” (p. 3). Riles’ focus on the artefacts (documents, funding proposals, newsletters, and organisational charts) created by the network to display, communicate and archive its work. NNSW had similarly been maintaining artefacts that steadily communicates its aims, tenets and identity as a sex worker network inwards to its collectives and outwards to those looking at it as a ‘spokesperson’ of sex workers’ rights in the country.

Network thinking is useful to understand why aggrieved populations that network find it easier to form political movements through collectivisation and solidarity (Gould, 1991, 1993b; McAdam, 1999; Morris, 1981). Sex workers specifically, network and collectivise as a response to ongoing violence, since they find themselves embedded in a specific relational context that also controls the social ties they have built (McAdam & Paulsen, 1993).

Sex Worker collectives in India came together during the AIDS epidemic in the late 1980s-1990s to further their rights to social access and care beyond AIDS (Ghosh, 2003, 2004, 2005; Kaiwar & Gothoskar 2014; Lakkimsetti, 2014; Lorway & Khan, 2014; Lorway et al., 2009) interventions, working against poverty, exploitation, and violence through collectivisation. However, even though sex workers' collectivisation has battled large epidemics like AIDS, the stigma attached to them as disease-carrying populations have carried through to the COVID-19 pandemic via ill-informed studies (NNSW, 2020a) seeking to push narratives about "shutting down brothels to control disease".

The national network, as most networks in social movements, has been a conduit of information and support for all the collectives and NGOs that work with it, mobilising solidarity and collective action, developing collective identities and creating socio-cultural ties essential to community building (Mische, 2003). Through the funds NNSW can mobilise, the collectives on ground are able to engage in projects that would otherwise not be funded by state or national governments (where healthcare, especially the sexual health of sex workers has remained a primary concern).

Over the past three decades, NNSW has contributed to the capacity building of its members, giving them the confidence to articulate their

stories, fight for their rights through well-structured training programmes, enabling new members to understand the world of law and rights including women and human rights while focusing on decriminalisation of sex work. SANGRAM in Sangli runs the VAMP institute that does formal training workshops with allied organisations like Point of View (on digital storytelling), or The Human Rights Law Network (on legal literacy). It has established a Centre for Advocacy against Stigma and Marginalisation (CASAM) driving sex worker led research projects, training peer coordinators to become research leaders, formulating questions, methods and writing up research reports. The network coordinates activities at the central level, with member organisations in all states having the freedom to develop and implement programmes with allied organisations in their personal and professional networks based on their reach and ability. The network bears costs and provides all necessary support, primarily for national and state-level advocacy programmes, and network-building with other movements.

Being a part of the network means that its federations and collectives have to conduct some similar activities, like running Targeted Intervention programmes to tackle AIDS within their states/districts/neighbourhoods. TI programmes are the oldest kind of work that the community has been doing – the work they know most well. However, as a group (not a movement) of sex workers made them a global health category at whom aid is targeted. All collectives were also similarly involved in a 'Help desk project' to increase sex workers' access to identity documents and welfare schemes. A member who worked at a help desk in Andhra Pradesh told me that the project became a space to seek community solidarity for women who were going through intimate partner violence, police violence, issues within the family, or inability to get government-provided land. "There is

also a sense of trust that is built", she said, "they know that no one will care for sex workers more than a sex worker". The helpdesk gave the community a sense of ownership and leadership, since they identified both problems, solutions and won grant funding to run the programme, while not requiring much in terms of 'new skills' or a learning curve from the peer support workers who were already trusted within the community.

The NNSW board group is a representative group of the state leaders of the network, with reserved spots for minority populations (people living with HIV, MSM workers and new workers). Board meetings are a space to share knowledge and gain a deeper understanding of each other's situations across all states. Board group members are not only the primary point of contact for whatever happens in their state regarding sex worker collectives but are also leaders holding district wide collectives together, and planning state-wide programmes for collectives to follow. Board members decide what campaigns must be carried out, what research projects to take on, and how many of their state CBOs and individual members can involve themselves in work of the larger network. For example, if there was an event in which sex workers were invited, the invitation is first shared with the board in multiple languages so they can understand and send it to their peers in each state, and get back with dates, times and individuals that are interested.

Board members are at the forefront of all initiatives in the state, responsible for keeping morale up in times of 'new' crisis – lack of funds, a new raid, or a natural disaster. They hold the history and the future of the network in them through the knowledge they gain by travelling across the country, participating in campaigns and making themselves 'visible' across networks and working relationships. They carry forward and keep doing the work the

network has been involved in while training a couple of people to share this knowledge. A core group was created in November 2021 to build 'a second line of leadership' to shadow the board in their work and learn from what senior members of the movement and network have been doing historically. Core group members are usually 'younger' in age or the time they have spent working within the movement/network. These examples show a workflow of the network that is both formulated by a small group at the centre (the board), and the collectives at the farthest end of the network, feeding back to what does not work, and what is needed on ground. In this way, there is priority given to both what the 'national sex worker' has to ensure is done (responding to policy, news articles etc.) and what the 'local sex worker' understands as problems that have to be solved in her everyday interactions with the community (documentation, medication, social and mental health etc.). Local and national concerns don't always align, but the network and its meetings at the national and state level ensure they are heard and solutions created to the best of the network's and its leader's abilities.

Cross Network-Movement Solidarity

The language of guiding principles that sex workers use is new, but these are concepts they know intimately and embody. For example, while it was known that a worker's personal life and details must not be shared because hidden sex workers do not have the opportunity or privilege of safe visibility, the word 'confidentiality' is something the workers learnt during the CEDAW processes as they spoke about confidentiality and data protections of their community members. Although HIV interventions taught them safe sex practices to prevent infection, they learnt about the world of sexuality, gender, and sex through workshops. They knew about

the laws that target them, they became paralegals through certificate courses made accessible to members of the public. They learnt about Sustainable Development Goals and their space in Gender Equality goals for the country through their work with other groups, making cross-movement solidarity invaluable for the movement – both for the language it teaches movements to reach out to each other as well as the solidarity it can build when plans are put together.

In October 2017, the network arranged for a cross-movement conversation between the sex workers' rights movement and other rights-based movements in the country. The event, named '*Rubaru*' was held in Delhi[46], planned as a series of panel discussions where NNSW would introduce activists and union members, as well as announce and establish their presence in the capital to extend solidarity to the movements while asking for their support. Here, sex workers had the opportunity to establish their own politics in conversation with other movements – sex workers in the room shared that they have a 'syncretic culture' where sex, and who they have sex with have no class, caste, or religion, leading to all the participants discussing the intersection of choice, social stratification and sex work.

A statement by Nisha Gulur, the then president of the network shows how knowledge and the practice of 'sharing knowledge' is being done within the network and being used by the movement to create solidarities.

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[46] *Rubaru* means 'meeting', usually from differing places/spaces.

> We have spoken amongst ourselves, with unions, federations, brothel-based workers. Now we will be meeting different social activists who will be listening to us, and we will be talking to them.

Nisha Gulur, President (2017), NNSW

A conversation with Saba Dewan and Rahul Roy, associated with the *'Not in My Name'* [47]protests in India against rising mob violence, and growing concerns about Islamophobia and hate crimes against Dalit people in India brought out an interesting point of discussion. The sex workers in the room said they have a 'syncretic culture' where sex, and who they have sex with have no class, caste or religion. It's possible that the sex workers themselves do not look at where the money comes from, because that is not something they can choose although clients do choose who they have sex with. This is interesting because we know that the economy of sex work, like any work, is stratified. These points flowed into their conversation with lawyer and women's rights activist Vrinda Grover, who asks, "What is the choice? Who has the choice and the right to choose? Is choice limited to people who can function in caste, class and race blindness?"

The conversation the sex workers had with representatives from the *New Trade Union Initiative* (NTUI), *Hero Honda Theka Mazdoor Sanghatan* and *All India Central Council of Trade Unions* (AICCTU) drew connections between sex workers who have tried but failed to successfully register as trade unions and other worker groups (domestic workers, contract

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[47] The 'Not in My Name' demonstration in India took place in the capital and multiple other cities on June 28th, 2017, in light of an increase in reported lynchings against Muslim and Dalit people. The demonstration was critiqued for being Brahminical, and distant from the ground reality of why Islamophobia and Caste Based Violence takes place; because of the structures that demonstrators attempted to distance themselves from, instead of counting themselves as a part of the problem.

labourers and ASHA[48] workers) who are discouraged by the government to form trade unions. Stigma remains a primary reason for trade unions to not take up the cause of sex workers- the dichotomy of 'good' and 'bad' workers who can and cannot ask for better laws and better working conditions. This is also a point of tension when it comes to workers across caste barriers, who consider oppressed caste sex workers as traitors to the anti-caste movement (more on this in the patch on Ambedkar Jayanti).

Nisha's statement reflects the work NNSW, and its collectives within have been doing over the past years to ensure that their voices, and more importantly, their demands are heard by government officials, and other groups they have shared experiences of stigma, violence and joy in common with, in the hope of creating cross movement solidarity. Having said that, it is also important to note how a lot of the solidarity building happens inwards within communities and collectives of people across eight states in the network who have entirely different motives, and connections with movements in their own home states (for example, Gujarati sex workers work most with rural women's groups, while Keralite sex workers work with trade union groups and find it easier to do so because of the state's left leaning policies).

Having said that, a lot of the work that NNSW is able to do is limited by the grant funding they have access to and what work falls within the remit of these organisations. This work involves sexual and reproductive health focused work (condom distribution, health camps etc.), documentation so that workers get access to social welfare schemes, and sometimes

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[48] An accredited social health activist (ASHA) is a community health worker instituted by the Ministry of Health and Family Welfare (MoHFW) as a part of India's National Rural Health Mission (NRHM).

collective building to carry out NACO funded targeted interventions. Doing this work puts them in conversation with certain groups- drug users, transgender communities across the country, people living with HIV and Disability rights activists as well. This is how NNSW became a part of SAATHII, for example, which is a trust network headquartered in Chennai and runs a concerted response to HIV from India.

This is compared to the work that they *want* to do, which for some is to diversify skills, find ways to put their children through schools, have equitable access to housing and rights-based work so that they can challenge police violence and be part of the larger communities they live in. A group that should have more solidarity with sex workers networks is that of new age urban transgender groups, queer groups, which, due to a lack of class solidarity still do not find much in common with each other even if (as I previously mentioned in the introduction on positionality and caste/class trouble, and eventually in the last empirical chapter on anti-caste sex worker solidarities). The binary is not as strict as I present it to be, but for the sake of understanding, I describe it as time that goes into one task, that takes time and energy from the others that could have long term impacts for the community. This energy and time flow is part of the global funding industrial complex within which sex workers work in a stipulated time and within expectations of public health and social care for their communities, but not themselves. These norms in turn affect the intimate relationships they create with each other, within their families and with communities they are a part of in terms of time and energy they can and cannot give. I expand on this through the patches on trust and heartbreak, and social care during Ambedkar Jayanti.

In this case, While the network and its collectives are not isolated, they have different experiences of cross collective work/solidarity based on the state the collectives work in. For example, in Maharashtra, collectives like VAMP and Muskan work with SANGRAM, which is an NGO of rural Maharashtrian women focusing on sexual health, gender sensitisation, legal support and so on. In Kerala on the other hand, sex workers' groups work with youth groups (for example, one called Sex Education Kerala) to make relevant work and conversation through social media spaces like Instagram. Groups based in Maharashtra also work with technology focused organisations like Point of View and CREA that, through their own funding, host multi-movement/group festivals and full day workshops where sex workers can network with people across movements. These workshops are usually filled with participants across class, caste, gendered groups, across ages and they become ideal spaces for sex workers (and similarly other groups) to introduce each other into the issues they face internally, for which solidarity in the form of campaigns designed together could be useful.

I noticed through multiple resources made by the SANGRAM that sex workers often had to historically initiate contact with other movements and collectives, since sex workers are often missed out, or kept out of conversations that affect them. Beyond conversations on trafficking, they also have a say on censorship, on the union budget in India, on sexual assault and rape laws, abortion rights and so on, but they are uniquely placed as women who are not only as working women deviating from work they are *allowed* to do, but also as women "powerless" in their situation- that collectivising is not expected out of them.

Over the past couple of decades however, sex workers rights groups have found a home in collective activism through evolving movements. For example, sex workers have had an impact historically on the women's movement and its evolving understanding of women's rights, the women's health movement through the lens of women's sexual and reproductive rights and through emerging movements on gender and sexuality and their impact on the rights of women as well as individuals of marginalised sexualities. At the same time, they continue to be a part of their village, town and city communities by being responsive to issues that impact the entire community; for example, sex workers in Sangli initiated flood relief efforts August to October 2019 (Sangram, 2019).

As I mentioned with *Rubaru*, the network is focused on having conversations with certain groups in particular; trade unionists, political parties and politicians who come to sex workers' groups, and other women's groups during election time. Outside the country, it is easier to have conversations with people in cross regional sex workers' networks often, than it is with local queer groups due the aforementioned stigma. At the same time, by including sex workers within their political organising, many feminist groups are on one hand, changing the way sex workers are spoken about in the media, and on the other hand, realising that urban youth expects that sex workers be a part of the conversation when it comes to marginality-a growing consciousness to decolonise while modernising and questioning known ways of being, but also a result of media representation shifting to include nuanced sex worker led stories (think The White Lotus in 2021 or Anora in 2024 among others) and digital spaces like Only Fans (that with its own issues, slightly destigmatised, or euphemised sex work). In this way, sex work, and the demands of sex workers' movements have been repeated enough times in multiple

movement shop floors to be thought of seriously, and considered when speaking about violence, women, marginality and migration.

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People in the upper rungs of the movement know what a 'movement' is, however, trying to get other people to work like in an established NGO is hard. I saw these issues crop up first-hand when I had to create a couple of handbooks to establish the need for reports more accessible and understandable for people who had never written these reports before. In my opinion and experience, standardised expectations of impact assessments and reports, especially in lengthy, inflexible formats only creates more work for communities already inundated with work as 'representatives' for large groups of marginalised people. Funding agencies keep saying that they want to help; listening to communities, easing bureaucratic processes, and building trust could be the start.

The 'oneness' of the global sex worker community is often referenced during fundraising periods. In 2021, tensions were high when all the conversations within the collectives seemed to be about not having enough money to make it through the week. At the peak of India's COVID crisis in May 2021, the panic officially set in further and the entire world, and particularly the global sex workers' network turned to India. We started our fundraiser on Milaap (a fundraising platform) to begin putting together emergency funds for workers while also applying to international organisations like The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria as well as state funds. At the same time, a member of an Australian sex workers' collective reached out to do an event where Indian and Australian sex workers could meet and share stories, while also raising money for our fundraiser. We also planned for an event with the European Sex Workers

Alliance (ESWA) to create a similar space for fundraising. At this point, and during many of these meetings, I would feel like the community is very tight knit, everyone knows everyone.

The network has a social media presence on Instagram, Facebook, Medium and Twitter, usually run by coordinators or a supporter, and all of them have different followings. Often, the information relayed differs according to the kind of knowledge that needs to disseminate through these specific channels. The faces on the channels are usually the same, public-facing identities. While it would be useful that sex workers across the network use the channels to speak about what they want, but in the interest of keeping them protected, it does not happen. Many public-facing sex workers have their own handles on these platforms, while some only use them to repost information posted by the network and individual organisations. When there is important information to be spread, there is often a call on the WhatsApp group to ensure people are sharing it, taking space in the algorithmic platform and 'storming' the platform for a short period of time, making its reach as wide as possible within personal and professional networks, adding in the cross-movement solidarity connections that spread this information, collect signatures for petitions, share the 'sex workers side' to a story, or a call for funds.

Working in Crisis

When I first joined, I did not know how much the network relied on interstate and inter district travel. During the pandemic, everything had to be replicated, as far as possible, online, at all levels. The pandemic brought forth capacity building needs for the community to understand Zoom so they could communicate with each other. While it brought the community together with people who otherwise would not have been able to work with

them (like me), it also separated people relying on in-person interaction for daily work as peer supporters.

Due to the COVID-19 lockdown initiated in March 2020 in India, sex workers had been unable to restart their livelihood, living off rations provided by the government and NGOs. However, many hidden sex workers could not claim any emergency relief (which would include outing themselves) or support their families. As a response, NNSW has been advocating with the district, state, and central governments to access emergency relief for sex workers. Early in the pandemic, many state members tried to ensure that sex workers were included in emergency ration distributions even though they did not have identification documents. In July 2020, the Department of Women and Children in Maharashtra issued a circular calling for sex workers to be provided relief across all districts in Maharashtra. Following this, relief was distributed in August to sex workers without proof of identification. In October 2020, based on the intervention of sex worker networks, the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) of India issued guidelines to state governments to provide relief to sex workers. Crucial amongst these were guidelines to recognize sex workers as informal sector workers and register them for relief under appropriate schemes. A similar recommendation was given for migrant sex workers too. NNSW members have been using these guidelines and recommendations since to access identification documents, for state and central welfare schemes, which are also needed while applying for large funding schemes to ensure relief packages/money transfers reach community members as rapidly as emergency grants should.

NNSW's regular functioning heavily shifted during the pandemic. The coordinator who could remain in Delhi to connect with other national

movements was cut off when the network had to recall members to return home for their own safety. Finding novel ways to work in a lockdown, collectives started using their personal and intervention-based networks to provide essentials like rice, vegetables, oil, medicines, sanitising liquid, and masks to their communities. At the beginning, when there was no access to funds, many sex worker leaders of town/village-based collectives hired rickshaws and went to localities with supplies they had bought or collected themselves. ART tablets, along with general medication to alleviate COVID-19 symptoms were also passed through their individual networks.

The national network sprang into action when large funds were announced, ensuring applications for these funds went in, board meetings took place virtually, that the WhatsApp groups – otherwise used for updates on days of remembrance or rights – buzzed with activity. I observed many examples of this 'jumping into action' throughout my time at NNSW. During a raid in August 2021, of a red-light district in Nagpur called Ganga Jamuna, the network immediately arranged press releases, sent a team of sex workers from VAMP Sangli, to advocate for the barricades to be removed. We made digital and physical posters while reaching out to more media organisations via social media to go to Nagpur, talk to the VAMP team there, and cover the sex workers' side. The energy levels peaking and dipping sharply, as the activity on the WhatsApp group during exciting events continues no matter the time of the day, the chatter on the network's social media kept in tune (by me) until the group falls quiet again.

Silence

On some days, there were no pings on my phone. I guiltily admit that I (sometimes) loved those days. The urgency of most messages almost always gave me a small panic attack. But I would also get anxious if there were no

pings for more than a few days. ‘Are you okay?’, going out in different languages to different people.

There are at least 5 WhatsApp groups for different states, different projects. There are many more, I don’t know how many. Messages are neatly compartmentalised into what needs to go on the Board group, what on the core group, what on the coordination groups, and sometimes, on personal chats to me. Some “this message was deleted” texts sneak in too.

On silent days, my mind would be present at home, in London, worrying about writing. On the days of activity and noise, split-walking in a thick coat and breathing in cold air, I’d be thinking of Kiran’s cat stretching under the sun, bright in Sangli. There would be countless moments of snapping in and out of Sangli and London. I smelt coffee, cigarettes, and fresh cinnamon buns outside campus in Russell Square, my texts came from a place where I imagined the silent buzz of a fan, sweat, *vada pav*, and hot chai, stirring me from my Zoom rooms.

Language and Translation

A couple of sex worker leaders I spent a lot of time with and translated for would begin speaking at events by saying, “My name is ___, and I am a sex worker”, sometimes followed by a sentence about their migrant or HIV status. What was important is that their identity as a sex worker needed to be cemented in the speech, their public identities, as a person one could think of when they say ‘a real sex worker’ as though she is a mythical creature otherwise.

A network exists in the way it is visible, even more so if the network is on the margins. Without the visibility of those ‘on the margins’ decisions are taken for the marginalised in the name of their invisibility. The careful

thought networks put into using documents, films, and photographs of meetings, festivals and their collective impact in the country through constant engagement with media organisations and their own website tells us how these artefacts, even social media handles and groups are part of the network's history and future. The following two sub-sections further describe how essential language, translation, and certain symbols are to the existence and communication of the movement. Here, there are two meanings of translation: the first, translation between languages since the network altogether speaks at least 10 languages; the second, how translation is used in ANT as a method of equivalence in a heterogeneous group.

A social network is a network of meanings (White, 1992, p. 67). Translations and interpretations play a vital role in how collectives across the network understand their work at the national and local level, and how knowledge is transferred from community to community, community to national board, and board again to community.

Most histories about sex workers and sex work in India have remained one-sided, violently mistranslated and never made accessible to communities post-extraction. In this context, the network takes translation very seriously. For instance, a key part of the network's functioning is translating legal documents pertaining to the rights and lives of sex workers in India into all languages that the members speak – English, Hindi, Malayalam, Tamil, Telugu, Kannada, and Marathi. State representatives further translate these by dialect for collectives spread across the states. Translation is part of the fabric of functioning for the network: in all online or in-person meetings, there are pauses in-built for translations to occur, down to the order in which they happen, working with clockwork precision.

Every single report, call for an activity, or message on a WhatsApp group is translated into all the network's languages to ensure every single member of the board has a say, while board members ensure every representative of their collectives has a way to communicate and add to the network's knowledge. Voice notes are used intentionally to provide context and indicate tone, further easing communication because many in the network know each other in person but are new to remaking the network on WhatsApp.

Another aspect of translation within the network is the refusal of outdated, global categories offered to the community. In 2024, during a national consultation on *'Prostitution' and Violence* with the UN Special Rapporteur on Violence Against Women, sex worker leaders struck off the word 'prostitution' from the banners. During the protest, Renuka Kamble, the president of the network as of January 2024 said to the meeting that those wanting to talk to sex workers must learn to use the terms sex workers use for themselves, which in her case is *laingik kaamgaar* (sex worker) in Marathi. This refusal to fit their experiences into globally used, reductive categories is one of the many ways sex workers push back through their local, embodied knowledge.

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As we got to know each other better, a few members asked me to teach them English, already hyper-aware that everything I said was taken more seriously because I knew English. In meetings, while struggling with Hindi and Malayalam, I would try to make fun of myself so that they knew I regretted not knowing some of the regional languages better than I did, including Malayalam, my mother tongue. Some of these issues were easily solved as I sparingly spoke in English, only using it to translate/write a

report or communicate with the supporters even though it is my first language and the only language I can think in. But I wanted to make myself accessible by not speaking in a language that already holds so much power in our minds.

My comfort with Hindi eventually increased as I kept speaking to the coordinators of the network, words rolling off my tongue more easily, without using Google Translate on the side. My journey with Hindi was further helped while I provided translation support to a lot of the activists as they went to consultations, meetings, and events. Soon, I was sending voice notes much more confidently than when I began (which involved being anxious for 30 minutes, trying to be exact with my words, before sending a voice note). I used a phone application that allowed me to instantly translate and write in any other language I needed, which worked as long as the person I was talking to replied in written script of the language we were speaking. If the script was Roman, I had to find other ways to translate and communicate it back. I got closer to the Maharashtrian collectives because I knew Hindi, but I could not build as much rapport with the groups from Kerala as hoped, since I had never lived there, and only language could not bridge the gap between being able to understand a vocabulary created from years of living in the same place. Once again, I belonged everywhere yet nowhere; a curse and blessing by my diasporic upbringing. This is a methodological concern, but it was also how I was learning to be a co-worker, along the steep learning curve of working everyday in the face of new crises emerging and us springing into action.

Translation, Power and Support

While speaking to Neena, a Maharashtrian collective member, about capacity building, she said it was not because the network did not want to reach out more and do more, but because there still is a lot to be done on the ground level, especially with education. About the 2022 Supreme Court directive on safety for sex workers, she said,

> Jo, even the supreme court directive will take a year till it reaches every community member on the ground level. It is because we do not understand so much that people can play power games. It becomes the same structural issue, with the same barriers as any other worker; the workers should have the right to ask for what they want and we should listen, but the translator, the supporter interjects, and the barriers remain the same – it is easy to save, than to put yourself out of work. And with this, comes the additional identity of being a sex worker; morally to police is easier than to accept, agree, move on, and get the resources.

While talking about how long it takes to translate and pass knowledge about legal provisions across the network, Neena mentioned that translators and supporters in the network have power. This power is most visible when supporters across the network exert their opinions on how certain activities should take shape instead of going with the slower, more democratic route of asking the community. Most supporters try their best to step back and let the community decide, but due to the nature of caste and class boundaries supporters are often seen as beacons of knowledge for communities depend on, instead of relying on what communities already know.

Callon (1996) says “translation is treason” (p. 15) since translations (like edits) can never be exact replicas, always with some level of displacement. The supporter and translator’s role in the network offers new levels of interpretation and direction within the network, which at once creates

tension, but also must be accounted for – another 'getting on the same page' across power relations (Latour, 1987, p. 117).

From the local to the global, there are fewer non-sex workers/non-former sex worker allies in support roles. Globally, more sex workers have access to English as a language of communication, and support roles along with primary leadership roles – namely: program director, program manager, monitoring and evaluation officer, and accounts officer[49] – are often reserved for sex working individuals (which, collectives in India are slowly working towards). In most NGO-collectives, the collective/community-based organisation runs all its targeted interventions (TI) independently, directly funded by the government, through independent units the CBO manages, while the 'parent' NGO provides technical and translation support. Getting more sex workers in leadership positions took some time because current government guidelines for setting up the TI program require officers with a Bachelors or Master's in Social Work degree, but they managed to break the "class ceiling" (Laurison & Friedman, 2019). While talking to one of the supporters reminiscing about Kamalabai, a beloved sex worker leader from Sangli, tensions about language become apparent:

> In the initial stages, it became difficult because the program managers would be called for a meeting and all the other NGO heads knew English and from our side we would have Kamalabai, who would say "Marathis Bola" (speak in Marathi). She would say, "I don't know what you all are saying, and you have called me for the meeting. I am also with you, but if you don't speak in Marathi, this won't work". I remember the pushback from these other NGOs. And because she would make them translate everything and make the effort to

[49] Information gathered from conversations with the collectives and cross verified with NACO Terms of References for corresponding jobs.

> include those who don't speak in English, I think that is where collectivisation gave the programmes a module. She used to say, "if it is about us, and this project is about us, then we will be in the decision-making leadership and then you will have to create systems for it". Often there is no space for workers to talk to each other without the involvement of supporters etc. With the virus, it got a lot worse because there is no space to do any 'chit chat' over chai after you have met people during workshops where people could be networking.

A lot of the work undertaken by the network and its collectives since the past three decades has not been documented, until community members had to make impact assessments, write grant reports, and document their work on websites. Documentation not only helped legitimise the network's work, but it also created a presence for activists or people looking for support from the network to find them. Much of the work is left out from formal documentation because informal mental health interventions, festival organising, smaller workshops of interest to community members do not exactly fall within the neat brackets of health based interventions. Any reports (academic or otherwise) made of the community's labour often do not find their way back after researchers and media personnel have borrowed them – these narratives remain lost.

Translation plays a huge role in 'remembering' the movement's history, its present and future goals and ensuring the network stays 'on the same page', finding equivalence across the network as well as beyond the sex workers' movement. Supporters are crucial, especially because urban activism in India is still in English, in the city, and the network's sex workers who do not know English are largely left out of the conversation, which means, a lot of the knowledge must be orally relayed to people, while being 'trained' to increase their capacity to work in the network. Added to this are monumental tasks like drafting bylaws for the network, translating them

into regional languages, and translating back to English, to be edited. During the 2019 Anti-Trafficking Bill discourse, supporters translated parts of the bill that directly affected sex workers, held state and district wise consultations, collected comments and signatures from all the collectives before feeding it back to make a network wide response to the bill, to then translating it once again to send it as a collective response from the sex workers. All this to be done within a week when the bill was going to go through without consultations – comments were invited a week before posting. Additionally, supporters were also creating a coalition of academics and lawyers to support the sex workers' response.

'Cultural' Icons of the Movement

Celebration is a network-wide language understood by all collectives. Commemorations of 'special' days like Sex Workers' Pride, Sex Worker's Rights Day, or the International Day to End Violence Against Sex Workers act like checkpoints to reflect, share and think about the movement and the activities happening within the collectives and networks. 'Celebrations' can usually involve district-wise meetings, protests against issues they currently face, or just drink and food. Sometimes, these commemorative days are used to forge new alliances with the neighbourhood police station, put up a stage and dance, or even just take a break.

Special, nationwide, large events like the *Festival of Peace* and the *Festival of Pleasure* organised by the networks in the country (NNSW and AINSW) become spaces of confluence and solidarity, but more importantly, of celebration, dance, and song. These more 'Indian' ways of celebrating, and transferring knowledge with each other has been occurring against the backdrop of the global movement's larger motifs, like the red umbrella, a symbol of love, and need for protection used as a sign of safety and

speaking to each other by hidden sex workers. These known motifs, along with English phrases like Sex Work is Work, Sex Work is Decent Work, and Rights Not Rescue are used alongside other regional phrases and slogans. These phrases have been translated, understood, and internalised so that non-English speakers know exactly what they mean while shouting these slogans or, using them at a protest, conference, or talk, together with regionally understood slogans, like "*jyaan orru laingikathozhilali aanu*" (I am a sex worker) in Malayalam, a language that did not allow for the worlds of sex and work to come together.

The network recognises the importance of imagery, recording crucial points, and putting up photographs of themselves in large groups, holding banners and using special icons and logos to signal the existence and persistence of a network of sex workers spread across the country. These

images are uploaded in newsletters, the website and across NNSW's social media. I curated an online presence on the job search and networking website, LinkedIn based on the board's agreement, because in many ways it was a political choice: here is a network of sex workers posting jobs, engaging with other workers, while telling the world about what they have been doing. This imagery is in direct contrast to popular imagery that exists

about sex workers – usually based on the street, lining the walls on either side of a 'dark, seedy alley' across Google searches, Oscar Winning documentary films, Bollywood, and popular TV.

Figure 21: The colour red has historically been associated as a colour of sin and seduction, marking it on sex workers who then reclaimed it as their colour. The red umbrella, much more recent in its association, was introduced at the "prostitutes pavilion" at the 'prostitutes pavilion' at the 2001 Venice Art Biennale and has since become a symbol of sex worker rights around the world.

In some cases, video footage is used; for Ambedkar Jayanti in 2022, as for all Jayantis before it, a professional video crew makes a film about sex workers' celebration. Movies, therefore, are important, because they become artefacts to the movement, no matter whether they come from the community, or from outside it. The network often engages in creating video records of their own stories to provide an alternative story to what exists about them.[50]

[50] Notably, through 2004-2006, NDTV, a news channel in India has steadily covered the work that VAMP and SANGRAM were doing without an 'angle' beyond journalistic reporting, and without questioning the rights or wrongs of sex work. One of the films archives the history of collectivisation among Sangli's sex worker, another covered the Sangli floods of 2004, when sex workers from across Sangli came together to provide relief for the town.

Figure 22: Aesthetic choices are interrupted when workers have limited time to set their backgrounds up for a video they are recording to put a quick message out into the world. The shot above is one from "Sex Workers Speak Out!", a project by and for sex workers from the Network of Sex Work Projects, an International organisation that connects sex worker led collectives worldwide. These little videos are as much documentation as documentary films.

Because so many of these artefacts have been recorded and published, it became easier for a communications coordinator like me to direct media persons to the information regarding questions for which answers have not changed instead of the workers having to relay them again; questions that never seem to go away (violence against sex workers, sex work and trafficking, child trafficking, saviourism, intimate sexual details, HIV statuses and so on). Workers who are already burnt out could be doing something else entirely instead of repeating themselves.

Drawing to Understand the Network

Every time I think that I know where power lies in the network – with the president, with one or the other supporter, I am proven wrong. Each person shifts power according to their experience of what they have to deal with. When the matter is about law or academia, the supporters well versed in it take the job up. If it is about some women complaining about police violence, they collectivise on their own and take the task of visiting the station on their own with women from other districts/states. It seems more about who carries the burden of each crisis. Some of these issues the women have dealt with

earlier, and know how to mitigate. While they are training to become paralegals, they currently still need supporters.

Jo's journal entry (2021)

I often struggled to understand the network and its working. I had skills and time, but I did not know where to put them until the opportunity arose. My frustration with not understanding the expansiveness of the network, not being able to meet them, ask them all my questions as a co-worker and being stuck in London got me into drawing up simple flowcharts to make sense of the network before me.

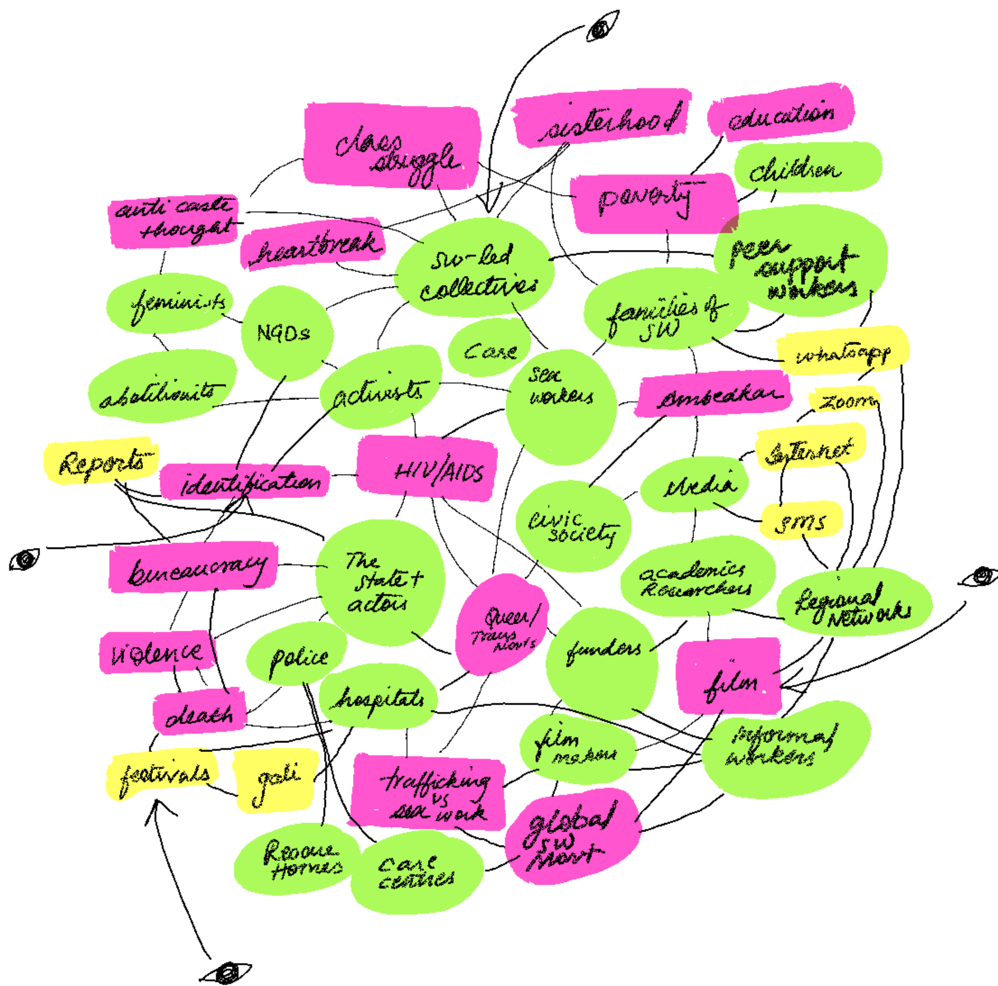

Figure 23: The identity of a sex worker is a deeply networked one (Latour, 2005). The eyes point at the four patches I approach this networked world with.

Measurement and visualisation have been central to the growth social network analysis (Freeman, 2000). Traditional understandings of the network show it as a start with many focal points connecting each other but Riles (2000) argues that the network takes a circular form where networkers have an innate interest and passion to network, whether in salaried time or not, rather than networking as 'part of the job' of being in an NGO. For sex workers at NNSW, networking and being visible has become a matter of life and death. If they are left unseen, they will not receive funds, and/or policies will be made that hurt them.

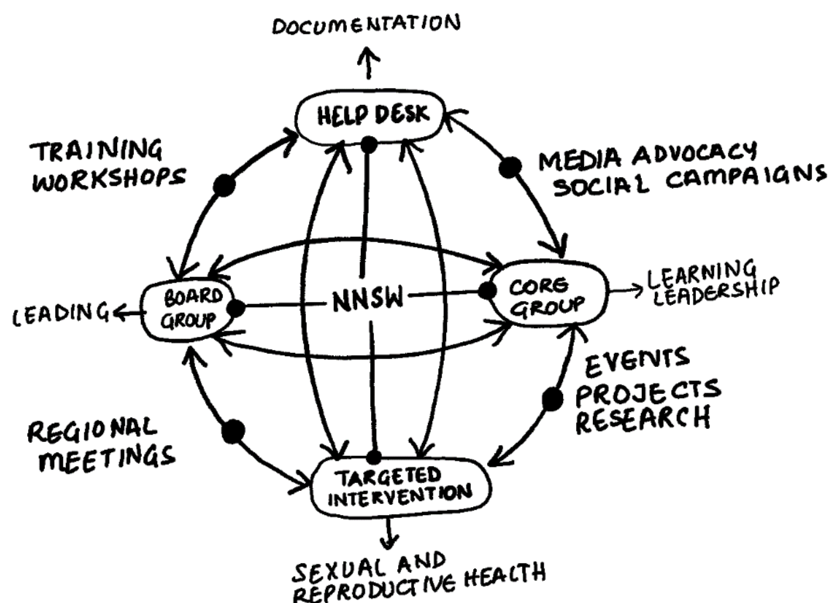

Figure 24: In this visual, the network revolves around the work that people do, rather than around the people that do the work. It does not matter who does the work as long as it gets done for the good of the larger community.

There are many more forms that the network takes: NNSW is both an institution as well as a network of institutions (collectives). Drawing these networks out to visualise the entities in conversation with each other gives us an opportunity to zoom out and understand motivations for sex workers to network like this, when there is (1) no 'good' money in running a network

or an NGO[51], (2) it takes a different set of skills to network beyond the sexual economics that sex workers are used to.

The network's focal points are the projects connecting the rest of the network with each other. State organisations work on the same things, together, from different geographical areas. HIV Targeted Interventions will always be a focal point because sex workers and sex work are tied to HIV, and the National AIDS Control Organisations fund these peer-coordinated interventions, which are at the core of all the work the network does, whether during new crisis periods, or festivals (in reference patch five). The board group steers what happens with the network while the core group learns the leading as it is being done.

There is an acute understanding of mortality within the movement. More network members are always being taught what work needs to be done, and how to do it. In the time I was writing up the thesis, the help desk ran for a year, giving many community members their formal documentation. While the crises keep existing, the solution often relies on funding from external sources. The actors working on the tasks at hand, thus, are irrelevant. Not dispensable, but the movement is heavily dependent on the work getting done and not who is doing the work.

I discovered depth in the network by working on one project at a time. With my growing understanding of each collective's work, and in my doing it with them, I shared an intimacy with workers on different projects. It was also about whether I had the capacity to pull off the tasks that needed to be done, and then hold the fort on my own. In case I could not do a task, no more similar tasks would be given to me; in my own mind, it felt like a game

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[51] The concept of 'accha paisa' or good money is used to talk about the amount sex workers (among other workers) can earn for the labour they exert (not just in sex work).

with levels. Every time a new task was entrusted to me, I was surprised because I did not know the network was doing this work. Every time I got involved in an event or a conversation, I learnt something new about how the network was creating connections. At no point did I feel like I could assemble the network neatly in points and arrows –network members clash, run away, travel through, across and over the network.

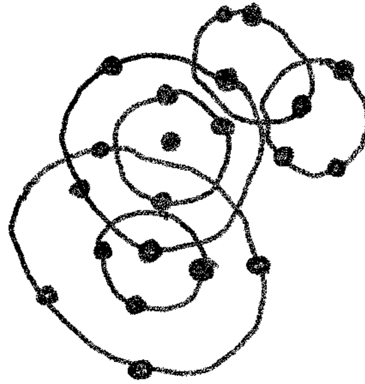
Within my use of network visualisations and concepts, I was unable to illustrate the degrees of power each actor, mediator or intermediary held in the network, even though I was able to note their presence. Moreover, there are many groups of people that become part of the network at certain points and dim out at others, technologies as well; there perhaps needs to be a temporal element to the visualisation of networks that although is not within the scope of this thesis, should be in the scope of others. There is also no space for subjective interpretations of the network, but instead, a rigidity of categories to be able to flatten the network to describe it. However, I was/am more interested in the way different people from the network and outside of it experience the network through their individual connections with it, instead of as cogs in the system.

Networks to Collectives

In this patch, I spent considerable space and time discussing the creation, work, and translation of the network to its collective members' lives. However, as Mische (2003) argues, it is not only discourse and language that makes collective action, but the interactive context within which the discourse is held. What this means for NNSW (and for this patch) is that since most conversation within the collective is about violence, crisis, and the need to collectivise in the face of continued crisis, shared every day, communication involves a jointly constructed idea of violence, collective

action, as per the ‘rules’ of the collective in terms of roles, relations, reactions, and negotiations of power, etc. These meanings are inherently ambiguous, multivocal and dynamic, with each member holding shared and individual meanings of words, phrases, arguments, and understandings.

These dynamic, shared meanings within NNSW construct social relations (which was initially about protecting themselves from the AIDS epidemic, but then became about strengthening the capacity of sex worker leaders). These relations shift, and are multilayered as they are experienced on both the collective and individual level of the members. Within this shared collective, meaning making, identities, relations and ideas reactivated, deactivated, visibilised, or kept hidden based on the constraints of their social settings. The next patch explores the nature of these shared meanings in the collective through workshops in Sangli and Vijayawada, to see what the network is, and what it means to people at an interpersonal level, especially during moments of crisis and need.



III

संघटन हमारी शक्ति है

The Collective is Our Strength

"Sangatan Humari Shakti Hai[52]*"*: (Net)working on the Margins

Based on the conversations and rapport I built while working at the network, this patch is located in Sangli, Maharashtra and Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh where peer leaders and I collaborated together for workshops on networking, trust and crisis to 'second line leadership' to both record and understand what these words meant in their daily work for the collective or Community Based Organisation (CBO)[53]. This patch explores how collectives connect and work with each other, what personal networks are like, and how they become public networks or shared networks. Who becomes/is a part of these networks and who stays in them?

During my time with NNSW, I managed to build the most rapport with my interlocutors from the Telugu-speaking states (Andhra Pradesh and Telangana) and Maharashtra. To spend more time with two groups of collectives in these two states instead of a cross-state initiative, I chose Sangli, because of its deep history with the movement, and Vijayawada, for members across Andhra Pradesh and Telangana to attend a Telugu language workshop[54]. I assumed the places I would hold these workshops would be my two field sites, beyond my larger field site of the network I had

[52] The network is our strength (translated from Hindi to English).

[53] The participants interchangeably used both words to mean the collective of peer outreach workers, crisis intervention workers and anyone else involved with a formal CBO or informal 'collective'.

[54] Additionally, I knew the Marathi context because I was born and studied for my undergraduate degree in Mumbai. My family moved to Hyderabad (the capital of Telangana) a decade ago, increasing my proximity and understanding to the language and cultural experience of being Telugu. These personal experiences made it easier for me to build rapport with interlocutors in these two states than interlocutors who spoke my mother tongue, Malayalam (in Kerala-based collectives), a language and culture that had changed in my household since it became a hybrid, diasporic experience that was unrelatable for Keralites living in Kerala.

experienced online. Both the workshops in this patch and interviews in the next patch were funded through the Open Society University Network (OSUN) Engaged Scholar Award, given to scholars working in close and long-term relationships with community organisations.

I had been working with NNSW for a year by the time we did the workshops, but I spoke to network members as a researcher because of the Engaged Scholar Award, which made me a facilitator within a 'project' with a start and end, and not as an employee of NNSW. The distance I had by being in London when I began working and not within the network in person meant that I could speak to members when they were in their rest spaces, and not at work/in the office/in the morning hours. With this distance, we could be free, fewer colleagues, they could show me their cats, and I showed them my indoor plants. This distance slowly disappeared as I embedded myself in the work of the network in the coming months, and all the time I spent with colleagues was in meetings, events or festivals, and impending 'work' hanging above our heads.

For this sub-project, the network and I finalised research questions and workshop plans through multiple Zoom meetings with individual leaders, board meetings and rough drafts of workshop flows shared via email for feedback. Moreover, the fund let me pay my participants for their time when they sat for formal interviews of about one or two hours. I made this decision because interviews can be physically, mentally, and emotionally intense, apart from taking time they would otherwise spend working with the NGO or doing *dhanda*.

This patch is not only about how sex workers trust, and negotiate their responses to crises with each other, but a learning of how a sex workers' network works when there are so many competing things to do. Co-

facilitating the workshops in Sangli and Vijayawada gave me insight into how the network functions ‘outside’ sex workers’ rights advocacy and how the collectives create and reproduce through trust networks in their day-to-day practice. For this reason, this patch has details on how a typical event/intervention is planned within the network, what actors are roped in, and the highs and lows of networking as a process.

Method

After over two decades of work, NNSW and its collectives had already taken part in many research projects, both self-led and by researchers with designed projects coming to the NGO or collective for data collection/support and co-analysis. They remember and appreciated research projects that meaningfully involved them: co-authoring articles, planning workshops together, co-creating films developing existing hobbies, and skill-building that recognises the skills they have as sex workers (business, marketing, social media, communication, filming, legal supporters, peer support, data collection) and build from there out of community-led interest to learn (craft, stitching, drawing) than asking them to learn more ‘morally focused’ skills. Mindful of this, I requested a meeting to pitch what I was interested in with worker-leaders from VAMP in Sangli, and WINS in Andhra Pradesh, and understand what the communities would find worth engaging in.

Both groups (VAMP a little more) insisted the workshops be learning experiences and ‘fun’, ‘not depressing and traumatic’, which hinted about prior experiences with research and the sex working community in both places. This idea was comfortable for me too. I had been facilitating workshops since my undergraduate degree as a peer mental health support group facilitator in India, and was still something I was doing on the side

when the idea was being discussed with the groups. We decided on a facilitated workshop style activity and discussion-based event for both spaces, keeping joy and personal experience at the centre. I put together a 4-hour plan for a small group (10-12 people) filled with exercises and discussion points they had never explored before (after reading a few reports and speaking to leaders about what was already done, so as to not bore the participants). Another doctoral colleague at SOAS, Nora Wuttke, an experienced workshop facilitator on ethnography and art, helped me with drawing activities that firstly, got people comfortable participating with drawing techniques and breaking the discomfort that one walks into a space with, and secondly, using this comfort to delve into much more complex questions, like that of what a personal network would look like. The workshop plan, interspersed with games, tea breaks and promises of excellent food, was intended, by me, to make it a place of free sharing and chatting about 'daily things' – as much as possible for a person they knew but were meeting for the first time, with people they worked with every day.

Insights from the workshops are interspersed with my observations being a part of NNSW and VAMP as their Communications Coordinator.

Part I: Drawing Networks: Crisis, Safety and Trust in Vijayawada and Sangli

"Are you back in India?" My mind hung on the word 'back'. Although I have always been someone for whom going *back* home to India made sense, this time I was not too sure: home had become London after staying in the same house for 2.5 years. I didn't know if I was coming to a whole new place. The first three days back home were consumed by jet lag, which I tried avoiding by forcing meals, sleep times, and getting my body used to the newly

strange heat. Within a few days after I landed, I was already in a couple of NNSW meetings. Sleepy, but now with a different background, my face only a silhouette because I was sitting against the bright sun, compared to London, where I had excitedly placed my table in front of the windows to be the first person in the house to bask in whatever light filtered through.

"Jo, arrange a meeting for 4 pm today"; my mind automatically starts counting back until it stops and remembers I don't need to. At least for a month.

Sangli

There was a lot of anticipation and imagining what everything would be like before I reached Sangli. Since I would be meeting people I knew well in every other way other than through physical proximity, I was nervous about spending entire days with them. I was also excited, to be active 'on the ground' as they would say, visiting the office, the Targeted Intervention centres, and the *galis* that I had heard of and could only imagine up until now. For the Sangli workshop, I was told there would be 21 people – 9 more than I planned for, and I had to reconfigure even my plan B to accommodate for the change. Since we hadn't booked anything before I got there, thankfully we were able to make sure there was more food and enough art material for everyone's use.

Kiran waved at me from inside the auto-rickshaw and moved for me to keep my bag and shift myself into the seat. We immediately squeezed each other's hands in excitement, giddy with familiarity and happy to add touch to the eyes and ears that had experienced each other on Zoom for a year. Kiran spoke to me exactly how we had spoken on Zoom, "We are all so excited that you are coming". I replied I had been too and that I am

simmering in so much excitement that I have not been able to process it completely. As we slowed down by the hotel I was staying at, she said she would see me on Monday. The rickshaw driver was someone known to her. In the days that followed, I understood how the network of auto-rickshaw drives in the town were connected to the women in the *gali*.

I met Ayeesha a couple of hours later. She, too, came in a rickshaw driven by a person known to her. A few hours later, unprompted by me, she mentions, “I don't travel in rickshaws of people I don’t know. I don’t feel safe”. I didn't ask her why immediately, but days after, while walking from the office after the workshop to the police station for Jayanti rally permissions, she mentioned that she doesn’t walk this much, especially not alone. I asked what she meant, wondering whether it was the roads, her stamina, her dislike for walking, or something else. She told me she usually has a couple of trusted auto-rickshaw drivers she calls when she needs to travel. If the first driver is unavailable, he immediately checks with his trusted network of trusted friends to take her. Everywhere I needed to go, I was also protectively placed in the autorickshaw or car of a ‘friend’ of the workers or travelled pillion on scooters of VAMP members, Jaya or Razak.

“I look a certain way, Jo, and people who look like me are assumed to be sex workers, and while that is true in my case, it also attracts unwanted attention. I am stared at a lot, and I don’t feel safe walking,” Ayeesha says this after having lived in the two neighbouring towns of Sangli and Miraj for over half a decade, having made intimate connections with those more local than her. Yet, her identity as a migrant worker from Nepal takes precedence over her other identities, having always presented as a Nepali (assumed) outsider in Sangli for sex work. For Ayeesha, the collective and personal network lies in the safety she feels to be able to work, as well as

protecting other women presumed to be outsiders and treated as such. The network and community thus kept including and growing inside my mind, drawing maps of all these people who were protective of, and involved in the health and safety of the workers at VAMP.

All the women who attended the workshop in Sangli were from the VAMP *Tanta Mukti* (crisis intervention) team – small groups of peer workers who are the first point of contact when workers from the *galis* across Sangli, Miraj, Karad, Satara, Icchalkaranji, and Kolhapur needed assistance to handle complaints/crises ranging from client trouble (abuse, harassment, not wearing condoms, non-payment), arguments between sex workers, arguments between sex workers and their *gharwalis*, police violence, trouble at children's schools, issues with documentation, and even issues between peer support workers and sex workers to name a few. Both Kiran and Ayeesha agreed that this group within VAMP might gain the most from a workshop on leading and networks – information and inspiration they could all use for their vital crisis intervention work. On the evening that I reached my hotel, Ayeesha and I discussed the plan and figured out the art materials I needed and the food. This was the first time I was telling Ayeesha the entire plan I had drafted: the activities, what I was going to ask, and what might come of the workshop. We chatted about everything, thoughts bouncing, some not completed, excited, but also nervous until we both fell asleep until about 7:00 pm when she had to go home. I was anxious because I felt underprepared for a workshop in two days, but Ayeesha, being the coordinator she is, calmly told me exactly where we were going to get the food, and where the art supplies would come from.

Letting her confidence rub off on me a little, I rest for the big day.

The four lines of the Zoom room broke open when I stepped into the SANGRAM office. I walked up to the building and took off my sandals. The first thing I saw was the large frangipani tree in a small circular courtyard-like area. The office rooms surrounded this courtyard. The SANGRAM office's training room, big with many windows, and where we were doing the workshop, was a place comfortable for all of us: Ayeesha and Kiran worked from here, I had seen this room through my Zoom application, and the participants had all been here countless times for different trainings, meetings, elections, celebrations, and more. What I thought from my Zoom room was *the office*, was just a meeting hall for Ayeesha – the villa had other offices, and the main office had an AC installed, where everyone hung out, particularly in the heat of April. Throughout my time here, I saw people working, but more often, I saw people just hanging out in this space. I noticed people moving – my Zoom room had ensured they only appeared sitting. People used all parts of the villa to chat, take afternoon naps, catch up on work, sit around, have a smoke outside on the concrete benches, peeked into the kitchen for chai throughout the day, but like clockwork, sat in a large circle at lunchtime. For the first time, I saw what Ayeesha meant when she said that communities don't only need resources and money but also physical space to gather, relax and rest in between, often away from 'the rest of the world' as conceived differently for every single person there.

Ayeesha introduced the workshops as 'training' to the participants. In her experience, calling it a 'meeting' stressed people out. Although, calling it 'training' put the weight of learning *from* me into the workshop, instead of being just a cosy place to talk, and learn from each other, as I had planned. I see my role in these spaces as a facilitator for these workshops but also as a bystander who saw the workshops and ideas that I put together dismantle and rearrange themselves in their own way. This experience was different

from my usual workplace, where as a facilitator I was to keep things together. Ayeesha and I set up mats once we got to the office, and Kiran met us there. I walked around the different office rooms saying hello to those who recognised me from our Zoom interactions, laughing with those who didn't. A cup of tea later, our participants trickled in. Ayeesha took 'attendance'; since this was a part of the 'training' being offered in the office, it was important to keep track of who had been around and accounted for[55].

Figure 25: A shot mid-workshop of participants discussing an ideal training workshop.

Nora, who I mentioned earlier with her expertise on drawing as an ethnographic method, said that I needed to get the participants comfortable with their pen, their paper and drawing as an action that brings to it no judgement. Practising funny (to experience) and fun (to do) drawing exercises gets people to not take themselves and their drawings too seriously. The first exercise was drawing portraits of each other without looking at the paper in front of us. As Nora predicted, we laughed about drawing and how badly we had drawn each other. But, after the fun

[55] If too many trainings were missed, a coordinator would go check on the wellbeing of the worker.

of the activity itself, the participants wanted me to make it make sense: “Why did we do that? Why did we draw our faces, what can we learn from it?”. The two types of portraits we drew, one from the outline of the person in front of us and the other from the nose of the person, would show us two different perspectives of looking at the same person, of how many different ways there are to look at anything. It made total sense, but their question also told me more about how ‘training modules’ need to make sense, even in its fun.

The participants were familiar with the work language of the NGOs – programmes, training, intervention, targets, and sustainable goals. A lot of groundwork in everyday interaction and problem-solving was translated into these words, which made them tangible, reproducible, and understandable for a wider audience (other NGOs, collectives, countries and reporting on impact). Mindful of this, but also in the interest of my own facilitation style to create something during the workshop that the participants can take home, I added a component on ‘workshop building’ where participants could write down ideas for workshops they would like to facilitate or see facilitated, and how they would build it from scratch: the logistics of location, food, audiences, activities, budgets, and takeaways, ideas on what they would like to teach or learn, and whose help they would take putting everything together. Inspired by conversations with some first and second-line leaders in the network on building morale and interest in leadership, I wanted them the workshop’s takeaway to be that they could organise these workshops themselves too, instead of waiting for someone to do it for them. At the end of the activity, many new groups were made from shared interests in certain themes, topics, and event types – people who wanted to screen a movie, teach a computer class, an information session on Ambedkarite thought. These ideas did not come easy. The first

set of ideas rippling through the room were concerned with condom usage, health training, and outreach work – subjects the women specialised in through years of training. After more thinking, more asking to see what was missing in the trainings they attended, they came up with topics they were generally interested in.

Figure 26: Faces from the drawing activity.

Figure 27: Examples of the events planned in the last segment, on report writing, how to write computer code and Sangatna Bandhna (how to tie together a collective, or how to network to create a collective).

A key topic of interest and conversation during the workshop and in the breaks between were my tattoos, and my gay identity, which followed their way into the *gali*, as I came to be known as *tattoo wali jo* (Jo with the tattoos). The workshop seemed like a prelude to actually knowing the

collective and network – an overdue, long introduction simply called a 'training' where 'Jo from London' was finally met, and understood with prodding questions and curious-shy glances. During, and after my workshop experience in Sangli, I felt the pressure of facilitating a good workshop drop from my shoulders. I realised that it was less about the content and impact of the workshop, but more an exercise in seeing how the network, the collectives within it and the people within functioned with each other through rhythms of crises and joy. I did not try to 'fix' my workshop plan, and kept it exactly the same so that whatever had to happen, would.

Vijayawada

The workshop for teams from various districts of Andhra Pradesh and Telangana was held in Vijayawada, where none of the teams resided, creating a "blank document" feeling for the people who came – we stayed together, ate together, lounged together, and worked together for a night and two days. I mentioned earlier that it is important for many collectives to create sex worker-only spaces for individuals to switch off from the rest of the world on the days they are with like-minded people. It was planned such that teams from each district could use the first day to review their annual progress (this happened in April 2022, so annual review meetings were timely) and use the second day to discuss future plans and workshop with me.

Figure 28: The hall we were doing the workshops in with its map of Andhra Pradesh and the district of Vijayawada peeking from the left.

The annual meeting and the workshop in Vijayawada were being held in was in the centre of the city at the Christian Social Service centre – a safe place for those visiting, offered to them by a long-time friend and supporter of Meera, my point of contact and head from Womens Initiatives (WINS), an NGO that works across Telangana and Andhra Pradesh. Meera is also the Telugu language supporter and translator for NNSW, monumental in liaising between the collectives and the larger network. WINS' involvement with Christian organisations reminded me of my own experiences working for a Christian care centre in Kamathipura, a 'red-light district' in Mumbai for my Masters' dissertation fieldwork. There was some amount of discomfort immediately – the organisation had a heavily moralistic approach, viewing sex workers and their children as only worthy of rescue, often using words like 'downtrodden, disease ridden, and immoral' to describe both mothers and children; the social workers had less compassion for the children in the centre because they were 'just' sex workers' children, having had their 'destiny written for them'. Working at the organisation was a crucial moment in my life – I realised I found these

formulations of human life unempathetic, unjust and only furthering colonial, missionary saviourism[56].

At 5:45 am, when I got off the bus in Vijayawada, a supporter from the centre picked me up and took me to the venue. The crunch of the gravel courtyard at the centre alerted my arrival to Meera and Durga, the head of Me and My World, the sex workers' collective in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. I ran to hug them. With many hand gestures and broken Telugu, we sat down to chat about my trip from Hyderabad to Vijayawada.

Almost immediately after settling in my room there, we set off across the road to find some coffee (the social centre only served tea). "You're lucky you came in April, Jo, otherwise you would have really suffered blazewada". Vijayawada was called "Blazewada" because of the extreme heat it suffers in the months after April. The day I reached was cooler than usual because of the winds from the Indian Ocean blowing upwards in the month. Meera and Durga had just returned from another field visit, and I understood that this was a significant part of the network-building they did. It was impossible getting large numbers of people from the communities to travel to a single destination; it was more efficient for supporters and peer leaders to travel to each district and have back-to-back field visits to hold meetings, review work and make plans for the future, further meetings, how to deal with crises they came across, taking information to them. The coordinators and peer leaders in each district and within each collective were key connections they had to keep together because they took care of the day-to-day work of the network through the collective. The loss of interest in a peer leader meant the doors to the collective and network of sex workers

[56] A year later, in 2023, I came to know that there was a communication breakdown between WINS and the supporter from the Christian organisation regarding money, work and conflicting understandings of sex worker collectivisation and conflict within politically charged environments like a collective.

closed for the rest of the network, and no network can work with only a few nodes.

*

At this particular monthly meeting, two other groups had also come to 'watch' the proceedings, to see how they could be a part of the network and bring their own collective to the fore. One was a self-formed and led collective of sex workers from the semi-nomadic Dommara community in Hyderabad. The second was a group of older sex workers not allowed to work in government-sponsored HIV Targeted Intervention programmes since they had crossed the age of 60. Older sex workers relied on their peer support work within TI programmes and the CBOs they had created were very much intact, embedded in the community they were from. Fearing not being able to advocate for the TI programmes meant not being employed with the state AIDS control organisation, they wanted to join the larger network of sex workers led organisations in Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, and in extension, NNSW.

The review meeting commenced with Rani, a peer leader, introducing all groups and guests, then delving into the foundational principles adhered to within the network. These principles, reiterated and scrutinised across various meetings, emphasise the affirmation that "Sex work is work, that sex and the body cannot be sold, and that the collectivisation is the most important work", upholding the bodily autonomy of sex workers, rejecting the notion that they sell their bodies and asserting their right to self-determination. Underscoring the importance of collective action and emphasising the necessity for unity among sex workers advocating for their rights, Rani reminds the collectives of the main goal of the network:

decriminalisation, amidst challenges such as societal stigma and government neglect.

These tenets illustrate a feeling of national, and even global relatedness and kinship with sex workers around the world fighting for similar rights in different contexts, in different parts of their journey to decriminalise sex work in their own nation states – a forged transnationality with shared interests, even with individuals one has never met (Schein, 1998).

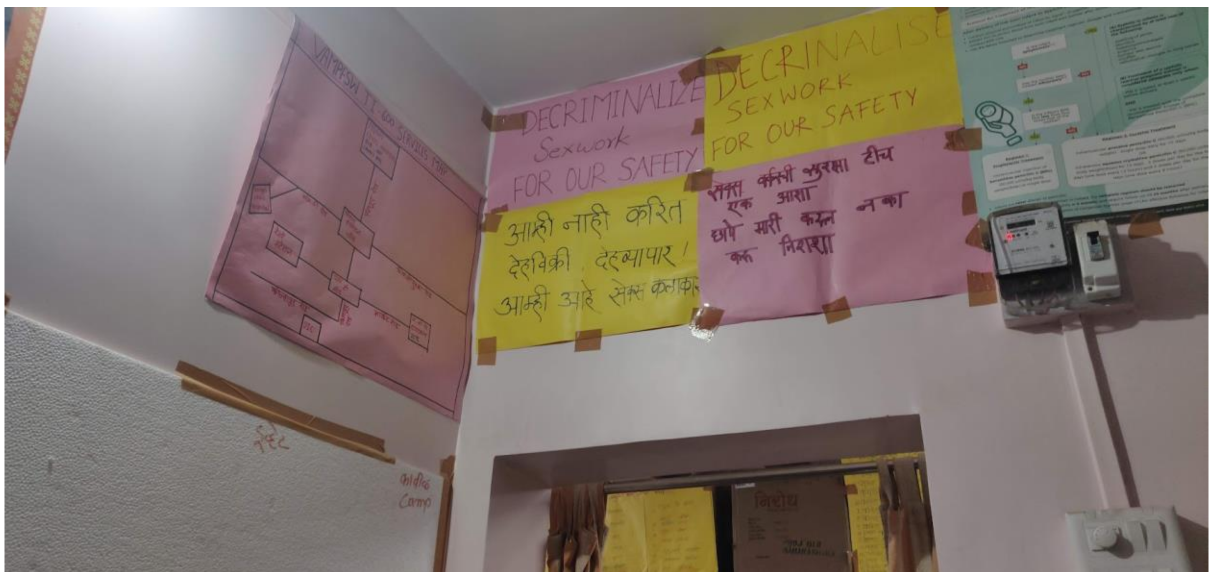


Figure 29: From the VAMP Miraj Targeted Intervention Office: posters with some of the messages: 'Decriminalise Sex Work for Our Safety', 'We don't sell or exchange our bodies, we are sex workers', 'the safety of sex workers is our dream, raids (by the police) are disappointing.

The review meeting on the first day served as a space where collectives shared their experiences with each other: 'case studies' from each collective, of new connections they made, where they went for advocacy work, new crisis situations that might have come up, how they handled each situation, and what they were looking forward to. As an activity, each Community Based Organisation (CBO) present assigned a member from their 3-person group to write reports from the monthly review whose first task was drawing a comparison between a challenge and an issue to categorise cases and then adequately respond. Similarly, there is a lot of

conceptual work and understanding. that goes into network and community building: understanding the differences and similarities between groups, 'politics' of different organisations to know who would support what, who to reach out to based on power structures, and the meaning of slogans shared in the community so that it can be turned into action that comes from understanding.

This was an important section in the schedules of both monthly and annual meetings of the collectives here, as well as in larger NNSW board meetings – the sharing of strategies so that lessons can be shared across the board from the board representatives to the collectives who dealt with each issue. Strategy sharing is facilitated through workshops to focus on minute details across a range of affairs: dealing with police violence, abusive customers, verbally abusive landlords or even bureaucracies in schools that did not admit children with only their mothers' names. Technically, the problems and perpetrators are all the same at the state level, and eventually at the national level; everyone in the group faces similar issues but in different localised manners in their *galis*. The philosophy for this practice was to learn from the ground to the representative, and take lessons from the representative level from each state back to the localised ground level.

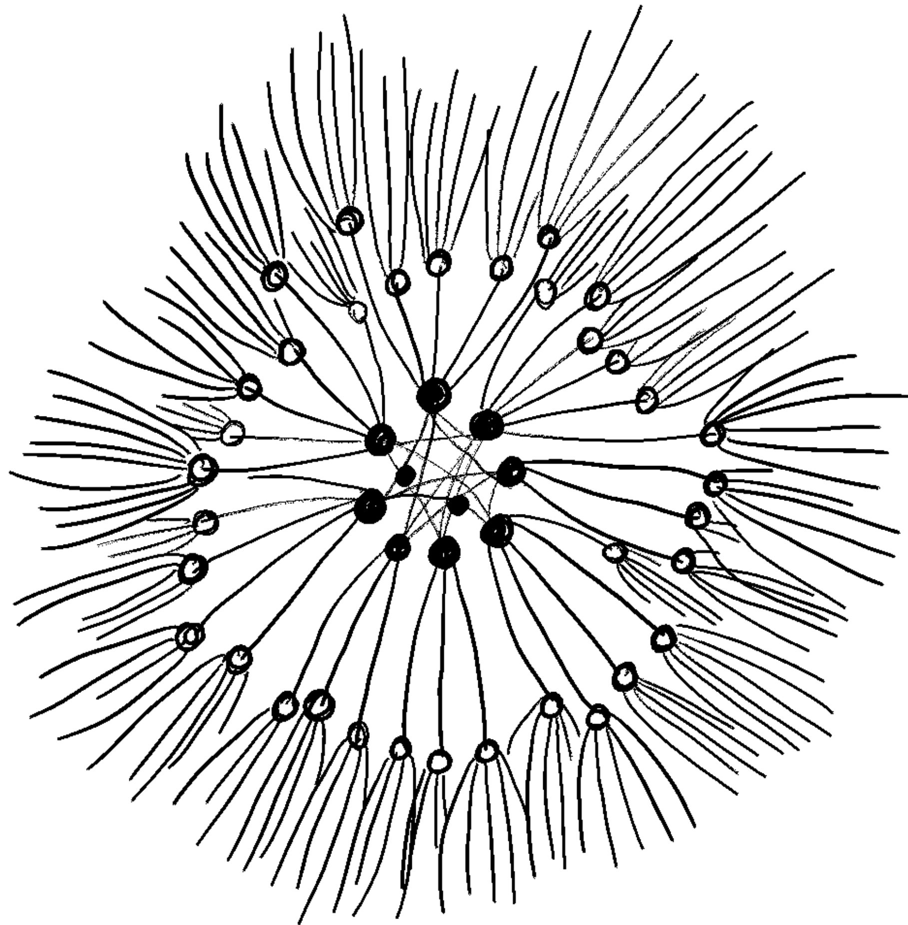


Figure 30: All lines run both ways, visualising the network.

To denote this in a visual form, the above drawing of information collection and flow looks like this to me: all lines running both ways. The information flows from everyday events and responses to community events, reported to peer workers within the Targeted Intervention team, crisis intervention team or individual trusted leaders and representatives in *galis*, who take it to state meetings for all district and area level leaders. From here, information travels to board meetings where support for bigger issues (for example, a fire in the *gali* that destroyed many houses requires monetary and rebuilding support) is discussed and strategies from all kinds of issues are shared and noted. This flows back to the states as the topic of meetings with the intervention teams on the ground, passed further along by word of mouth and/or formal training sessions through the network. For example,

when the Supreme Court of India announced a new directive on media representations, information was translated to all languages to be passed to every single sex worker until the fringes of the network.

Board members in the centre represent the state-wise collectives they lead, along with the interests of collectives and individuals there while also looking at the day-to-day running of the network: which projects to take up, which researcher to work with, statements to write, events to go to on a national level.

The two dots in the centre are the coordinators who must be aware of everything everywhere (the role I had taken up with Ayeesha). Board members have rich networks because they start from ground-level roles, building up as they come into the centre of the network. In my visualisation, the lines are not representative of the number of collectives, but only the flow of knowledge. These lines are connected to also denote the overlapping nature of relationships and knowledge; friends call friends in states other than their own regarding their problems instead of their peer representative in the collective. The collective runs through interpersonal relationships, resembling networks as understood by network theorists in anthropology, as well as kinship networks, pushing beyond a ‘work identity’, to be based on relatedness and affinity.

*

I played my part in these conceptual understandings by facilitating a discussion on sex workers' collectivisation by screening VAMP’s ‘Save us from Saviours’, a film many in the group had not seen before. Since it was translated in real time in small groups, the participants responded to the film with slightly delayed laughter, claps and eventually a lengthy

conversation on condoms. This was the first time the group saw people 'like them' talking in a familiar language, in a film made with the collective's support. They enjoyed the film's back stories and participatory methods the filmmaker used to make it *with* the collective rather than solely *about* them. I also added my experience working with different organisations around the world, talking about similarities in sex workers' situations nationally, regionally, and internationally.

The main activity planned for the workshop was to see how people made, defined, and reached out to their personal networks. Within this larger question, was an invitation to find comments on leadership styles, communication, and rapport building to work with each other.

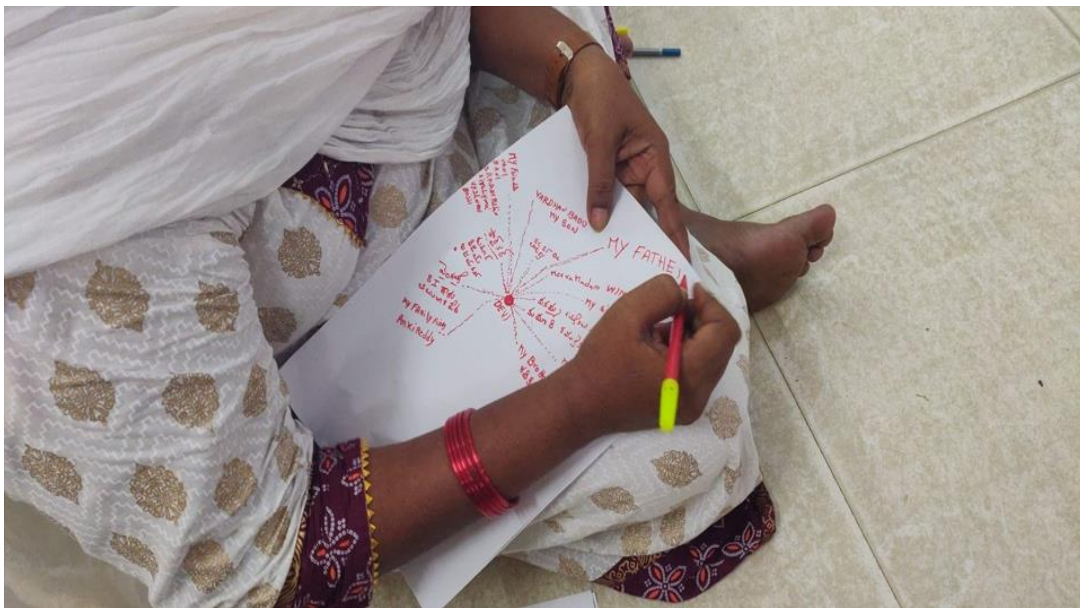


Figure 31: A participant draws a personal network in Vijayawada.

Part II: Faces to Networks

When we started drawing networks, most people wanted to understand who goes into a network[57]. Upon explaining a few categories (family, friends, partners, spouses, community members, leaders, help desk workers) and non-categories of floating people coming and going from people's lives (a police person called only in times of need or Jo, who came from London), most began with who they would call in their networks during an issue. Members from Sangli first thought of their crisis intervention leaders and teams from other localities and districts instead of their families, or children. This exercise on drawing networks is also about who is part of your network *first*, based on what happens to you daily and with whom you share those happenings. Even within sex worker communities, people with an overview of the problems the communities collectively face were trusted more than an individual with only the identity of being a sex worker. You had to be a sex worker and an active community organiser.

[57] In this patch, I have presented examples of individual networks from the workshops in Sangli and Vijayawada as I analyse them. I have also presented all individual networks side by side over a couple of pages as I do not want to leave them in the appendix. The connections between the networks are made clear in my writing and analysis.

Figure 32: A full picture of all the network drawings from the workshop in Sangli.

Some names turned up in nearly everyone's networks, which they noticed for the first time. "Oh, you also call Jaya? Me too", leading to an appreciation of the person in the discussion about them turning up during times of crisis. A lot of the participants in Sangli did not know how to read or write in any language – they were proficient communicators without the need for a written format – but I had not asked about this before. I had probably downplayed the importance of writing and drawing in my workshop, and Ayeesha expected that like most trainings they have experienced, this one will also be me speaking, and them listening.

Another challenge was trusting me with the names in their networks; the participants chose Hindi (Devanagari) or Roman characters they knew, or even symbols to depict who they meant in their networks, explaining to me what each character and dot meant instead of recording it on paper. This even translated to a drawing of a phone far away from the physical network drawings. The network erupting from the phone, on WhatsApp, was separated from the network of realities that they faced. People they worked with in reality were categorised there, even though connections were kept digitally.

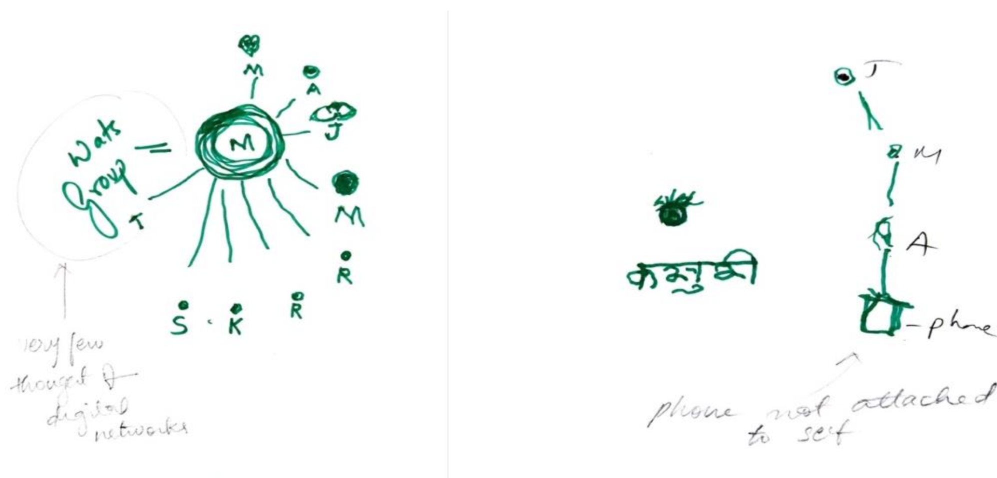


Figure 33: Two networks showing the existence of digital networks, one placing the phone far away from the self (annotations my own).

I also came from a digital world, and was only part of their world momentarily, for the morning before the workshop; I needed to be a part of their real world to build trust, which happened during Ambedkar Jayanti. Some of the real-digital divide of this particular kind was bridged in Vijayawada through the dancing the previous night, where I was able to insert myself and experiences of my body before the workshop into their worlds, and them into mine.

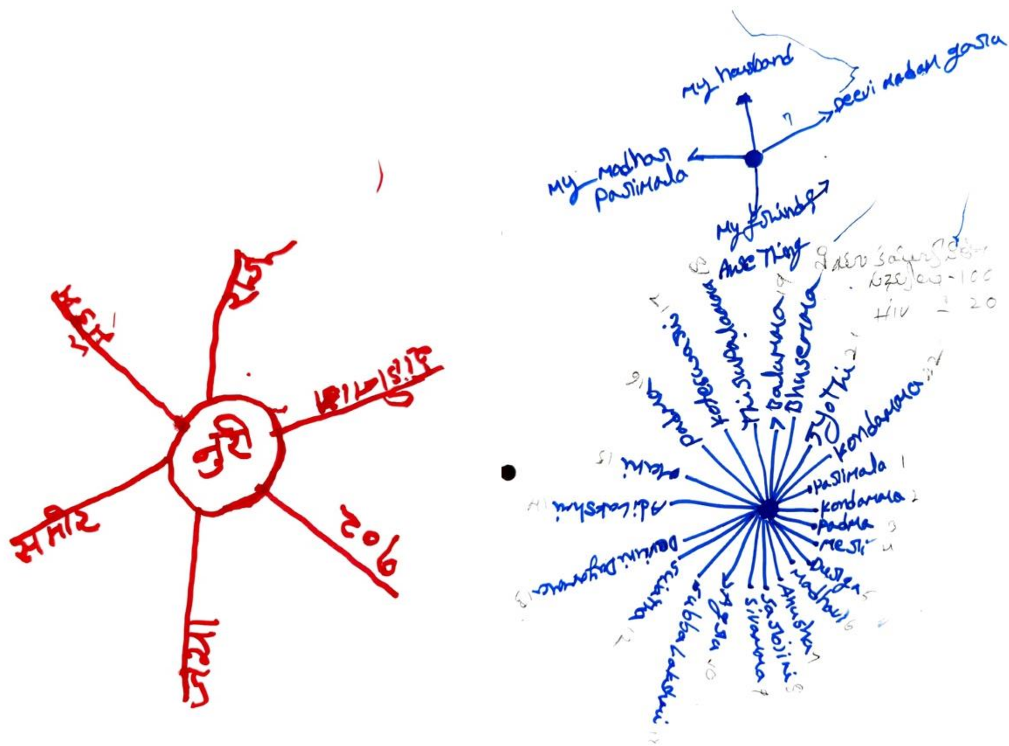


Figure 34: A sparsely populated network vs a detailed one.

Some networks were sparsely populated with critical community leaders and no one else (pictured above). When asked to detail out these networks, some of the participants spoke about how the particular network members they included did the bulk of the work, and the number of times they were called was more important for the members to plot them down as an important point of contact than the breadth of the network. This was insightful for me – not everyone thought of their networks in the way they

plotted everyone in their life, inner, outer, and transient circles. Some people just plotted those who had the strongest 'impact' on their own work. This conversation also led to talking about the overlaps of personal networks and public networks; in my own example drawing (pictured below), I detailed my family and NNSW but left out other work projects. Once I drew my network, some participants thought they had to draw me at the centre of their network – a misunderstanding because I could not communicate the idea better the first time around (pictured below).

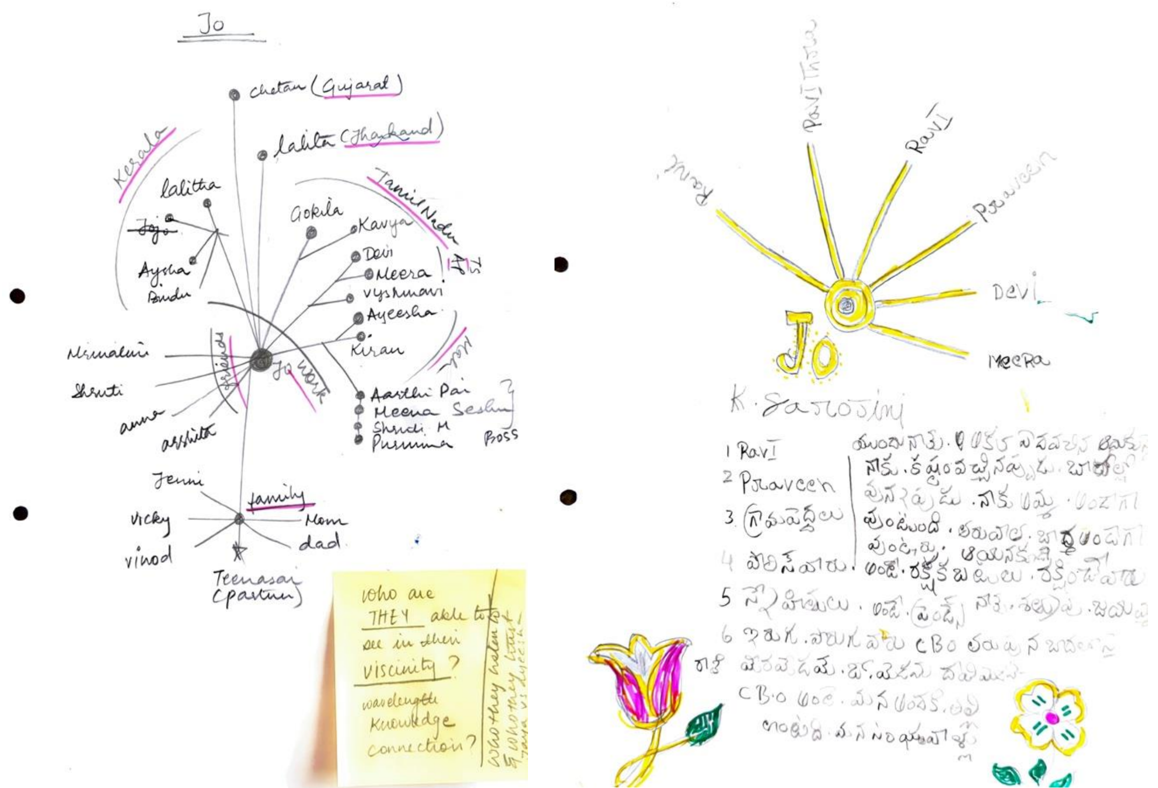


Figure 35: Jo at the centre of the network: a miscommunication.

Unprompted by me, there is a context, spatiality, and even a temporality attached to each person's network offered on paper. In retrospect, it isn't a reflective exercise for one afternoon. If we had more time, we could go into differently themed networks (personal, family, friends, crisis intervention,

work, office, client, police, and politician) based on the places we go to and spaces we occupy to then see how they interlap.

The network described eventually is also an edited version of the practised network – sitting in a group with other leaders and committee members, participants could also easily jot down names of people they want to keep those connections with. The network does not only exist in the past to but also in the future to keep those lines intact. The activity was not entirely seen as a 'useful' thing – after drawing the network, some members crumpled the piece of paper with "what is the use of me knowing who I talk to?". Some connections had no lines connecting back to the person, having people floating in the network. For me, the network in Maharashtra served as an insight into how networks were made of who we approached when in trouble. Of course, this was pre-determined because the participants were in crisis intervention groups, and crisis is on the forefront when it comes to working with the collective, network or me, a representative of the place they work for/with.

In both workshops, as we drew out networks, we talked about gaps (in people, time, events). Some felt they needed more friends to talk to beyond their workplace, some spoke about the place their family has within the networks, some looked at past and present networks to think about how they have changed and struck out people not in their networks anymore. Some networks had blood-related community members who were all peer leaders within the CBOs they were representing. There were few migrant workers within the networks, making these communities rooted in the same localities where generationally everyone knows everyone. Many sex workers lived and practised as families, basing their support networks also within the families. In Sangli, many women had fled destructive family

situations. These network points of the family remain interspersed with a mix of people in the political, state actor community of who is going to support.

The network is also seen as a mix of work, and play, of who we know, who we learn from, and who we help: “I did not know so many people were involved in my life, that I have helped so many people, and so many people have helped me”.

We discussed who is usually considered a leader within smaller and larger networks, and why some people are called for help, and not others. Drawing back to the first reference of the matrix, trust is built through action and response during times of crisis. If someone can be depended on enough times, they become a larger part of the network, as compared to someone who can only be contacted sometimes. Often, I heard leaders talking about other leaders across the network, second-line leaders talking about first-line leaders, and members of the community talking about specific people they can depend on. From this trust and reliance on people who have ‘acted’ when there was need for action, personal networks are built. Since a lot of the crisis moments are tied with personal lives of the workers (living in the *gali* together, work lives and personal lives in this case collapse into one), a sense of love and sisterhood bloom from work contacts.

Unlike Sangli’s crisis intervention groups, Vijayawada plotted families first: brothers, sisters, and then with ‘permission’ from the facilitator (me), partners. They felt they needed to ask me if they could put in some names (like a partner’s) as though it is forbidden in other contexts. I further understood the role of partners in the network when one of the leaders told me that the most discrimination she faced was from relatives with the

wealth to support her but did not, when she claimed the identity of being a sex worker. Instead, her partners supported the education of her daughter until her PhD. For this leader, her partners form a large part of her network because they are her support systems. Added to these partners who can provide monetary support, are also friends made in different places: movements, public and private offices.

One must notice how people with no visual idea of networks (as theorised) visualise them. Many had no idea they spoke to/were influential in the lives of so many people, while some were happy to share how power played a role in these networks by marking people like *sarpanches* (village heads), police personnel, and partners in a different colour, or with a bold outline, and decorations (pictured below). All the networks were largely circular, with the person in question at the centre of the network.

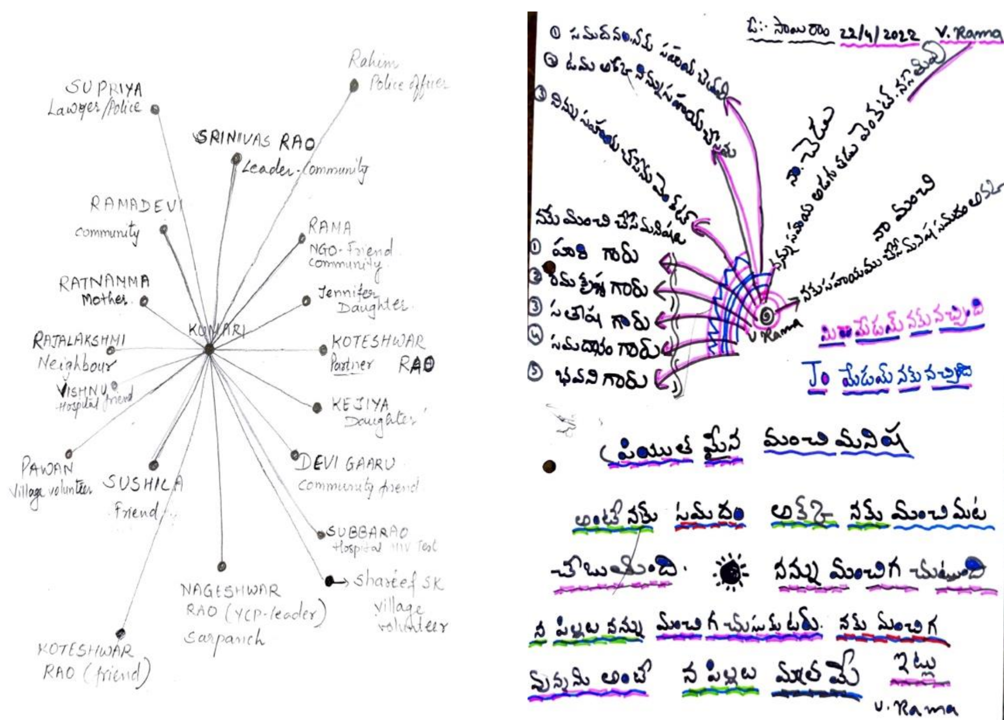


Figure 36: Examples of networks that were detailed to include places, actions, and relationships along with the names of those in the network. The one on the right, in Telugu, also has annotations of who the participant likes, who she dislikes but is still but is still part of her network, why she likes someone (for example, she says 'Samadam *akka* (older sister) gives good advice and looks after me well' and 'my kids look after me well, and are the reason for my happiness' as well as sentences indicating their relationship, like 'I helped Uma *akka*'.

Ravi Thanu

Ravi

Pravan

Praveen

Devi

Meera

JO

K. Saroojini

1 Ravi

2 Praveen

CBO

CB·O

network

దేవి

CBO President

vani

Help చేసినవాళ్లు

Namatha

Swathi

Bujjamma

NNSW

NGO'S FRIWES

NET WORK FRIWES
RATHNAMA
KIRAN

MY FATHER

(Died)

YARDHAN BADU
MY SON

My Friends
VANI
RANI
SANADRESHI
SIVALYMI
VYSHNAVI
BUJJI
Shamala

SC ST OC

Meera Madam WINS

MY SISTER

MADHN
Advocate

My Brother

MEENA SHADMAN (SANGAM)
ARHI MAN (SANGAM)

KASIN SISTER
VANI

MY FAMILY FRIENDS
AnkiReddy

MY Daughter
SINDURI

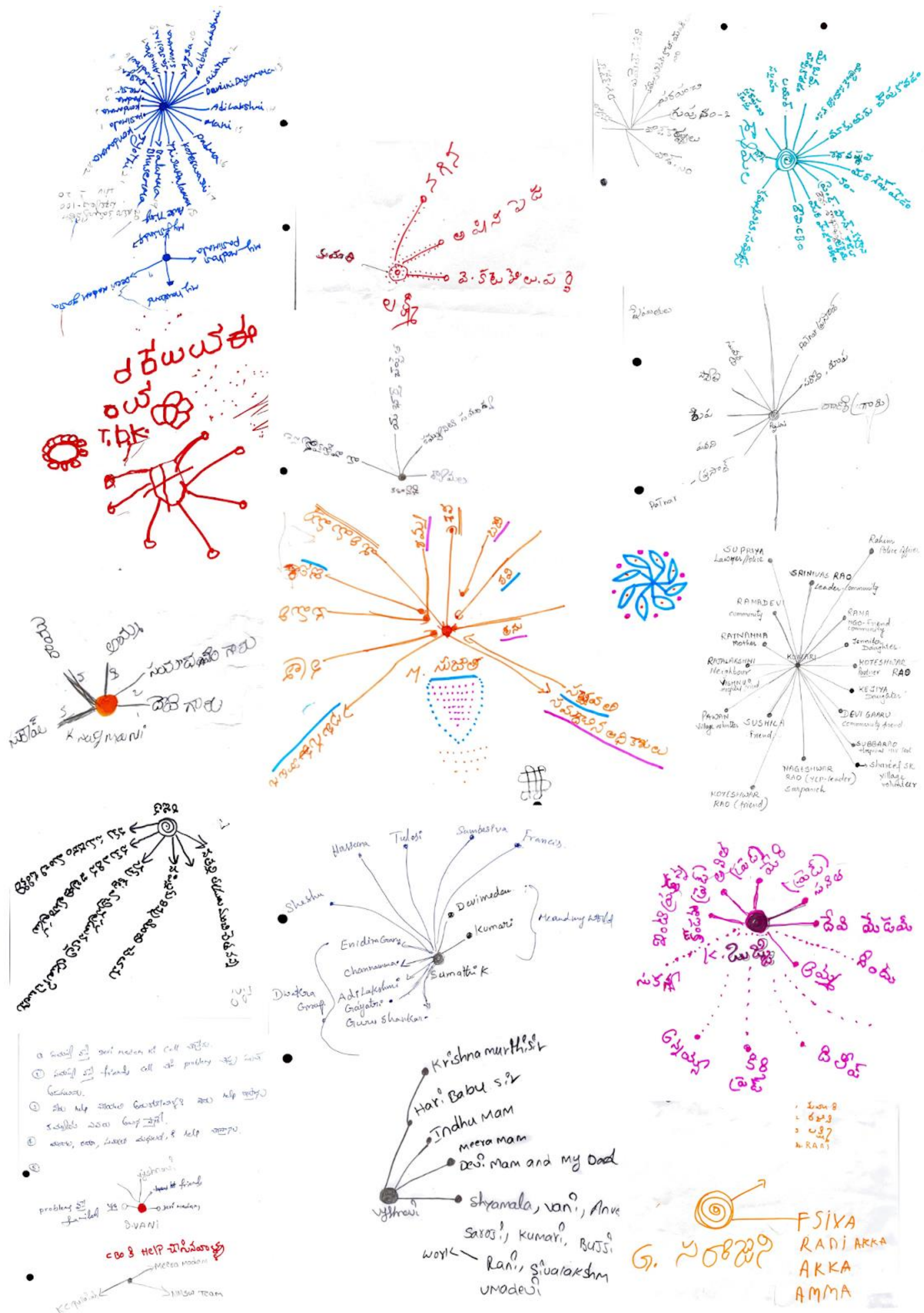


Figure 37: A full picture of all the network drawings from the workshop in Vijayawada.

Figure 38: A decorated network with designs and names of 'only the important people'.

The networks in Vijayawada gave me insights into networks as who is known and who can be trusted based on this activity of knowing and sharing blood, family, and ties. These networks were more detailed, decorated, and not always circular, with detailed notes on who is who, markers of where they met and how. Some of the largest networks belonged to those in higher positions in the CBO: our peer leader Durga, had an extensive network of almost 50 people consisting of the "main people she knows". Some networks put me in the network, even though we had never spoken before the workshop. The networks were categorised as partners, work, other groups, and even CBOs, connecting two CBOs and their workers. Some people separated networks for aspects of life: the helpdesk, for pleasure, for crisis; separating circles of people but also connecting themselves with all these circles.

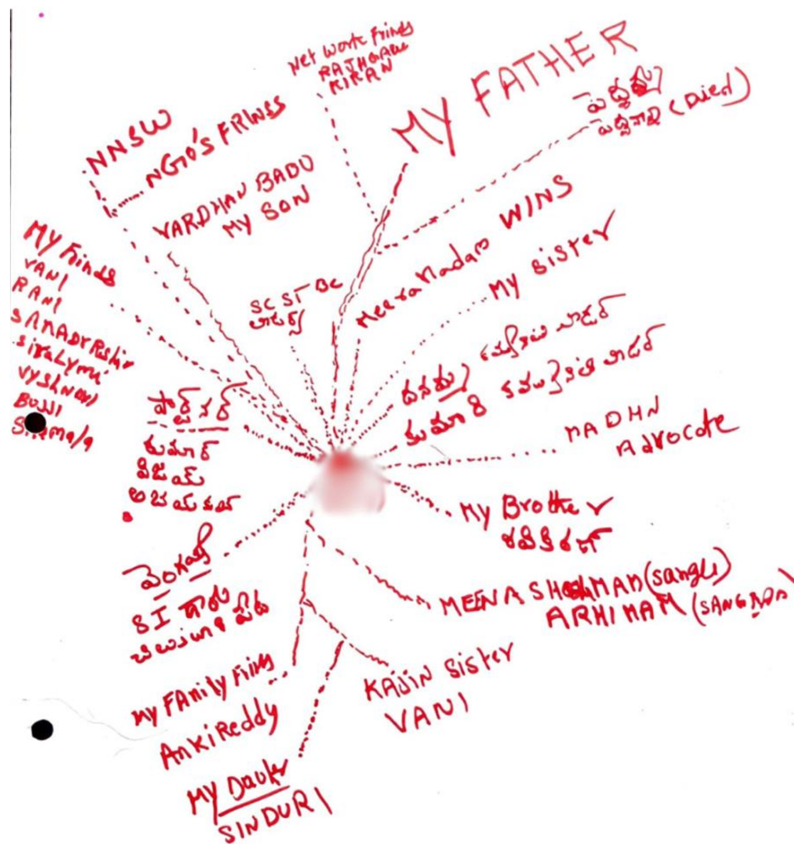


Figure 39: Durga's network as a peer leader and the face of the sex worker collective, Me and My World (an apt name for the network she drew) in Andhra Pradesh.

The energy in the room subsided when, while discussing notable persons within the network, a lot of the members cried, reminiscing about why some were in the network, the importance of having a network and collective, and the importance of having anyone next to you in your fight in the first place. This brought the network drawing activity to a close, determined by the group, hoping that another evening of dance was necessary to process these emotions. In many ways, for me, someone with completely different and varying networks from the women in this room, spanning countries and continents, NNSW became an important part of what grounded my work. Having been physically away from India, working with the network connected me to India through messages, calls, and network meetings when I felt helpless in the face of extremist politics unravelling at home with rampant hate crimes, human rights violations, and

an increasingly right-wing central government. It was also about the work I was unable to do for the networks I left back in India, of trans, queer, anti-caste activists, brimming guilt in me for having moved away from my work that grounded me in my own identity and community.

The night before the workshop in Vijayawada was designated for dance after sharing many intense stories, case studies, and reviewing each collective's work in the day. Earlier, different groups had entered the hall with large bags of rose petals. I realised what they were for when at 4 PM sharp, somebody closed the doors to the hall, turned on a speaker, and played the latest, most popular Telugu hit song. Each member took petals in their hand and threw them on the person dancing to the song. Six hours, slippery floors, and two falls later, I knew them more than I possibly could in my broken Telugu. Dinner afterwards meant more head nods, smiles and speaking through our eyes. The night went by sitting in the courtyard and crunching gravel on our post-dinner walks. This time of dancing, the silliness we experienced of the drawing exercises, with the time we spent together at meals and *chai* times, before asking them about their personal networks, worked well for us. They knew me better by then and had some amount of trust in what I was asking them to do, so the networks drawn were also more free-er, more decorated, maybe even more complete than what I would have achieved by meeting them for a very short time and asking them to trust me during a process of drawing and telling me, essentially, who they talk to, meet, and how they know them.

At many points in both workshops, before and after them, I was asked when I would be back, when I would visit each district, when we could talk more about networks, where I felt restrained by my fieldwork and what I was there for. I also wished the visa office at university did not email me that I

needed to get back as soon as possible if I did not want my UK visa cancelled and reported to the Home Office. While I had been physically in the field for only a month, my records showed that I was on the field for a lot longer than that – who is to explain to plain numbers and records the difference, the existence or the lack of fields?

Spaces and Hierarchies

I also understood that my interlocutors usually didn't have spaces in their towns to spend time with peers, so it made sense that if they were travelling, they had space to just be with each other at the time. In Vijayawada, the group only opened up to me when I danced with them, the structural hierarchies of class and caste swirled and sedimented at the bottom of the songs we knew the steps to. Maybe the arts, singing and dancing, joyfully looking and speaking without the spoken language flattens that which cannot be as easily flattened without this joy.

I did not need to know Telugu, and in Sangli, as I danced during the Jayanti procession, I did not have to be anything other than a person enjoying the beats of the *dhol* accompanied by the shimmer of the *lezhim* (a small Marathi musical instrument of small cymbals held together by a stick and connecting chains). Collective dancing both dissolved and embraced the differences of those partaking. It only mattered that you were dancing (if you were not, you would be pulled in by your wrist). After the night of intense dancing in Vijayawada, I spent three days slowly removing the yellow petals of the flowers we threw on each other out of my hair. They were stuck, like glitter usually is, remnants to those who participated, reminiscent of a time well enjoyed. In the workshop hall, the floors had become sticky with flower mush. I fell once or twice but was immediately

picked up by my elbows to continue. Falling and getting up was part of life, and part of dance.

Figure 40: Lezhim dancers performing before the rally erupts into dance at Jayanti celebrations in Miraj, 2022. Source: VAMP Jayanti 2022 video by Tejas Snap Shot, Sangli.

During the workshop, the hierarchy between the supporter Meera, me, the peer leaders, and the collective members floated back up. Even though I said things like “don’t call me ma’am” (partly because it caused me immense dysphoria and partly not wanting to recreate the hierarchy out loud), I’m aware that hierarchies having existed for decades – of the good woman-bad woman dichotomy, of caste, class, colour differences – won’t undo themselves by me being called by my first name. At some point in the review meeting Meera, the group’s supporter and facilitator, stopped to tell a few who had brought her a garland and rose petals, “You cannot be bringing me roses and flowers. We may not be equal, but we should try to be equal”. Meera had spoken to me in length, especially about going on field visits, where peer leaders were always garlanded and treated the guest in special manners. She had to tell Durga, the state peer leader (and NNSW

board member) to stop encouraging special treatment to avoid automatically creating a hierarchy. It is a difficult conversation because people have an emotional attachment to people they look up to, with the inherent need to garland them, welcome them, and put them on a pedestal. Meera and Durga both believe that while peer leaders are leaders, they are representatives equal to any other woman in the community. This view is echoed in Sangli when one of the peer leaders said if she steps down or dies, another person will immediately replace her. The movement doesn't stop, it takes care of you, as you move with it.

In Vijayawada, the women had gathered from 9 districts around Telangana and Andhra Pradesh, away from their homes, all living together for two days in the same social centre as me, so our time belonged to each other and no one had anywhere else to be other than the meeting hall, dining room and corridors. In moments between the workshops, review meetings and meals, we often caught each other in the corridor or under the tamarind tree outside, sitting, texting, on-call, or thinking. These in-between meetings, less structured than even the *chai* breaks, were different. Since Meera wasn't there, I could not speak to them or them with me; words there, but only filling the air inside the mouth. Some attempts at Telugu from me, Malayalam and Hindi from them, seemingly small changes in atmosphere between workshopping, living, and relaxing giving me different levels of knowing and understanding my interlocutors and their relationship with me, an outsider-insider.

Figure 41: Flowers in my hair after an evening of dancing in Vijayawada.

Days after my workshops in Sangli, I visited the *galis* and could sit on the road corner for a cup of *chai* with my ex-participants who could not join me just a few days before. A few days after the dance party in Vijayawada, I was chatting through my Google Translate app on my phone, remembering the time we were dancing, communication feeling much easier. Perhaps, that was my experience of ethnography- going where their participants were most comfortable – not in the meeting hall or board room, but in the dining hall or outside a *tapri* (*chai* and cigarette selling stall). At the end of my second workshop in Vijayawada a few weeks later, I figured that this whole exercise in planning and executing the same workshop plan, in two different areas, with two very different groups of people was an exercise in "networking" – arranging something with the network in the way the network usually arranges them (training, events, talks, meetings). Moreover, how the same workshop is received differently, with groups of people who were primarily sex workers, but working in different ways because of cultural and state differences, where hierarchies with supporters, friendships, competitions, and connections changed my facilitation of the workshop. Somehow, from having known the network, the women, and the priorities of the women, I was not bothered that things refused to go according to plan.

In Vijayawada, with Meera, everything constantly looked "taken care of" – where we were going to stay, eat, and do. "You just have to get here", I was told. In Sangli, there was more ambiguity, and the usual tension before an event was to take place: "Where do we get the food? Are the lists ready? Jo, remind me when you are coming again? What are the plans when you get here?", reminding me of the times these questions had come into my mind too when I was entirely responsible or working with a team for an event.

Figure 42: The annual meeting within which I was facilitating the workshop was held in a Christian Social Service Centre in Vijayawada, planned by Meera, Durga and Rani.

In Vijayawada, I was treated like a guest who would be taken care of by the members, while in Sangli, I had to figure things out on my own, like any of the networks' workers, which made sense because I was an employee of SANGRAM and had worked with them previously than the groups convening in Vijayawada.

This is not about how well a workshop can be put together by two groups of people or the facilitator responsible for it, but instead about how groups function with each other, people coming together and exercising their ownership of the network they are a part of. In Sangli, I was asked to coordinate with Kiran and Ayeesha (the main coordinators of VAMP and NNSW) for everything – dates, food, where I should stay, and how many and which members would attend the workshop. In Vijayawada, I had one point of contact, Meera ma'am, a supporter from WINS (an NGO), the only one who spoke English, while I could not speak fluent Telugu which was required to coordinate with other members. This dynamic between Jo and Sangli collectives, and Jo and Andhra Pradesh/Telangana collectives had carried forward from months before when I was working with the

collectives online; because I knew Hindi, I could speak directly to the workers, but in the case of Telugu sex workers, I had to depend on Meera. Sometimes, I had to depend on my partner when it became important for me to communicate personally with a member of a collective in Andhra Pradesh/Telangana. The outlets I had presented to me to hang out with the groups in both places differed. In Sangli, they only got to know me and let me know them a day after the workshop. The entire workshop was their introduction to me. Whereas in Vijayawada, the option of going back home with my interlocutors was unavailable. In Sangli, Ayeesha and some others invited me to stay with them at home, and I agreed. However, as days went by, I started feeling the need to be in the same neighbourhood but separate from my 'work' place, so I booked a hotel. Having this space to decompress every night also helped me understand more in the morning time because, in retrospect, my attention/anxiety disorder had made it tough for me to valuably contribute with my thoughts throughout the day without a space to be quiet, recharge, and think on my own. I did think a lot about having more of a 'field experience' had I stayed in the *gali*, or with my friends from the network, whether that would have given me 'more access'. But by the time I saw my friends in person, I already had all the information and 'access' I needed having been an employee of the same organisation, spending time in the morning with them, visiting *galis* for surveys and photography work documenting incidents and crises for the collective. Some interlocutors also had to work at night-time. The challenge I posed myself about access came up because of the idea that the researcher has to be everywhere, all the time with their entire body, soul, and energy. This is not something that is possible; it feels impossible even today for me, which I have expanded on in my introduction to Patchwork Ethnography.

The social service centre in Vijayawada had dorms, where all the participants had stayed. As a guest, I was given a private AC room unprompted, denoting once again, an assumed class difference. In both Sangli and Vijayawada, the employees cleared the workshop space for us – removed chairs and placed plastic woven mats on the floor, upon which we sat in circles. These caste and class differences hiding behind terms like 'respect' for me (the facilitator) and the supporters, disappeared among the sex workers themselves. Among themselves, they were all 'just' sex workers, even though some were peer leaders of their collectives, and all of them varied by their class, caste, gender, and religious locations – a syncretism I had heard of, explored in the political construction of the Indian Sex Workers' movement, but saw practised within the workshops and outside in the *gali*: there are only two groups: sex workers and non-sex workers.

Figure 43: Ayeesha explaining things I could not in my broken Hindi as we co-facilitated in Sangli.

As participants started leaving on the last day, Meera and I sat chatting in the canteen about how collectives in each state function. Her reflections led me to think about all the collectives I had witnessed and worked with. In Kolhapur, Maharashtra, VAMP branches work in the same way, with a beating heart in Sangli at the SANGRAM office. In Andhra Pradesh and Telangana, self-led collectives of sex workers that have completely different formats of working and implementing projects come together, forming Me and My World. These illustrate two distinct types of working: the former, while providing a shared outlook and view to the world of who the sex workers of Kolhapur are, have less space for multiple versions of collectivisation with strict boundaries of what can and cannot be done, which is still helpful since there is so much migration in Sangli. At Me and My World, with the diversity each group brings in, it takes longer for the network to process and find a common front for the sex workers to organise. However, there is place for new groups with new workings to enter the network. With newer collectivisations in each state, there is space to experiment and share strategies. I am mindful that each collective still has health and its targeted interventions as its core work. The ways in which they collectivised have more to do with how possible it was to reach community members and how willing people were to create collectives without the support of non-community members. I wonder if these models would work if they were flipped in the states. Each model works in the places where it does because the collectives there have already formed in response to existing social structures and experiences of the sex workers there.

One day, on a call with one of my friends from the network, we were talking about prominent activists at the helm of NGOs around the country, and towards whom many informal collectives, projects, and formal Community

Based Organisations look towards for support – mentorship, financial, legal and more. One thing we noticed particularly was how certain activists' style of work reflected how the communities worked as well, what projects were taken up, who we built solidarity with, which funds we could access, and what the primary issues to address become (some activists only focus on legal recognition, while some more on health rights). There seem to be unsaid rules about who gets to do, and who chooses what part of activist work. Although this does not mean community representatives are passive in these decisions, or that this knowledge does not travel within and outside through dialogue community members have with each other. Word travels quickly, and the community strategises and responds to supporting, known activists as they respond to anything else- with tact, diplomacy, and advocacy.

Ending the call with thoughts around the community understanding and watching everything as it unfurls, my friend says something that sticks with me:

> "Jo, community *sab jaanti hai*" (the community knows *everything*).

This prompt brought up other questions: What processes happened in the community and their lives that they knew, teaching it to each other what they knew to use this knowledge towards a freedom they envisioned? For this thesis, I chose not to include information about specific shared relationships and fractures in the movement, because, like any progressive movement, conflicts are often used against its members to dismantle vital work. This is a personal anxiety I and many other activists deal with in cross-movement work – some stories need not be shared, written down, or recorded in favour of other stories of pushing through these anxieties to

live through this thesis. I leave stories between these lines to be told by my friends in the collective themselves.

From network to collective and back

The process of networking (outreach, training, and upskilling) is key to the creation of the collective. In this patch, I ask what the network and its associated collectives mean and do for those doing the work of the networking. Why do people give so much to the communities they make, and how does that affect those in my thesis? Are care networks formed because those with sex work experience become 'family'? What does kinship mean for sex workers, and what can sex workers networks teach anthropologists about kinship, about networks, about the idea of chosen families? Who are kin for those responding to violence, and what choice do they have in the kinship bonds they form?

The workers I interviewed and met in the 2 years of my fieldwork and before this thesis speak about the most prized thing in their lives: the collective, without which they would not be listened to. It is not just anger (against injustice) binding the collective, but also the lived understanding that a singular sex worker will never be listened to and the collective is important for any change to come.

Networks have been analysed as privileged sites producing social cohesion and collective identity in social movements, where dense networks are seen as 'fostering solidarity, trust, community, political inclusion, identity-formation, and other (by implication) valuable social outcomes' (Mische, 2003). This conceptualisation of the social network traces back to Melucci's (1989) description of 'submerged networks' of everyday life that co-create a collective identity based on experimental worldviews and responses to

tensions the group must negotiate. Within these responses, the creation of collective identity becomes an end in itself of the participation in movements and within networks, making social networks valuable sites for individuals to formulate collective identities through face-to-face interaction and exchanging their personal identities. It is now common knowledge that pre-existing solidarities, especially friendships, neighbourhood ties, and organisational affiliations are critical to the mobilisation and recruitment within networks (see Gould, 1993a; McAdam & Paulsen, 1993). However, these have been focused on how diverse network connections are, rather than how different connections co-exist and create collective identities in the face of violence.

Moving forward from the situational bond workers share with their 'older' kin, these collectives also become families of choice, offering some resistance to dominant systems of inequality steeped in normative kinship structures (as Carrington, 1999; Weston, 1997; Braithwaite et al., 2010 among other queer theorists have shown us) and intention to be there as each other's support system (Muraco, 2005). This is narrativised by a quote from an interview with a leader:

> I will never be alone. I have never felt alone in this *sangatna*, they never let me feel like I don't have my parents or my siblings. I always got all this love. We can't live without the collective, the world won't let us live. Although this violence doesn't happen much in brothels because we are together, street sex work is dangerous because of the police, the customers who are bad, partners who beat us up. For safety, when a woman goes with someone, she tells her collective members where she is going for safety and people go there in case anything happens.

By expanding on lived experiences of people that constitute networks, working through networks, this patch provides a narration of on-ground

definitions of safety, trust, networking, and power. Much of the work network analysts have done across disciplines has been quantitative; the structural paradigm that dominates network analysis has been critiqued since the 1900s because the significance of action by the actors has been overlooked by analysts preoccupied with the structure of the network itself (Hollstein, 2014). Some social network analysts in sociology and anthropology are trying to pull qualitative concerns back towards social network analysis (Edwards & Crossley, 2009), arguing that it is not just important to study the shape and numbers in connections, but also how these relationships are activated, suppressed or represented in social settings to further the network (Mische, 2003). The doing or living of networks is not represented in graphs, leaving out concepts of culture, agency, and process within patterns of connection without the sense of connection that are reproduced over time (Emirbayer & Goodwin, 1994).

The quantitative-qualitative question for social network analysis has also bothered social scientists studying community behaviour. Communities, when studied as networks have historically been tied to spatial boundaries when instead, a community can/should be seen as a network of meaningful social relations between friends, neighbours, relatives, and work colleagues (Piselli, 2007). Classical sociology views communities as solidarity relations based on kinship and common residence attached to an individual leading to a shared sense of feeling, and a spontaneous willingness to cooperate, share roles and activities (Tönnies, 1988). Radcliffe-Brown (1940) defined communities as territorial units marked within geographical boundaries, composed of stable institutions, and people exercising their roles according to the community's standardised norms. These traditional understandings of community, place, people, and their networks within defined spatial boundaries, eventually become inadequate while analysing communities

migrating, transacting, and moving into different spatial structures and places (from the village to the city, and maybe back to the village).

Experiencing and Translating the S*angatna*

Sex worker leaders are both rescued and rescuing. They rescue themselves from the police, from everyday violence, and less frequent large crisis situations but at the same time, they are viewed and acted upon, as those rescued from brothels, their workspaces and the streets, where many find protection. This is the irony of the collective working to protect themselves from those that seek to protect them. The collective and its survival are vital to the movement; from both my reading of literature available on mutual aid and self-led community collectivisation or the workers' own narratives, collectivising is the only way forward for a safe and just future for sex workers in India.

There is something also to be said about the institutionalisation of radical voices within the collective and I wonder what would have happened if those invited in because of their previous community experience never became a part of NNSW, but fought alone – they would probably have gotten tired and things would not have moved, but they would also not have the amount of work they have to do currently. Just like decriminalisation, getting rest is an important ask of the movement the sex workers are not directly fighting for, but direly require. When more workers are able to collectivise and meet each other's needs in the community, some workers do not have to pick up on all the work that needs to be done, allowing for the work to be continued.

Along with the challenge of the intensity and volume of work, another major challenge to the spirit of the collective is financial security for the work to

continue. NGO work does not have money in it, and the Indian government's recent crackdown on NGOs has made working 'from the grassroots' difficult[58]. Over the years, the network has been sustained through a variety of small and large grants and through the money its supporting and allied organisations that were a little more established were able to give it. As evidenced in this patch, sex worker leaders that work in these spaces do not do so because it pays them a lot of money, but because it is necessary. A common question I came across in my conversations with members is, 'when there is no money, why would more people join the *sangatna*?' Because the network spends a considerable number of years training their foremost leaders so they can make their own decisions to push the network forward, hopefully some day without supporters.

> I have been working for the past five years without regular pay. I also used to think that the office should support. During the help desk (a project run by NNSW to provide identity cards for individuals within the network through state-based collectives), I could earn a little more through the funding. Now I can also get some more time outside the house because my family can see that I need to work for the money to come in. When I say I am working, I need to show that I'm making some money, pay the rent and show the cash, *na*? For meetings around the country, it takes eight days to go, come, the meeting itself, and a day of rest, so it is a loss sometimes (Divya, Jharkhand, 2021).

[58]Over the past 13 years, NGOs in India have encountered funding challenges due to the implementation of the Foreign Contributions Regulations Act (FCRA), resulting in cancellation of licences for NGOs receiving foreign funding. This situation worsened during the Modi government era (2014 onwards), particularly for NGOs critical of government policies. As of 2023, 20,693 NGOs have had their licences cancelled. The repercussions of the FCRA extend beyond these NGOs, affecting smaller, informal, and unregistered collectives as well as rights groups operating at the grassroots level across various intersections of caste, class, gender, and religion. These community-led initiatives rely on NGO support to secure funding, hindering their ability to carry out crucial work within their communities.

A question that rose out of my engagement with my interlocutors, with no clear answers, stays with me: can everyday resistance be translated and does translation take power away from resistance? In patch 2, I illustrated how important translations are to networks and collectives. However, after spending time with individuals working across various levels, I felt that attempting to articulate a movement, a collective, or a political action, and translating it (usually upwards towards a language, people, funding organisation with more power) was the reduction and end of its life, because, when the movement seems to end, a translation begins. I also think about the work it takes to do this translation in terms of writing reports, communicating local understandings, and defending lived knowledge. Many times, different members, both at the board level and the crisis intervention level spoke about how continuously trying to fund their collectives takes away from the energy they have to put into the collective itself (they do it anyway). I also know there is no way to create solidarities other than by translating actions and movements across boundaries; it would be naive to only consider the effect translation has on the movement and not the effect of the movement has on translations and global identities. Still, I sit with this question while I complete writing the thesis and talking to my interlocutors 'informally' about work that does not seem to end.

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There is a marginality that the network and its people experience to be heard within their own world that they inhabit every day, but they are also the centre. Marginality as a concept helps to understand these issues and unfair practices, but bringing these workers back to the centre might give enlighten us on how to support them further.

The "network" then, becomes a rich collection of individuals, that have criminalisation in common (sex workers and their networks of supporters), the effects of stigma (clients, families, children), personal experiences (sex workers among themselves), collectives (across districts, states and the nation) and networks of organisations (across the world). Global interconnectivity continuously produces new localities, new orders of face-to-face interaction that in turn inform and shape global processes (Leite, 2017, p. 28). Similarly, the experiences sex worker collectives have in face-to-face interactions are taken back to the NGOs and global networks, who then share information and become who they are, leading to a construction of a global sex worker identity that returns to face-to-face interactions in the everyday.

I end this chapter noticing, and adding to the understanding I first started this project with: understanding that the *sangatna* is different from the network, not in the way that it is smaller, or geographically local, but beyond the network's strategic partnership to push for rights, the *sangatna* is an emotional and situational bond created for a feeling of safety. Both these formations are in response to the violence community members face. The network is not 'just a collection of *sangatnas*' but an understanding of safety, trust, security, and care that may or may not be translatable without struggle to the global context.

What I emphasise on in this patch is the 'story' of the *sangatna* within the network (White, 2008) and maybe, without the network, adding to a qualitative analysis of human networks not only through the social relations between its actors, but also the network as a living thing through its actions. The dense social relations shared through the sex workers' collective identity form a "catnet" (White, 1992, 2008), becoming crucial

means of recruitment into activist groups (Edwards & Crossley, 2009, p. 38). Sex work then, is a community spatially defined by its *galis*, and online presence, but also a social network of "meaningful social relations" with those having joined the network out of not only lived marginality, but also support (Piselli, 2007). Holland uses the concept of "figured worlds" and "figured work" to talk about formations through which we move on a daily basis, and in some cases considering ourselves to belong to; how different people come to understand themselves and their relationships in light of cultural patterns. These worlds are constellations of roles, actors, activities, attitudes, meanings, and norms while aspects are porous and open ended. Some of these have been studied as subcultures by Bourdieu (1993) and as communities of practice by Lave and Wanger (1991). The sex worker identity exists because the identity of the 'non sex worker' also exists – a 'good woman' to the 'bad woman'; those continuously constructing the sex worker identity from the outside to mean different things, materially affect their lives from these meaning making patterns that never only stay narratives.

> We cannot expect people to work in the same 'planned' way as in other fields of work. That is not how it happens on the grassroots, but they are the ones you can count on.

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Poetically, without realising it, I had seen the river Krishna in both Sangli and Vijayawada. From Sangli to Karad, as I travelled with Kiran to document updates on the new houses being built after the fire, she looked out of the window, folding her hands to the river when we passed it in the morning and returned in the evening. In Vijayawada, the river greeted me as I entered on the bus from Hyderabad, just at the break of dawn, crossing

over the Prakasam dam, one of the first and largest dams built in post-independence India. I didn't expect to see the Krishna here, and neither did it feature in my thoughts earlier. Still, I found myself thinking about the river, the fish that featured in the diets I was a part of during my workshops in Sangli and Vijayawada – the lives of the people in both towns held together by the river, a sacred symbol of food, the water lifeline it was for almost all states of Southern India, its rich basin, the household deities and their shrines on the banks of the river and the source of livelihood it is for so many communities.

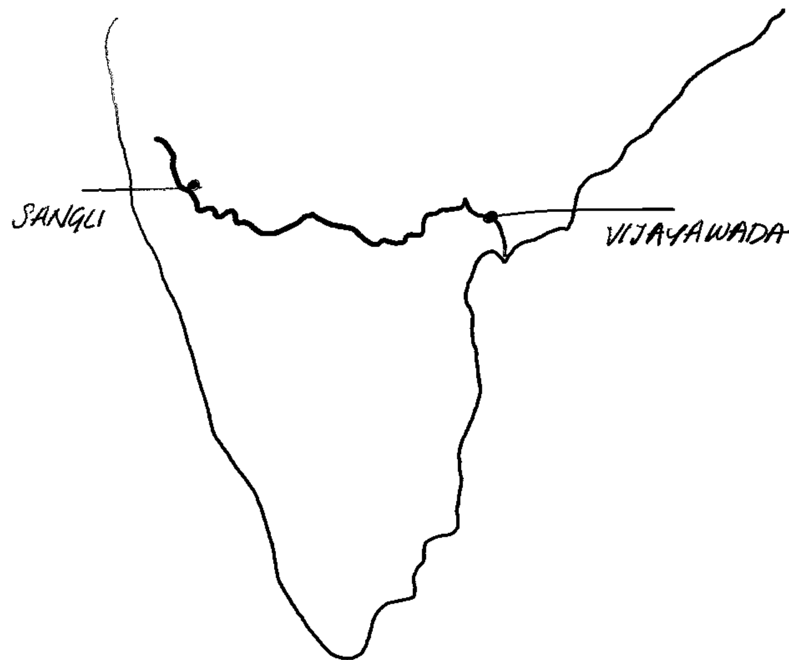
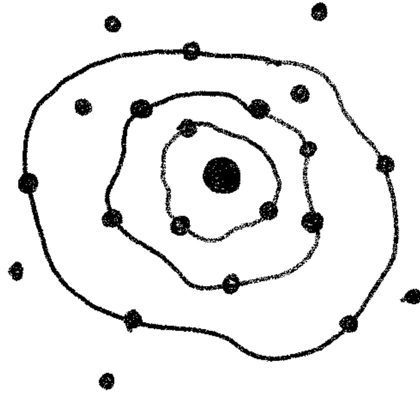


Figure 44: The Krishna River connecting Sangli and Vijayawada.

As I left on the bus from Vijayawada to Hyderabad, late at night on the second day, stomach full of military biriyani, I thought of the flow of the Krishna, from Sangli to here, and the collective for these women: how sacred their collective is, and how sacred the river, both life giving in different ways and also both ever present in their lives, the love they share for both their *sangatna* and their Krishna.



IV

एक साथ बढ़ो या एक साथ मरो

Move Forward Together, or Die Together

"Ek Saath Badho Ya Ek Saath Maro"[59]: Learning and Leading in Networks and in Isolation

A few months into working, I heard a member say, "GFATM *ka kaam chal raha hai*" (GFATM work is going on) at a board meeting. I received this text often, from members across the network – on the board, helpdesks, or crisis intervention teams. "GFATM *ka kaam*" became "GFATM *ka* tension" (GFATM stress) in personal circles. It took me some time (and Googling) to understand exactly what GFATM was, what the *kaam* for it entailed[60]. It was a fund the network applied to periodically to continue doing work through town-district collectives. GFATM *ka kaam* was essential – without this money, the collectives could not do any intervention work beyond HIV, funded by NACO.

Board members and those reporting to the board describe this work were differently. For board members, working on GFATM documentation was when their leadership skills were put to test as they documented the impact of their collectives, found examples to create narrative reports for the larger board. For members in constant contact with the communities at the district and town level (non-board members), GFATM *ka kaam* was a delicate dance of trust, patience, and crisis intervention that they were practiced in. As with most funding agencies, they said, GFATM took its time.

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[59] Move forward together, or die together. Translated from Hindi to English.

[60] The Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis, and Malaria (commonly referred to as the Global Fund) is an international financing organisation that provides funding to programmes aimed at combating HIV/AIDS, tuberculosis (TB), and malaria in countries around the world.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, emergency relief funding, worth $20 per person, took two years to reach community members in the name of 'incorrect documentation'. People in non-leadership positions blamed the community peer leader they had access to, who could only report/complain to board members, who had no power, as they themselves needed this money. The reasons for the delay, although bureaucratic, are often shouldered by visible, central community leader figures, and the only way to give feedback about these issues to large funds like GFATM is writing more reports.

This patch brings together formal interviews and informal conversations with board members at NNSW on leading, politics, and the joys and stress of working as a network. The patch travels with leaders' life histories of joining collectives, navigating individual and collective identities in service of the collective and its needs, assuming roles and skills within the collective, and coexisting within. These life narratives enhance the understanding of what the collective is and who the people are that make the collective. Like the identities of people, life narratives evolve over time, and from one telling to the other and with context (language, translation, time, shared background knowledge, details that come up or seem/feel important) (Peacock & Holland, 1993).

The narratives explore themes of care, emphasising the role of the collective as the heart of the community. The collective and community intensify their activities during crises while experiencing extended periods of inactivity during grant applications. These dynamics yield anxieties and valuable lessons discussed in the chapter's conclusion.

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Through these life histories, I was able to access various entry points of understanding self-making within the collective: within the collective, when the collective is presented at every state/national meeting, towards children, towards 'civilian' non sex work jobs, towards other movements, activists and more. By putting together the narrative formation of the sex worker, I understand sex worker self-making as a response to an identity they were given, or simplified to, a woman on the street, as though the woman doesn't sleep, eat, care, love, or watch the movie depicting her. These varied experiences break apart the neat narrative of the empowered sex worker in leadership positions, offering reconstructions of the nature of the collective that changes according to leadership, beliefs, and what is said about the collective leading to a larger question on why certain tenets must be repeated, certain histories written, certain stories recorded – so that the collective can go on.

Method

I wanted to understand visibility in the collective's leadership when an NNSW member approached me to help translate a piece about the lack of care for individual workers and their mental health in the way the collective is currently running[61]. She wanted to write this piece anonymously, not wanting anyone from the rest of the collective knowing about her thoughts, fearing backlash from 'betraying' the community. After that first call, in the subsequent months, we discussed her troubles at her day job of being a salaried employee of an NGO and sex work. I asked other members about their ideas on leadership, the collective, and the future of sex worker

[61] I only got to talk to visible leaders and sex workers. There is a refusal from some community members in not being visible to me until trust is established, and not making visible certain tensions and stories, that I accept and try to carry with respect in this chapter and in this thesis.

activism, especially since these conversations of compassion, love, and fighting were also happening alongside anger, fragility, and fatigue – conversations around these themes were already swirling in my head from activist groups I had been a part of before. Seeing similar themes as points of conversation within the collective inspired me to think more on cross-movement solidarities.

The collective members in this patch are used to narrating their 'life stories'. This is what makes them leaders – the ability to repeat traumatic incidents, deliver powerful statements, holding within them the power to carry forward the legacy of the leader before them. Some of these interviews with the board members were one-on-one wherein there were no language barriers, but in others, we had a supporter translating for both the board member and me.

I thought of different ways to discuss the themes for this PhD project, specifically on how leadership capacities are transferred, learned, and experienced locally in everyday work, deeper and broader in the network. These themes met other emerging themes from the field: leading, leadership, and being points of contact playing a large part in the lives of the sex workers, but also something that brought them pain. I thought of capturing these complicated feelings that can be summarised in this sentence I learnt as a young(er) activist and also heard repeated to me in my conversations with the leaders: "the movement is bigger than me".

With these thoughts, I wanted to know how the network practices every day through questions like: What are the can dos and the cannot dos of the movement? How does this affect politics and people's relationship with the movement? How do people experience leadership by themselves, on them, and for them through their work as NNSW? What do some of these

(connected) words mean for them? What duality (Bowen, 2021) is lent to their lives as sex workers who do sex work and square work (non-sex work, which is *formally* understood, expected, and unstigmatised) in office jobs through NNSW and their Community Based Organisations (CBOs)? What does it feel like to be doing so many jobs – 'respectable' office work, pickle businesses, consulting, and sex work?

I created a matrix of words I was interested in (marked in the lightest purple in the table below) that were repeatedly used to talk about the presence of a global movement, and came up in introductory conversations, especially those that were outward facing to researchers (where I started), media channels, or debates that the leaders participated in that I was privy to. After the first few words, I conducted formal interviews with board members, core members, and other 'prominent' leaders in the network to understand their ideas of these meanings.

A new layer of words (in a darker shade of purple) found their way into one one-on-one conversations with leaders as our relationship deepened, and possibly, when they felt that as an employee and fellow activist, I understood what they meant by strength in the collective, or collective pain and sadness without 'judging' the movement, and their ability to feel both happiness and pain within activist work. The last layer (in the darkest shade of purple) consists of words I saw more than heard when I went to Sangli and Vijayawada to experience the work of the network. 'Leader' could not encompass someone trusted to deal with a crisis, but at the same time disliked. 'Solidarity' alone, could not encompass the trust built in the collective, even in the absence of love, which I learnt later, is an inhumane expectation of tightly knit communities of circumstance and violence. Analysis of leadership also requires consideration that most sex workers

compete for similar clientele, especially if they are working within the same geographical area. This complicates the way solidarity, leadership and dis/trust are experienced.

Sangatna	Leader	Sisterhood	Pain
Strength	Solidarity	Collective	Sadness
Resistance	Organising	Hierarchy	Trust
Collectivisation	Distrust	Money/Funding	Love
Politics	Alliance	Movement	Rights
Change	Leadership	Competition	*Beemari* (sickness)

Initially, I had thought of my questions in the context of entering, working, and practising leadership as sex workers in a network of sex worker collectives and NGOs. After being part of its ecosystem, I had to reconsider and change them to the entry, movement within, and practice of the *sangatna* (collective) in later versions. I felt that the word 'leading' was reducing the multiplicity of the collective, its jagged but rhythmic ups and downs of tasks, emotion, and the lulls that constituted the everyday work of the collective.

I was privy to how the network had to manage government scheme access, digital documentation, and intra-collective tension, and it seemed that there were significant communication gaps in understanding what a leader is. For example, since not everyone is involved in the decision-making work of the collective, there were misunderstandings of what the 'work' of the collective was, and why certain people were the 'face' of the collective rather than others. This, and many conversations with the coordinators of the network made me realise that there were some tensions between their personal lives (emotionally, and mentally) and their work lives (as activists, sex workers, and consultants). I wanted to know the stories they were telling themselves and each other to keep working in difficult situations, surrounded by continuous forms of violence from not only the state but also anti-sex work/er groups, natural and man-made disasters felt deepest by already disadvantaged (by class, caste and gender) groups (detailed in my introduction and through the patches prior to this one). This violence, combined with the lack of resources, and the expectation of some 'leading' voices to be active voices for multiple things at once (documentation, talking to the media, working to prevent day-to-day crises) leads to fatigue. I wanted to understand how they embody the collective while working through periods of not only crisis caused by the outside world, but the fatigue caused by the inside world of sex work, sex workers, and activism.

How have narratives of joining collectives, staying in the collective, and building their presents and futures alongside the collective affected the way they would otherwise have lived? How do they use abstract words like collective, sisterhood, leading, friendship, camaraderie, advocacy and other words relating to the political collective, and larger community of people in sex work?

Part I: Entering the Network

> We, as sex workers are isolated, looked down upon and stigmatised by everyone – be it society or be it the local communities. No one ever looked at us like how regular people are looked at. A majority of poor people don't have homes, whether they are sex workers or normal people. During Corona time, they struggled so much. Even if we couldn't eat 2 meals a day, our collectives and networks arranged for at least one (Gauri, 2020, Tamil Nadu).

The most common point of entry for sex workers into leadership positions is through sexual and reproductive rights initiatives as peer support workers for state-run projects by the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO). Sex workers begin working for the community in their personal networks with reproductive and sexual health initiatives, moving on to taking up more politically driven work with sex worker rights collectives (rights-based, legal literacy, education, filmmaking, storytelling, media literacy, sanitation, and hygiene). The pull many sex worker activists have towards intervention and rights-based work reminds me of the 'affinity' Leite (2017) describes with reference to Jewish Marranos in Portugal. Unravelling the nature of 'kinship' as known to anthropologists, 'affinity' describes a feeling of 'kinship' like closeness, shared sense of identity, likeness, related-ness, closeness, and sympathy. Intrigued by the word, it became important for me to understand whether sex workers felt this affinity.

Sex workers do indeed, feel an affinity towards each other, because they face persecution only they can understand and empathise with, which leads to a malleability of kinship identities they understand from biological kin, to the broadening of familial networks. Many sex workers are estranged from their biological kin, choosing entirely new, chosen families to live their lives with (like people from various marginalised populations, for example queer

and trans people). Moreover, attaching the concept of the family to the figure of the sex worker as popularly understood is also subversive, as sex workers are seen as individually existing people on the street, even though many sex workers have family within brothels, or nearby, work from home, and as I displayed above, have large networks of related connections that are chosen as family[62].

To cope with the stigma attached to some of their identities and persecution from different social structures, sex workers become a part of this bigger sex worker family around the world who have a common goal: safety at the workplace, to be recognised as workers, while having distinguished individual and localised experiences of violence, stigma, and self-making based on the socio-legal structures in the nation-states that they are migrants or citizens of. Interestingly, as sex workers travel to find work, they make broader networks (like business-people who rely on client networks and word of mouth for a flourishing business), which are kept intact for safety at their multiple work and home places. Who then, forms kinship ties in the networks of sex workers as family? As 'contacts', who become chosen family ties? And how can this also be understood when we term these close relations as both families, and as networks: two interconnected, but vastly different anthropological concepts? What does violence do to kinship?

> I am very disagreeable, I'm a woman who stays far away from organisations. I have only one intention – earn money, and go back home. But one day, after a series of raids, the organisations and all the *gharwalis* met and I heard that

[62] Tambe (2006) has warned against using words like family with which come expectations from kin, as families recreate (sometimes abusive) power structures. However, I find it interesting to think of sex workers networks through both network and kin-making concepts mixed with care frameworks and aim to do it with a pinch of salt, holding the tensions together.

> they were talking about how they wanted to kick out the Nepalis and Bengalis. I got really angry. “Why will they kick out Nepalis and Bengalis? Have we taken something from them? It is because of us that these people are still here. They’re getting paid because we pay rent for the room. Right? Look at the rooms – it’s the size of a hen house and people are paying 6000-7000.” This is all I said and there was such chaos. Everyone started telling me, “Speak up Ayeesha, we are with you”. (Ayeesha, 2021, Maharashtra)

Not every person from a marginalised background is looking to be an activist. However, for many people in marginalising situations, anger against injustices they individually and collectively (after many instances of individually faced violence) face is one of the biggest motivators to join local action groups/collectives. The anger they feel as they ‘act’ becomes part of their identity; anger has been historically used to term them as rough women of the street (a classist and casteist notion), contrary to the good, proper women, rendering them invisible, and thus, disposable except to those who are ‘like them’. However, even within conversations of people ‘like them’, there are people ‘unlike them’ – as Ayeesha explains, for the local Kannadiga and Marathi women in the Miraj brothels, it was the migrant women from Nepal and Bangladesh[63]. When Ayeesha spoke up against injustices faced by women ‘like her’ (migrant women with no familial support, standing out not only as sex workers but also as women who 'looked different'), she was invited to join VAMP to advocate further for the rights of the Nepali and Bangladeshi women in the Miraj brothels. Multiple people within the NNSW’s collectives begin their stories with a particular event of injustice that stirred in them a fire to act, to stop the injustice from ever happening again. Less often, people join collectives because they feel

[63] Sex workers, like many groups of migrant workers within India and across the world, migrate through chain networks (Banerjee, 1983) created from social groups and identities that they were a part of before they started migrating for better opportunity. Many also singularly migrate to known ‘red-light districts’ in search of work in or around the area (examples within this thesis: Kiran, Ayeesha). The Miraj brothel is one such neighbourhood.

empathetic towards a cause (for example, transphobia within sex worker circles) other than their own.

This invitation to those considered the 'other' within the movement extends to the transgender and Hijra women/people in Sangli. Sudha's entry into the network started with the realisation that there were many people 'like her' in Sangli, after which there was a governmental survey on the community of men who have sex with men (MSM) who also rallied behind the HIV response by SANGRAM, upholding solidarities between three communities (female sex workers, men who have sex with men and trans women in sex work) that faced similar threats. The group for MSM and transgender sex workers, called *Muskan* (translated to smile) began collectivising through community-led survey to find each other, and then slowly grew to become separate district/town wise collectives in neighbouring towns, Miraj, Kolhapur, Ichalkaranji, Belgaum, and Satara on the borders Maharashtra shared with Andhra Pradesh, Telangana and Karnataka. Sudha explains:

> First, we started by teaching people to use condoms because people didn't use condoms. One, because they thought it is not fun to have sex with a condom, and two because the community thought HIV is a problem men who have sex with women get. We started with HIV, but then did more work to find out how the community has sex, who they have sex with, their sexual health beyond HIV and then their health beyond sexual health. Then we also started support groups where we started talking to each other about the clothes we wanted to wear, our hopes about becoming women, and the violence we were facing, and we started helping each other with transitioning. We could not talk about this elsewhere. Now, we are working to increase awareness of rights and to increase self-esteem of community members. We do this work at the local, state, and national levels through SANGRAM and NNSW (Sudha, 2021, Maharashtra).

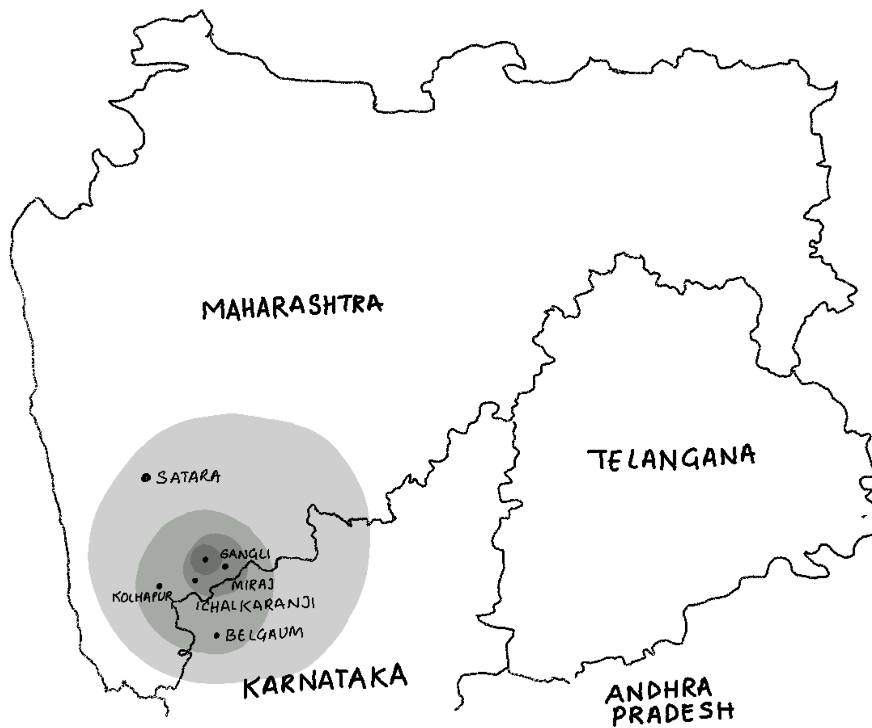

Figure 45: A map of Muskan's growing influence based on Sudha's retelling.

Leadership for me is to be able to learn skills that you can transfer to other people and teach them how to lead like you. At the same time, do not be a slave to anyone. I feel like the changes that are there [in activist spaces], have come because of us [older activists]. We stepped in the path of the thorns and flattened the thorns to create space for the people today to walk behind us and get their rights. I feel like we should look at what other people need and work for each other, instead of only looking at our own problems. We have been doing so many meetings and giving space for people to lead and take space; that should be done more. The more we will do programmes and people feel a sense of belonging and ownership to the movement, the more they will want to be a part of the movement. The public does not anyway allow us to collectivise. But we need cross-movement solidarity, and programmes [for outreach].

As far as I have seen, the workers in Kerala find it difficult to come together as a collective. There are lots of issues, and it is not like the collectives in other states. There are family issues, there is a lot of distance between the people here even geographically. If one person is in Kochi, the other person is in

> Kozhikode[64]. Even within one district, the workers are in varied places: on the street, at home. We face difficulties in bringing them together. The good thing is that people see me, and they want to do the kind of implementation work that I do. That will be there. Trust is there. The second line of leadership has people who are interested in becoming like me (Lata, 2020, Kerala).

Like Lata from Kerala, Divya from Jharkhand already had large networks as a peer outreach worker and coordinator. Gauri from Tamil Nadu, through her extroverted, caring personality and large networks of friends, wanted to assist/support them, bringing her into the collectives' fold she now works in, 20 years on. After stepping into the organisation, all leaders are trained across the country. Ayeesha remembers the time when she had to go from city to city for different pieces of training – on feminism, human rights, technology, monitoring sustainable development goals[65].

Part II: Living within the Network

The waiting room: a journal entry

> I wake up 20 minutes before the beginning of the meeting. Most meetings happen too early for me; too late for someone else in Australia. Just in time for lunch for my friends in India. I drag my feet to the kitchen and switch on the call – NNSW has a Zoom premium subscription I use, our 'personal meeting room'. This is a big change from waking up an hour earlier to prepare myself to

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[64] 'From Kochi to Kozhikode' is a known idiom that signifies the distance/magnitude of an action.

[65] The role of the coordinator is central to the network. When I joined, Ayeesha, the coordinator in 2020, was my first point of contact, followed by Kiran, who was president but had also been a coordinator. In the beginning, I did not entirely understand the position of the coordinator. Still, after a year of working in the network, the coordinator is the 'glue' between all the states, in charge of networking with allied organisations and the media, adjacent to the president of the network. I use the word glue because the coordinator must know everything about whatever is happening in the network at all points and has her finger on all activities, conversations, and future plans. Nothing should escape her watchful eye, because she needs to keep the supporters, NGOs, and state networks updated on each other's activities, without which the network will fall apart.

> be on call. Did my social anxiety get cured in the flurry of daily work calls, or was I too tired to write my thesis and also be on field all the time?
>
> I joined exactly 5 minutes before, Li was already waiting. She is a big figure in the sex workers' movement in Thailand, and a close friend of the network and its leaders in India. It must be teatime in Thailand. I wait for a couple more people to join the waiting room. The coffee has not kicked in, yet. 3 more people join, I send a text to Anna as a reminder for the meeting. "Coming", she says. I let the others into the room, one by one, leaving the external person we are meeting with today in the waiting room. We quickly say hi to each other and discuss our order of business on what our stance is. I see the trans flag hanging in the back of one of our colleagues from Norway and smile. She introduces herself; I use the word 'trans person' in my introduction as well.
>
> We wait for 10 more minutes more and discuss what we want out of this meeting. I send our person in the waiting room a text asking her for 10 minutes of time to collect everyone as Li jokes "give her a magazine, she is in the waiting room". After a clamour of quick discussion, we quiet down and I click 'admit'. The meeting begins.

I notice through many interactions like the one in the vignette above, how sex workers 'talk' to each other. There is a sense of knowing that comes from being in and around sex work(ers). No details need to be explained, the page they start on is always the same – an invisible head shake, a snicker when they hear about a certain ambassador making derogatory remarks, a slight smile when one jokes about handling clients – "What are politicians in the morning if not clients at night?". It took me a while to understand these subtleties, and I don't think I would ever completely understand. None of the people in the Zoom room are part of the same local network nor do they work together every day. But on this, and many other Zoom calls, they look at each other, introduce themselves, say 'and I am a sex worker' to affirm the identity that takes precedence over other identities and begin there.

When I entered NNSW, I was introduced as the communications coordinator and supporter to the organisation – each state had a supporter to the board members, core groups, and for translation work. From my understanding, a supporter is an ally who supports individuals and collectives by sharing knowledge and skills, advocating for the co-production of knowledge with the community, and liaising with community and non-community members until they can do this by themselves. The role of the supporter is not to speak/display their expertise or advance their own knowledge but to make sure the community has access to different spaces, and can voice their opinions regardless of the language/caste/class barriers that usually prevent them from being a part of these spaces. Supporters are like shadows to the members. New supporters like me are the shadows to coordinators, and coordinators shadows to the network. Supporting a group of disenfranchised people makes you realise where to speak and where not to. Supporters create spaces in academic worlds, conferences, and media organisations by forefronting sex workers, translating their words as closely as possible, and producing published material that can be referred to. Supporters are like crowd control, waving their hands and using their bodies to back the audience into a safe distance. Sex workers are the stars of the show.

Roles, advocacies, and practising leadership within collectives

“We should do advocacy”.

Kiran and Ayeesha used the word ‘advocacy’ a lot, for many different reasons and actions. Advocacy means speaking – to the collector, police officer, political party affiliates, and new stakeholders. Advocacy meant educating – the client, peers, and media persons who had come to visit. Advocacy meant publishing – with the media, on NNSW’s Medium channel,

monographs, and research studies. Advocacy meant creating – press releases, social media posts, posters, and campaigns. When asked what they would like to do in response to something, they would say '*humein advocacy karna chahiye*' (we should do advocacy). I was often to understand on my own what kind of advocacy to use.

Advocacy: *swad anusar* (as per taste).

> In Gokul Nagar, a woman from the community wanted to stand in local elections but her ticket was cancelled saying her caste certificate is from Karnataka. No sex worker voted during those elections, and the opposition party also lost a lot of their support because she was not even allowed to stand. We cannot do anything alone. Today, any advocacy work that has to be done, we can do (Kiran, 2021, Maharashtra).

For Kiran, advocacy means crisis-breaking by immediate action. In this case, the entire community came together to show the political parties in power that they are nothing without those who vote for them, and for voting to be truly democratic, everyone, especially migrant sex workers who have trouble with their identity documents must have the right to vote.

> I question how they can say sex work is not needed and ask them how they suggest sex workers survive. With the Dalit movement, I have spent days and days in meetings to explain why they need to stand with us. It takes a lot of patience to do advocacy.
>
> In another case, I have worked with the Muslim religious minority rights movements to help them support us. He (a prominent leader) now stands beside me seeing our movement and goals as a vital women's issue. This is how we do advocacy and win this war of convincing other movements to work alongside us. This is a constant struggle (Durga, 2021, Andhra Pradesh)

Durga, a leader from Andhra Pradesh, explains that there have been many times when organisations do not work with them because they are a sex

workers' collective. Durga then has to do the work of meeting with them, explaining the gendered violence sex workers face, connecting the dots for them, and the need for organisations to support sex workers in their fight for sustenance, a living wage, and being able to afford basic things. Durga accounts for the emotional intensity, perseverance, time, and hard work advocacy takes. Advocating for the self starts small, with friends and family, then with clients, partners, lovers, and then with police persons, organisations, networks, and beyond, during 'high-level' meetings with the United Nations and with the 'society' at large.

> In the corporate world, a consultant would get paid a lot for this work, but in this world, sex workers just have to defend themselves free of cost, and put their individual labour into it so that they are listened to.

Community teaching is felt more in places like Jharkhand where there are fewer community members, and a majority of the work to behave as collectives with more significant numbers falls on fewer (usually 1 or 2) members. The board member from Jharkhand, Divya, shares her desperation to get more leaders into the fold for this reason but states that a basic requirement is that the person is literate and self-driven. But there are some gaps in finding the 'perfect candidate':

> Even if I train someone here, they will come back to me to ask me something so that is not the point. That is not the point of the second line of leadership. Those who are good at speaking cannot read and write. Those who can read and write do not want to work at the grassroots. I have one person in one district. I need one more.

> Being a part of a collective gave me confidence. I know how to handle tricky situations. You have to run your mind really quickly and be active. The situations are different. The way you speak is different. In sex work, the more you talk with love, the more money you get. In organisations, the more you talk

> with love, the lower you will go. Keep pushing at the back, but don't step ahead to work. Keep working behind the scenes. Just keep doing it. Oh my God, Jo! I've taken the responsibility of all the women. My peers at work, no matter how much we've been together, this thing makes them jealous.

The work of advocating, with diplomacy (as Ayeesha calls it, 'talking with love') are skills sex workers use within their 'primary' occupation, whether for themselves or the collective. Ayeesha hints at the resentment this diplomacy brings when used in different settings and with different people. Some of this resentment comes from the visible invisibility of the hard work being done to keep the collective going through the hands of a few members. Another point of contention is that sex worker leaders are working in a competitive market both against and with each other. While sex workers are the only people who can completely understand the intersection of the privilege-disprivilege they are in, they are also working as service providers for the same clientele with the same (often limited) resources which inherently warrants feelings associated with competing: jealousy, anger, sadness, frustration, anxiety and stress that with more stress of collective crisis breaking tends to weigh down on sex worker activists. While competition is viewed as a natural side effect of the free market, sex workers I worked with are aware of and work hard to minimise the harm competing can cause by holding onto their belief that they exist as a syncretic culture, breaking 'outside' boundaries of class, caste, race and gender where the only difference is that one is either a sex worker or a non-sex worker as a strategy for safety and trust.

In a meeting with two new coordinators of a newly formed core group training activists from the second line of leadership, both expressed concerns over expectations surrounding what they called 'advocacy'. 'Can we tell you something, Jo? People still don't understand what they are

supposed to do being part of the core group. They confuse it with their work as peer supporters, or targeted interventions or other projects. Maybe we should start by telling them what the core group is and what is expected out of them'. Together, we created a pamphlet for the reference of core group members, and for anyone else who becomes a part of the core group in later years to understand these unsaid expectations.

Knowledge is created and sustained through group meetings, and training sessions. During the first election process, planned efforts were made to circulate documents in multiple languages so that in-person translations are seamless. The programme schedule was written in different languages and colours, publicly displayed on walls. The final report of the election process not only captured the processes and defining moments of the electoral processes but also creates evidence for how a deeply stigmatised community adopts mainstream processes and adapts them to create a bottom-up format of advocating for their own rights and needs, instead of the other way round.

Middle People

> I was like a sponge inside a small water pool – I absorbed everything.

Ayeesha describes her experience in the collective and the steep learning curve she had in this way, similar to how I had imagined the collective at first-a room with multiple doors, many of which I had no idea were there. Talking to Ayeesha, I realised that the sponge analogy made more sense because that is also how I felt – learning, re-learning, applying, and executing.

Pia entered the core group sometime after it was formed in 2021. She was asked to join NNSW even though she is a child of a sex worker and not a sex

worker herself because of her 'loud work' – a quality attached to people who make themselves visible in times of protest, resisting the noise of forced identity and structural violence. She was holding the fort down in Nagpur, which only had one sexual health based Targeted Intervention, but no rights-based collective for sex workers to come together and advocate beyond health concerns. Supporters said Nagpur 'fell' (unable to challenge police violence) because they had not collectivised. If there had been a stronghold of sex workers standing together, the police would not have dared to barricade the area.

> If I have an issue in Nagpur related to the law, Nihal sir, known to NNSW, is there in Nagpur to support me, and I can just reach out to him. Things get solved quickly. Earlier, there was no idea about who to call or what to do. But now, if I just call him, he knows what to do, and I have help. I've been around for five months in NNSW, and problems that were not getting solved, are now solved (Pia, 2021, Nagpur).

The network is well-known and well-connected to the people who support it from the outside, so issues get resolved quickly. There is a lot of admiration in Pia's voice as she talks about supporters she is in touch with at NNSW. She confirms the fears I have had but is also more confident than I am; she is new to the network, but not new to the movement. Pia has been in and out of court for most of her adult life, taking care of her mother and helping the women in her area deal with the police when there are cases levelled against them. Because of her in-depth, on-ground knowledge of the law, the supporter in Nagpur asked her to apply for a law degree, and the lawyer supporters at the network are helping her study law to officialise her place in the movement.

Learning collectivisation and networking in this context also comes with some urgency because of the burnout singular leaders are going through.

Until and unless second-line leaders are trained and created, all duties fall on the few people 'capable' and 'trained' to handle them – everyone I have spoken to who loves this work is also utterly burnt out by it. For every new request, every new email and every new 'opportunity', there is a sigh of exasperation that it needs to get done. There is no capacity. No time. Not enough funding. No emotional support for those supporting others beyond each other.

There is a trend of who comes into leadership positions, in this case people who have been leaders unofficially, becoming leaders officially. Their skills remain the same, but they are trained to do much more with these skills. Like Pia, some people learn the community's work solely due to their (lack of) distance from it. Ayeesha talks about various sex workers' children who have become part of the collective because they are the children or partners of sex workers – people who care for them. These individuals 'know everything' – who is new, who has gone where, what fights are breaking out, and who is supporting whom. They keep tabs and act as informal informers for those formally working in the collective so that members can pre-empt issues and strategies. It is also a way to keep tabs on younger entrants to ensure that there is no trafficked victim in the *gali*. Protection only seems possible through internal 'surveillance' of what goes on in the *gali*.

Pressure, Worthiness, Respectability in Collective Building and Visibility

> You are not a leader if there are no people behind you.

"Do you feel pressure?" I ask.

> I would not call it pressure. I would call it being alert, and if we are alert we can deal with whatever comes on its own (Ayeesha, 2021, Maharashtra).

I don't agree with the description of ‘getting into’ sex work, I just view it as any other profession. I've worked in other more respected (by society) jobs in various NGOs and children’s education. I've done small teaching roles in Sunday schools for Christian missionaries to sustain the family. The reason I started sex work is to earn money. I've faced a lot of challenges. When I was in children's education, I couldn't do sex work and the income was low to sustain the family. I was a receptionist at a Hero Honda bike showroom where I used to make Rs 12,000 per month, but there was a fear of being outed as a sex worker there because men started asking me for sex work. So I quit. Through sex work, I was able to earn Rs 5000 a day, which gave me security and freedom to be involved in other things. In 2016, I got involved with an NGO called Action for Development, which had around 2300 members. I was outspoken in those meetings about our concerns and well-being. I put myself forward and was elected as one of the 5 CBOs and president of a CBO later unanimously. These roles were voluntary roles without pay.

When I introduce myself as a leader of sex workers, people ask me why would I want to continue doing this where I get more recognition due to my leadership and speaking skills. I am proud of my integrity and work ethic. I get things done without any supervision which has way helped the sex workers movement gain credibility and respect. This also led to the unity among workers which is well respected by the society and allied organisations. Journalists want me as a strong and powerful woman voice, but without the baggage of my sex worker movement. I never tell people when I invite them to the meetings that it’s for the women's rights movement, I always am forthright in revealing that I work for the sex workers movement. I get hundreds of calls congratulating me, some of them were from other movements like the Dalit movement, who comment positively on my courage and determination. This is from the experience of the last 6-7 years. We have to work extremely hard to keep going and I won’t fault any individuals for these hardships.

When I am not in the field, I am on calls all day, this is my strength and weakness. There is always something to do and follow up on. If there is an emergency I tend to do it on my phone and that's my routine. This is my way of communication. I never turn my phone off and the instances it was turned off

> can be counted on my fingertips. The phone has become my weakness and gets me to do my work and it enables me to do my work and solve any crisis (Durga, 2020, Andhra Pradesh).

Durga's story touches on many aspects previously discussed (the visibility of leadership, holding the identity of being a sex worker, the tension of getting work done, and being criticised for being visible), while also bringing new variables to the fore. She speaks of respect, credibility, determination, and the continuity of work when she is not 'on field' – leading never stops. She also talks about how she is breaching frontiers of expectation with the anti-caste movement in the state, which as the last patch of the thesis will explore, has been contentious activist territory.

Being a leader comes with the additional responsibility of being 'worthy' for others to stand behind you. In almost all my conversations, peer leaders reported putting an end to what they called 'bad habits': alcohol and drug use, seeing abusive clients, and gambling, and instead focusing on 'good skills', like working on public speaking and dressing 'professionally' to stand in the same room as 'big leaders', or leaders that are known to them. Leaders travel across the country to attend workshops, panels, seminars, trainings, and meetings, even at the cost of their income dwindling since they cannot do their primary job (sex work) when they travel (some still manage). At these gatherings, they must create and sustain a 'good image' of themselves: choosing who they are talking to, where they are going, and what they are doing because they are being watched. The freedom that comes with sex work, then, ends with the unfreedom of being hyper-visible in leadership positions, surveilled for goodness, and properness. The creation of the leader in the *sangatna* is not by invitation or accident solely, but is also carefully arranged. Leaders are trained in more than skills. They are trained in creating their image and in humility, to look like and be

powerful leaders inspiring change, as examples (as in Lata's narrative) so that people can look up and want to be like them. The collective depends upon good leaders inspiring good leaders.

Noted that these expectations of dressing, acting, and being a 'good' leader are also propped up at the doorstep of already marginalised women, properness being a tool for gentrifying their selfhood, but at the same time, these leaders, no matter how they dress, act, or react, are an anomaly in many groups, as they refuse to be sanitised for the sake of solidarity.

Build-a-leader

In this quest of build-a-leader, there is less space for mistakes and even experimentation despite there being no correct way to collectivise. The collective relies on individual and collective responses to the violence thrown at them at any given time; some strategies work and some do not. There is no blueprint, no instruction, and practising collective work means doing it repeatedly for anyone to get it right – getting acceptable results in response to the crisis event.

The leader's 'worthiness' comes from exposure to other movements, and how 'other leaders behave' translates to what the leaders shape themselves towards. They have clarity on what one can get from the movement and what one cannot expect. I suppose managing your expectations is also one of the strategies to be used to sustain oneself in the movement. Theming thoughts together from interviews of different board members, I outline what aspects emerge when sex worker leaders describe an ideal leader in three 'expectations' that are also accepted realities based on experience. The outline also assists my understanding of the responsibilities that are undertaken and why many leaders hold the beliefs they do about this work.

Number 1: Family time is to be kept to a minimum, make sure you commit completely and don't expect much.

According to Durga, leaders can only succeed if they limit time with their families and make the collective their family where all care is to be directed. You cannot have both. She adds, one must also be honest, courageous, and think on their feet. "Don't expect any money from the movement but commit completely", she says, giving me an example: "People criticise me for being the centre of attention, but they do not understand that I am in the pictures because I'm travelling at night to be everywhere. To take our movement everywhere".

> Of the seven people who started this work, I am the only one left. Two people died, one person left Sangli, and two people are here, but I'm the only one in the community still actively working.

Number two: "It is not necessary that people who start the work of the movement need to come with us till the end. Sometimes people get left behind, sometimes we need to leave them behind," Sudha tells me with a solemn expression and a quieter voice than from the rest of our call. She means both death and exiting the movement by 'left behind' – an acceptance most leaders have when they reflect on their journey as leaders. The loss of friends is a guiding force for leaders to look forward in their work, to know that they are continuing the work that was started by people years before them.

> The people who give you power can take away your power. This power is not a chair I will take to my grave, and I should not. So, we should take care of ourselves. We cannot take it so seriously that we give our lives up and think about the future. Someone will come before, and someone will come after. The space should be made suitable for those who come after.

Comparing her power to a chair that she cannot carry, especially to her grave, Durga points out that the nature of power is fluid and touches many hands. In some ways, the leaders wisely do not take their job more seriously than their lives, yet there is a tension that comes with the responsibility of being at the helm of their collective, being privy and intimately aware of the ups and downs before anyone else.

Number three: There are no breaks in the movement.

The first time I came across this knowledge during an interview, I felt a sense of discomfort thinking that it romanticised burnout within activist spaces. But after many instances of going back and forth on what that could possibly mean for the collective and its individuals, I understood it more as an excitement, and inspiration to fight a system that does not care for you and your kin in the collective. In Covid Mutual Aid, Jupp (2022) says, providing care in the community is not mutually exclusive with protesting against the lack of infrastructure within care, going further to describe horizontal, affective, and quiet activism in the everyday support members provide to each other, something that also fills them with adrenaline, as described above.

> We don't feel like taking a break. We also sometimes avoid things we used to do in the past, such as drinking in public places, as that invites arrests. We don't want the leaders in Me and My World to be associated with that. We rarely have a drink, but when it is, it's in the house, not in public places and restaurants. Sometimes when we talk about going to cinemas, we just immediately talk it down. Why do we need movies? We see enough action already. I am not scared of getting arrested, but the issue would have blown up: "the leader of the movement was caught getting drunk". So, I only drink when I am in a safe space like my home.

Even though Durga solves most issues on calls, from day to night, she sometimes has to travel for over two hours for situations she thinks may need her intervention, particularly violent ones. She insists it is the tough ones that motivate her to keep going. Taking over 15 calls a day, at age 50, Durga doesn't move out of her bedroom all day. She does the work because she loves her community, but also stresses that the recognition she and the organisations she works for make it worth the pain and trouble. Because so many sex workers are hidden and cannot be active parts of advocacy efforts, she takes her job even more seriously. Sex workers who are out often have to hold up the movement for the sex workers who remain hidden. Members from other states share this sentiment, but with visibility for a few comes the annoyance of invisibility for those who want to be visible. Then, leaders carefully choose how much space they take, and where to pass on opportunities to avoid tension.

> We often discuss that when people work so hard to improve our lives, we should never quit and keep going regardless of the obstacles we face. During some tough times, I shed tears and felt like quitting. I think of them to motivate myself and start over again; immediately after one of these moments, I recruited 72 younger people like Kumari, Vaishnavi, and Rajyalakshmi.
>
> I love days when a lot of stuff is happening, and I'm running around. If nothing is happening, I feel bored. I don't like it. I love sleeping on Sundays; I love it so much. I cook on Sunday, eat, and sleep all night.

These narratives add another dimension to the conceptualisation of mutual care for the self as well as for the community, where people form personal ethics codes and principles to do right by the community, even at the cost of care for themselves. Within this daily tension, people find moments of calm, like going to the beach in a new city where they have gone together for a state meeting.

Sex workers practice a kind of self-care that is missing from state care frameworks, much like Audre Lorde's (1988) conceptualisation of 'self-care' as a radical, political act of warfare for black women in her book, *A Burst of Light*. Care has become a form of activism, self-preservation, and creating space in the community in the gaps left by interventions and movements that only have time to focus on crisis after crisis, and the reporting and response towards these crises.

Work, with no end in sight

> VAMP was registered in 1993, and in 2003, there was a protest after a police officer behaved violently with sex workers. After seeing all this injustice, I also felt like working with the collective. If a police officer writes something, at least we can read it and tell each other. When we talk about collective, it does not mean that we call once and everyone comes together. It is very tough. It takes talking to every single person and adding them one by one to the network. People don't reach out to the network until they fall down until blood comes out of their own hands. Most leaders started doing the work to prevent the violence happening to them from happening again and to other people. We always knew that whatever has to be done, has to be done by us. We got together as a collective, tied up the goons that hurt us, and beat them up. After this, they stopped.

Different leaders tell me that there is no other way – the collective is the way. Places that only have targeted interventions set up for sex workers without also becoming about the rights of the workers, is where violence increases, which evidences that health concerns of sex workers can be an entry point, but not the final stop.

> This is the feeling of being in a collective. Five people would look at each document, and we processed each person's records, checked spelling, and numbers, and corrected them. That feeling that no one should be left behind. That is the collective. We would lose work with customers, push our schedules,

> and they would be supportive of our work, when to come and when I am available. We would be in the office till 6 pm, then we would get home, wash our faces, wear our uniform, flowers, and lipstick, and sit to work.

"At the same time", says Sudha, "the community does not only need big things, but they also need small-small things". One-to-one counselling, picking up a call late at night when someone is drunk, turning up to the wedding of someone's child, giving someone attention when they just need an ear, the energy someone wants to put into a stranger's moment of crisis. All these 'small things' matter to the community and add to why someone is named and pushed forward as a leader.

> Even if we fight each other within the community, we rally together if there is a problem. This faith in the collective and its strength has increased. If the community can see that you are trying, leadership will come independently.

This love and passion for the community and collective work are peppered with a sense of guilt and pain attached to not having done enough. There is immediately a feeling of achievement that comes from the recognition one gets for their work. Durga puts it eloquently:

> I have never felt the need for money; I often just have enough to pay for travel expenses and nothing left for water or even tea. But I have never let it hold me back. I don't know when I have learned it, if it was during this journey as a leader or if I've always had it in me. My colleagues often ask me how do you manage and where do you get my courage from, I just say I don't think that way. The saddest part is the amount of violence I see on the ground. Sometimes I cannot answer all the calls or resolve all the issues that come to me.
>
> In the last RTI forum, local officials complained to their bosses that I am creating issues for them by getting Aadhar cards for sex workers. The senior official refused to listen to them, saying don't complain or say a word about Durga or her work which gave me a lot of happiness. This is because they have

> seen my work, principles, and commitment for the last 2-3 years that I am not working for any monetary benefits. Even when I travel to other districts to work with them, I refuse when they offer to pay for my travel and pay for it on my own. All of this behaviour has instilled a belief in them that people who work at Me and My World are not in this for money but for the upliftment of women.

Most workers I spoke to reflect that as sex workers, they need not work the number of hours they do in a day to earn as much as they planned. Yet, they work more hours than they can and should, just to be accountable to the community. Added to this is the passion for some skills they get to apply, which they brought in from outside the collective. For some, it is public speaking, for others, it is writing or even organising events. And sprinkled onto this is the knowledge that there is no place other than the collective where these women can be unabashedly themselves. Sudha finds the collective an affirming place to be herself, grow her hair, and wear a sari. She says that because of the collective and the care they receive as members of this collective, they can care for their families, who earlier would be places of pain and suffering. Since there is a collective where these trans women can be in safety, they can fulfil their 'duties' to their wives, parents, children and extended families as bread-winners. Ensuring this space for these women to access safety, health and physical space for the community is related to the care they can provide for their kin, flipping the role of care in societies that ask for the maintenance of an individual to be the family's burden. Creating care frameworks within communities that keep individuals safe leads to the safety of the family and the community.

*

"*Kaam khatam hi nahi hota!*" (work does not seem to end) Ayeesha, Kiran, Durga, Gauri, and more people say at different points in our online meetings. Officially, as I interview them, I ask them what they mean.

> Even if office work is on one side, there's something called 'part-time' no at night! How do you have part-time jobs, like that only part-time! Even if office work is on one side, then a meeting at NNSW, a meeting at Vadamalar, and SANGRAM work happening automatically – part-time! Rest and all is not needed for us. If we take rest, how will we eat? At night I am free! I talk in video calls and make money; I enjoy what I do! (Gauri, 2020, Tamil Nadu).

> I am eager to work in the office the entire time. Whether the salary is less, or even if the work is unpaid, I love this work because I am working for the people. They must trust me and trust that I will do my job. That's why I enjoy this work and do it and keep sex work part-time. That's all! I wake up at 5 am and do domestic duties. Sit on the bus at 9 am. I reach the office at 10 am. If there is work, I do that. Otherwise, I go to the rented room in Ranchi, switch on my work phone and start work. (Lali, 2020, Jharkand).

Do you get time to rest? I ask.

> *Laughs* I don't get time for myself. I have to take care of the kids. I need to take care of my room. I go to the office. I don't have time for makeup either. I can't wear it on the bus. It doesn't look nice if I do (Lali, 2020, Jharkand).

Pain, disappointment, and tension

> Last week, I got a call from the office, and someone asked me to come urgently to the town centre where a community member was running around naked, with a stick in her hand hitting people around her. We followed this person for 2-3 hours, got hurt and were bitten and pinched. We bore it, put a nightie on her body and admitted her to the mental hospital. I thank God for giving me the strength to take this person off the streets and admit them to the hospital. I cried for 2 hours thinking that a person with two children who left them, who has lived till now, had people around them laughing and jeering instead of

> helping. After I saw them put in a cell with food given to them, I felt my heart burn. I tell myself that I should not collapse (Lata, 2020, Kerala).

Lata and I spoke a lot about disappointment, support, and pain in the collective. While these issues came up, a much deeper, numbing pain was felt with the loss of sisters to illness and violence, political unrest within the collective, competing interests, and the lack of care given to the mental health of those on the frontline. It is not that people do not care about each other. There is simply no time to feel the pain that becomes numb due to repression in the whirlwind of writing policy recommendations, getting funding documents together, and running from city to city to expand the network so that food is more readily available. Still, individuals like Lata have to run, literally, when called to support other individuals in her community.

When I began actively participating in activist circles, what came along with the joy of collectivising with like-minded progressive people was the heartbreak of being hurt by people similarly marginalised. It is difficult to capture the pain I am talking about, that my friends in the communities have felt – so many words I find at the tip of my tongue are written here in vague sentences, with thoughts that stop before they start. Feminists like Rozsika Parker (1995), while speaking of care in motherhood have written about this caring ambivalence experienced in both positive and negative emotions intertwining with each other in our capacities to care. It is because it is complex, messy, and profound to care, that there needs to be social infrastructure truly enabling care for others, both proximate and distant (Hakim et al., 2020).

Tied to this pain is also the expectation that stems from the stigma of one minority member being directly responsible for the lives of other minority

members. One can say that is what leadership means. Still, within minority groups, and rights-based movements, this difference from the rest of society is exacerbated and forced onto the bodies of all members.

> No matter what people say, we must take it through one ear and leave it out the other and be there to serve the people; this is how we should be. I've taken a lot of counselling, gone through counselling training, and gained certification for it. At the core of my heart what pains me is that no matter what work I do, people still continue to label me as someone not good – a bad woman – and this affects me a lot. How much ever work I do, they claim that I haven't worked. They look at me as an enemy, and I don't look at them like that. I look at everyone as one mother's children. But when they look at me, I don't know what they think. But I took everything as, "Whoever talks [negatively like that], let them talk and go", so I suppressed my feelings about it. If I have to be a role model and do work, let people talk as they do and go. Anger would come but I would suppress that anger and prioritise that I need to work for the people. As a leader, I took into consideration how a leader must be, and so I must be able to bring everyone to abide – that is the power of a leader. That is what I think.
>
> If I tell them to work when they are not working, I look like an enemy to them. When they aren't working, I speak to them. Whether they work or not, if some underserved have trusted Vadamalar and have initiated our work in one place and then we are known at an international level, then no one should speak ill about Vadamalar, and embarrassment mustn't be brought upon us. To ensure that no one says anything like that about us, I talk to them. Because of this, they say things [about me] like, "Oh who does she think she is?", "Why is she saying this?" and this hurts me a little (Gokila, 2020, Tamil Nadu).

Speaking about competition and competing interests, one leader said competition keeps people interested in the work. Another says, it is often the case that those she works with every day do not take her seriously, while the people she sees once a week, do. A hierarchy within the

collective, she says, helps her maintain her position as an older, more experienced leader.

> I'll tell you the truth. The Targeted Intervention (TI) programme (against HIV) has completely divided us. Our community only does the TI programme, but they are bogged down with so much work that they cannot collectivise. Then it became TI vs *Sangatna*. The people who work for *sangatna*, like Raju, Mahesh, Ayeesha, and me, don't work for the TI. We only work for *sangatna*. There used to be a time when Kamala *maushi* just had to call once, and everyone would rally together. Now we have to call people ten times for them to come because they don't have time.

Sudha's reflections on the unusual lack of interest in the collective speaks to the immense lack of care/inability to care while caring only for oneself in a neoliberal capitalist economy. How will a person care for a community when the ideal citizen under neoliberalism is autonomous, entrepreneurial, endlessly resilient, and self-sufficient, whose active promotion justifies the destruction of the welfare state and civic engagement (Hakim et al., 2020)? This inability to care is connected to not being able to care about mental health, which is much less seen, and stigmatised as compared to physical health, leading to a slow erosion of capacity in the collective. At the same time, the self-reliance the workers have built in the absence of the state's care alienates them from the community. After one problem is solved comes the next, and the next and the next, in a circle of 'promiscuous care' (Hakim et al., 2020). The Care Collective (2020) has theorised this type of care-giving for groups, as a care network for 'strangers like me': forms of care carried out by strangers for strangers whose lives resemble their own although, in the case of the networks of sex workers, these strangers become family and closely knit communities instead of leaving after one action of care tied temporally, or geographically. The concept of caring for

‘strangers like me’ adds nuance to understanding chosen families, fictive kin and the collective both as family and network where care in the absence of care from usual sources (family or government) become the centre around which caring work revolves.

> There is no point in me taking the money I get from the work I do without putting it anywhere else. I have a lot of people in my house who are supportive of my work. That is important. They don’t know I am a sex worker, my children and their spouses don’t know. I still call myself a sex worker, but I don’t practise. I have a lot of work from the collectives and do outreach at the moment. It pays me a small amount of money, and it is enough for now although the rent is much higher (Lata, 2020, Kerala).

Lata and I often discussed precarity – of the law, the status of sex workers, the mental health of the people around her, the work that keeps coming, the attacks in news portals taking her by surprise, and responding to it all. Job precarity was a point of connection for me. I spoke about precarity in detail and in different ways with different people within the network, who all had an awareness of their jobs being precarious not only as sex workers, but also within established NGOs and collectives. The starting-stopping nature of sex work for Lata along with all the informal and formal work she takes up complicates the linearity with which sexual labour and in turn, the nature of sex itself is understood, complemented of course, with the reality of being neoliberal subjects in the market, living precarious lives with precarious jobs.

> Being a sex worker is tough. When we stand up for our work, no matter how much work we have and how much we have to do, in front of a client, we always have to put on a happy face and show that we are happy. We have to hide our problems, and we take care of the problems later. I know the entire community’s problems, but a leader cannot share their problems with the community. I feel like in most other jobs you are allowed to show

> dissatisfaction, or in your eyes that you have some problem. But in sex work, if you are not ready or performing, you cannot work (Kiran, 2020, Maharashtra).

Overworked, underpaid, and being tense often, were all feelings we laughed about, sharing how we were each earning during the month and sometimes lending each other small amounts of money to make it through. None of us romanticised this precarity, but just saw it as a part of life that has to be 'managed', ideally with each other, the community. We used the word *majboori* (compulsion) to define the love with which we worked, but the defeat we felt at the hands of larger structures and powers.

> I never got freedom. No friends. No going out. No friendships.
>
> He was my friend's boyfriend, and I am from a strict household. My father was a retired army officer. After tuition, we went out for my friend's sister's birthday. Usually, I would come home by 8 PM, but this time, it was already 9 PM. I begged my friend's boyfriend to take me home, and my mom would hit me. I was 10 steps away from my house, and because of this fear, I ran away to Calcutta and stayed with my friend's boyfriend's aunt. I did not have anything in my mind, this was my friend's boyfriend.
>
> My mother had a local standing and was very involved in the women's committees in our hometown, she registered an FIR, involved the police and came to Calcutta. She then got me married to this boy – her reputation was on the line. My husband wanted a child, and I told him that I did not. He was 5 years older than me, and he was making an adjustment by marrying me, a girl who was not home for two nights. I had a child, but my health deteriorated, so I went to my maternal home. My husband started having an affair, started taking drugs with his girlfriend and died of an overdose.
>
> When the police used to come for raids, I used to run. I don't know what got me so charged up. I started speaking non-stop. I said the same thing to madam (an NGO worker), "Why should I tell you anything about my life history? Are you going to look after my family? Are you going to go to my house and tell them that I'm a sex worker? Are you not going to let me work here, or what?" I

started thinking politically at that time, that I need to stand up for this or these people (locals) are going to ruin us. Not just for us, but for the coming generation of Nepali and Bangali people. It should be an open space. Has someone bought all of India?

We've gained freedom, no? Now should we become slaves to them and be oppressed at their hands? I started buying rooms then. I bought my own room. After seeing me, everyone else also got their own room. Then, whenever there was a fight in the *gali*, I used to go and if I ever spoke up, that itself was a sin. "Why did she speak? Why did this foreign girl speak? Is she going to be a leader for me now? Now, these people also knew the local politicians and such, so they'd instigate them as well. They put a knife to my throat, those sycophants of these political leaders. "If you talk too much, we will kill you right here," that's what they said. Even then I said only one thing, "If you want to kill me, do it. I'm not a woman who is going to back down. I have nobody. I only have a son who lives with my mother, she'll take care of him. I haven't gone home for two years now; they'll think I am dead. I'm not a cowardly woman.

If you die, you die and take everyone with you. Don't die alone. If you die alone, you'll become immortal. There's no use in that. Nobody is going to give you a tag, that "you've become Amar, Prem or Veer".

As soon as I came here, I took a room. I wasn't at work. I thought I wouldn't go back to work; I'll be in the community and I'll work for free. But I don't want this pressure. When you get a salary, you feel pressured. "Why didn't you go solve that fight? You're a worker, right? You're taking the salary, aren't you?", this is the conversation that happens, no, Jo? I've immersed myself so much that it has ruined my personal life. What have I got from the organisation? Look, what do you get from a family? There are positive, as well as negative – it's the same in organisations. Every family has fights, it's not like there isn't, but there's also love in those fights. That's what organisations are like too. My understanding has changed a lot. Now, if people from my community even hurl a few fits of abuse at me, I listen and laugh it off. I've been so hypnotised, that my patience has increased by working in SANGRAM. They've increased this limit. So, I can absorb it. Do you know how a sponge absorbs water? This is

> how they've made me. This is why it is a family as well, there's love in the family but there's also fighting, and there's a lot of backbiting. We're the ones who backbite, we're the ones who fight and we're also the ones who love[66].
>
> There's nothing I'd say I have lost. I've gained a lot. While gaining, sometimes it's become too much. "Man, what is this mess that I've gotten myself into today", this also happens. Sometimes, it also feels exciting. In the organisation itself, it's fun to compete. Even participating in competitions is so much fun. And then in the competition, winning and making other competitors lose is a different kind of fun. Every business has competition. I'll start with sex work itself, there's a lot of competition. "She wears clothes like this, her fashion is like this, this is how she wears the mascara and the *kohl*, this is the way she does her make-up, this is how she holds herself", all these things come up. I never thought of myself as a competition but I was made to feel that this is a competition. Because there is competition in everyone's life, there's competition in every field. We studied in school as kids and there was competition there too. In the family and house, I would compete with my brother, "Why is my brother loved so much, why do I receive less love?" There is competition. There is competition at every level, this is what we've been taught.I open my eyes, I wake up in the morning and start my day with activism and I end my day with activism (Ayeesha, 2020, Maharashtra).

My relationship with Ayeesha has been the deepest within the network, and within her smaller world of the Miraj sex worker collectives. When we met, Ayeesha was both the coordinator of the network, as well as the person on speed dial in the Miraj brothels. She is a person people call for help, well connected, and resourceful.

Our relationship did not begin this way. The first time we met, I thought about our awkward conversation for days. We fought a lot, because Ayeesha

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[66] This paragraph from Ayeesha's story is the epigraph of the thesis. It is repeated here so that it can also be experienced as part of the larger conversation we had.

does not keep anything inside, and neither do I. We are both emotional people, which made communicating both a challenge and a pleasure; Ayeesha does what she said she would do, there is no *idhar udhar* (here and there). Together, as the communications coordinator and the network coordinator, we eventually became inseparable; our work required that we are always on the same page. I woke up to messages from Ayeesha, since she would text from India, five and a half hours ahead, and my day ended with messages from Ayeesha too, since she slept extremely late after her *dhandha* (business) appointments of the day.

From colleagues trying to communicate better, we became friends. She helped me enter the collective, answering all my rookie questions about documenting, writing, who to contact, when to call, what is expected when there were no said or written rules. When I felt insecure about doing a task for the first time, she would be my first pair of eyes to check, since she knew who the audiences were. We both played the NGO-crisis-state-collective-people game together, and she made me feel better at a job where I felt I was a new person every day with every new task. Slowly, Ayeesha would also tell me about her pain, the unpredictability of working within the confines of the NGO-Government industrial complex, with people she really wanted to work with falling through the cracks in the name of bureaucracy. These issues caused Ayeesha great discomfort, because her morals were at odds with her work within the collective. We often had long calls, even though I am primarily a text person for whom calls bring only anxiety – my heart stopped racing when Ayeesha would call. By the time I finished writing a second draft of this thesis, Ayeesha had left the collective again to find better pastures back home. She had been struggling to find time to care for her health and chose to step away, even though caring for herself in this way brought her great pain at the start.

Care, Networks, and Care Networks

> Sex work is work we do so that we are able to do the caring work for the people we love. Most sex workers are mothers.
>
> Adams & Lee from the English Collective of Prostitutes (2022)

The narratives in this patch (and the thesis) establish that a lot of the work of the individuals and relationships in the *sangatna* is based on everyday actions of care. However, care is only a part of the *sangatna*'s function, along with collective identity formation and mobilising previously invisibilised voices. Given the 'carelessness' sex workers experience in their immediate circles, and eventually at the hands of state institutions, this section grapples with examples of care giving and receiving in the network, which even though not labelled as such, are actions through which trust and the *sangatna* come together. In the *sangatna*, care and kinship is reactive, and productive (Thelen, 2021), turning it into a mechanism of belonging in response to inequality (Aulino, 2016; Ong & Steinmuller, 2020; Thelen, 2015).

Anthropological study on care focuses on its experience and practice in a myriad of settings. Some focus on care as unpaid social reproduction[67] with kin in the household, others focus on care as paid exchange, or within social movements (Santos, 2020), with strangers (Huang, 2020). In any case, care has been looked at as a fundamental element of social organisation[68],

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[67] Theories of social reproduction have also been a fertile site for solidarity building among different kinds of workers and "non-workers"; housewives/mothers, gig economy workers, domestic workers, surrogate mothers, sex workers, the last two being perennial victims of exploitation. Even then, with statements like "we are not like them" coming from surrogate parents towards sex workers, the stigma attached to sex work plays its tricks again for work that takes very much the same capacity (Paramanand, 2022).

[68] Feminist philosophical work that expands the definition of care beyond domestic labour to argue for it as a tool for political engagement have played a vital role in the way care has been used as a concept of central importance to social organisation to anthropologists (Johnson & Lindquist, 2019; Ong & Steinmuller, 2021; Thelen, 2015; Ticktin, 2011).

and in recent times, as political critique of state violence, exclusion, dispossession, and expansion of capital (for example, see Biehl, 2007; Garcia, 2010; Glenn, 2010; Han, 2012; Jervis, 2001; Stevenson, 2014; Thelen, 2021; Ticktin, 2011)[69]. Anthropologists have also charted how care is intimately tied with feelings of intimacy, compassion, suffering, responsibility, and love, underpinned with moral sincerity to make up for lack of freedom, agency, rights, and citizenship for many communities (see Aulino, 2016; Buch, 2015; Kleinman, 2009).

A critique of the binarisation of care as either state-led ('bad') or community led ('good')[70] has been challenged by several anthropologists who argue that romanticising care can theoretically, ethnographically, and politically limit how we think about the concept of care beyond an emotive subject, resisting analysis as deeply flawed, recreating inequalities towards requirements of better attuned care that requires greater funding/resources to enable the expansion of useful care work (Cook & Trundle, 2020).

This chapter shows similarly unsettled (Cook, 2020) lived experiences of care among sex workers in the collective to understand how this particular social movement, the network, collective, and individual actors experience, deploy, and negotiate care relationships. The collective is a site created for safety, trust, care, and action stemming from it all. How do sex workers

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[69] For a thorough review of literature on care connected to social, legal and political contexts see Harding et al. (2017), for care tied to belonging see Thelen (2021).

[70] Care as a positive response has its roots in feminist research, where women are often represented as selfless care-giving figures. For example, Carol Gilligan's (1982) book, *In a Different Voice*, explores care as an alternative, inherently female ethic that is based on justice and moral deliberation situated in personal relationships (as compared to the "male abstract reasoning" that is more individualistic). Gilligan's work has been critiqued for assuming a false universalism and essentialising female care work. Positive descriptions of care have relied on a model of selflessness and maternal care. As Read (2007) describes, good care is understood as an expression of love and intrinsic concern that needs to be "gifted". On the contrary, any self interest in the giving of care, coercion and profit are often represented by the state and the market, creating a binary, while the other side is marked by collective interest and altruism, attributed to less powerful sections of society.

define care, and how might it add a deeper understanding of caring activist networks? This patchwork of care – experienced and shared – examines what it means to care in the collective.

Care in networks

Sex workers stay in their networks and collectives both out of necessity (to fight violence) and to create social relationships with 'people like them', who, in the absence of care from the state and from blood families, find family and community along the way. Many of these people are the bearers of care responsibilities in their consanguineous families, eventually becoming primary breadwinners, sending money from the work they do after migrating from home[71]. Post migration, sex workers carry this caregiving capacity into their jobs[72], and eventually remake families – by marriage, adoption, or through the collective. I focus on the exchange and experience of care in relation to the socio-political collectivisation that sex workers engage in, which can be looked at as a form of care for 'people like them' who need the *sangatna*, as family, as safety, as hope.

In networks, emotional care is tied to the making of the (care) network, within which 'approach emotions' (Klandermans et al., 2002) taking place in intimate social networks facilitate mobilisation by providing encouragement and moral support, or through certain rituals where

[71] Typically, female kin are expected to and perform care work within households with no legal recognition of this work or compensation (Fraser & Gordon, 2003). This is where social reproduction theories of sex as "private" that cannot be "public" work meets care as reproductive work that is required for the productive capitalist economy to thrive.

[72]Seeing sex workers as care workers is a relatively new argument since some sex workers view their labour as 'therapeutic' in addition to being empowering. Academics and activists argue that while there is a lot of care work involved with sex work, it would be unfair to only see sex workers as care workers. Moreover, sex workers do not have to be care providers for them to be treated as workers with rights. Instead, sex work should be deexceptionalised in the labour market (O' Connell Davidson, 2022). It is also useful to consider that sex workers are an over-researched population but underrepresented in academia so there is a real risk of running sex work as care work when not enough sex workers can add to this argument.

emotions are shared and encouraged by participants. By generating high emotional energy, confidence, and enthusiasm of social interaction based on identity, members foster feelings of solidarity for and with each other (Collins, 2004, p. 108). In this context, the long-term objective is to continue mobilising, and prevent avoidance.

However, care in social organisation affirms emergent subject positions, transforming strangers to familiars and vice versa, furthering hierarchies and exclusions, entangling subjects in relations of obligation and reciprocity. Care can also fail when rejected or unreciprocated (Ong & Steinmuller, 2021). Within networks, care can interpellate individuals and communities into positions of being donors, providers, recipients, or even an audience to the care being performed. Shifting responsibilities and needs create categories of actors contesting binaries of "insiders" and "outsiders", "donors" and "recipients" (ibid.) and in the case of the sex worker networks, "leaders" and "non-leaders", "active sex workers" and "non active/former sex workers" with expectations of care on some, and expectations of need on others.

Sex workers as targets of care, rather than caring individuals

Sex workers are usually considered targets of care (Paramanand, 2022), and what is usually pushed on sex workers as care, is governance that is insidiously violent, and technologically mediated like for most marginalised people (Biehl, 2015; Garcia, 2015). This governance extends to control through policing, and 'rescue', making them targets to evictions and violent immigrant policies that keep sex workers, especially migrant workers, out of care frameworks usually available for citizens (Vuolajärvi, 2022). Within this system, support is focused on 'post exit' therapy, since sex workers conflated with trafficked victims are put under the umbrella of exploited

women, low threshold health care for HIV/STI testing. There is almost no space for access to social, legal, or healthcare schemes, creating a model of care and ideological landscape only focusing on the reproduction of the vulnerable victim leading to premature death. This framework gets created by the organised abandonment (austerity) of workers followed by organised violence (policing, criminalisation, rescuing into underserviced homes) by the state (Gilmore, 2002), reinforcing a water-tight binary of 'trafficked' and 'fallen'. Trafficked women cannot access support for improved working conditions in the industry, or say that they would like to stay, while 'fallen' sex workers cannot raise concerns about bad working conditions, sexual abuse, harassment at work, and severe labour exploitation leading to human trafficking, eventually supporting no one (Thiemann, 2019). Black abolitionist feminist theories of social change focus on replacing this practice of organised violence and abandonment with communities of care so that social change means abolishing conditions that make criminalisation the solution[73].

The collective as a site of individual and mutual caremaking: examples from the *sangatna*

Recently, anthropological study on care has provided invaluable insights into how kinship is created through acts of care (instead of the other way round)[74]. Across this thesis, the reader can find many examples of sex workers, and their network of sex working and non sex working individuals using care as resistance, as a response to negotiate everyday violence, survival, and joy within heavily criminalised and abandoned lives. Here, care

[73]Black Feminist Abolitionists advocate for prison abolition, defunding state actors and problematises law making too. They are different from Sex Work abolitionists seeking to abolish sex work without wanting to abolish conditions that lead to sex work.

[74] For example, Carsten's 1997 study on day to day sharing of cooked meals in a Malay fishing community.

becomes a strategy, and mechanism of resistance when there is a lack of care from the state.

> Sometimes care is a responsibility rather than an active part of something one wants to do. I have not been cared for, and I care because who else will care for us? (Divya, 2021, Jharkhand).

Marshall (1977), describes kinship as taking care of and being cared for by others (as opposed to how anthropologists earlier understood care, as an aspect of or stemming from kinship). Carsten (2000) and Stafford (2000) have both similarly described relatedness as created through diverse acts of care. Care not only creates kinship, but also membership in various social formations, including social movements, the nation or even humanity at large (Thelen & Coe, 2017). In the *sangatna*, kinship bonds also begin with such acts of care: replying to a phone call, food when one can't cook, or showing up at the police station.

> "Gauri, it is 10 a.m. Why aren't you up yet?" This makes me happy. They check with affection and care to see whether I'm awake. They only leave once I've responded. Otherwise, they keep knocking on my door, or one of them calls me on the phone. The care they have for me, whether I have money or not, there is something called affection that must remain within our community.
>
> If time doesn't pass and if I'm not doing well mentally, I call people and speak to them "How are you? What are you doing? Have you eaten? Have you taken your medication?" I inquire about their condition, and that heals my mind a little.
>
> I wear many clothes. When I am at home, I am a mother and a wife. When I leave home, I am a sex worker. When I reach the office, I am a coordinator and leader. In the larger family, I am the eldest daughter-in-law. For others, I am a big sister. I am happy in these roles.

Paramanand (2022b) suggests seeing sex work as a part of the care performed when mothers help recentre their agency towards their children to be their primary providers, and in the name of not shaming their children, continue working in exploitative, low paying work that gives them brownie points for 'good motherhood and morality'. Sex workers care for their children as mothers, they are part of families that care for them as their kin, while also having large networks of chosen kinship bonds. Some of these bonds manifest from the trauma of being estranged from biological kinship networks, and some exist purely out of a shared identity with other sex workers. In all these bonds, is a strong sense of care, that some workers would only call ‘solidarity’. Care is extended to clients, partners, lovers, friends, and children raised together because it takes a village, or maybe it takes a *gali*.

Povinelli uses the concept of affective kinship to refer to bonds that are formed through shared emotional and material experiences rather than through bloodlines or legal ties. These kinships are based on affect—the emotional and sensory connections people make through shared experiences of survival, struggle, or resistance. In her works, particularly *The Empire of Love* (2006), she explores how Indigenous and marginalised communities often forge kinship networks that are rooted not in formal familial structures but in intimate, relational practices of care, solidarity, and mutual dependence. This type of kinship is inherently non-normative in the sense that it does not rely on biologically prescribed or state-sanctioned relationships (such as marriage or legal adoption), but instead emerges from lived experiences of joy, suffering, love, and collective survival. This affective kinship challenges the idea of kinship as something that must adhere to heteronormative and bourgeois models of family, but instead emphasises emotional connectivity, shared history and thus, a

fluid and expansive understanding of kinship, where relationships are not defined by traditional roles but by the ways people care for and sustain one another in ways that are shaped by the emotional and social needs of the community.

When it is time to work, the *gali* comes alive to attract a large clientele so that there is enough for everyone looking. During a visit to document a fire in the *galis* of Karad, in Maharashtra, women told me that the *gharwalis* (housekeepers, a direct translation) they know and love do not behave like landlords[75], but as mothers to the women in the house. The women share a situational kinship bond (Nelson, 2013), protecting and guiding the younger women in the *gali*. These women become their socialising agents to the rest of the world, not just in the brothel but also as women constantly under attack by state and non-state actors. The *gharwalis* take the responsibility of providing care by ensuring the women have condoms, access to medicines, hygiene products, clothes, make-up, food, and more. They also are the women on the frontline, walking into police stations if the women are being rounded up and taken to the station, especially without reason. However, these bonds are not the only kinship bonds that women share. These kinship bonds recognise the intersections of sex-working people in these bonds and responds to the needs of everyone forming the collective.

From this point, the self often takes a backseat as time is spent caring for those who need it more, as is the nature of the collective: older sex workers, children of sex workers, children whose mothers are unable to care for them, unwell family members who depend on the income of the

[75] Otherwise called a brothel-keeper; a woman who cares for the 'girls' (women) in the house, providing sexual health support and ensuring they are protected from bad clients and other issues. In many of the *galis* that have collectivised, the brothel-keeper is herself a sex worker who was able to save enough money and buy out non sex working landlords.

sole earning sex worker, immunocompromised sex workers, sex workers who were recently put through the 'justice' system, sex workers who have less family to rely on, migrant sex workers, sex workers battling substance abuse, street sex workers, home-based sex workers. Everyone is safe, yet no one is safe from the violence of the primary identity that can't be shaken – that of a sex worker.

As this identity is made rigid by the outside that does not care for intersection or lived experience, care becomes space for the self to expand in the company of other selves. In Gujarat, the Kutch Mahila Vikas Sangatan (Kutch Women's Progress Collective), whose sex worker outreach project is associated with NNSW, has a physical space built only for sex workers to be able to leave home and hang out with other sex workers, alongside people who really understand the nature of living and hiding some aspects of the self. Care means booking entire theatre halls to watch a movie together, to march together, plan little trips together, and to remind each other of their self-worth – something so often questioned that it becomes a part of everyday embodiment.

Also embodied is violence – at home, on the streets and on social media calls for aid. Dean Spade (2020), in a primer on the topic, believes that Mutual Aid addresses survival needs while building on the understanding of root causes of inequality, acting as a mobilisation technique for cross-movement solidarity (Durga, a leader talks about this with case to case solving through Dalit groups and Sex Worker networks) and is a result of direct participation and collective action. Sara Ahmed (2010, 2006) similarly notes how non normative kinship bonds are what create oppositional structures of care and relationality that allow queer people, sex workers

and other marginalised groups to challenge violence every day and continue to exist in the face of violence, and in the age of precarity.

Care then means response. During the COVID-19 pandemic, care meant taking antiretroviral therapy medication to sex workers living with HIV and grocery items to people in their neighbourhoods since people could not travel. Care doesn't start and stop with sex work experience; many sex workers also care for larger communities that they are a part of, despite hurt caused by eviction and gentrification. During the Sangli floods in 2005, VAMP mobilised funds, utensils, clothes, and toys for families that lost their belongings. As part of their work to ensure government schemes are reaching the workers they are advertised for, collective members have worked through nights gathering, scanning, and digitising documents into Excel so that every single member has money transferred into their accounts. Response also goes onto social media platforms, seminars, and places they are 'unwelcome', responding to anti-sex worker feminist organisations at the risk of harming one's mental and emotional health for the sake of the collective self. Care means always responding to crises: personal as well as professional, on the phone, on the ground, everywhere that crises emerge. I am told that a collective dealing with a new problem every day is also where people actually care about you.

In the face of constant, unending violence, care also means moving on. A supporter once menahmetioned that she learnt the meaning of resilience from sex workers who, somehow, moved on from the worst possible violence and abuse in their life to care for each other the next day. For leaders, care means the foresight to steer the collective in new directions, away from problems.

Figure 46: Mutton curry, brinjal fry and rice at Ayeesha's house.

Care comes knocking in the night when Ayeesha and I return after a long day at work, ready with food folded into large leaves: rice and beef curry, hot and spicy from the *gali*'s communal kitchen providing food to all bodies too tired to sustain themselves at the end of the day. This act reminds me of Stasch (2009) who argues that for Kowai in Indonesia, the act of 'caring for' and 'caring about' are not as differentiated as in North American or European settings. Here, material actions, of giving food for example, signify care and kinship, without which, the relationship is assumed to be just a matter of 'eyes alone' – unsubstantiated and thrown into question (Stasch, 2009, p. 133-136). On a car ride from the police station to the *gali* one day, a member of the collective asked me whether I would come back after I finished my studies, "people come, take, and leave. Will you come back?". Within such a schema, care within sex workers collectives becomes showing up, again and again, for trust to build.

Care is immediately taking Jo to eat the *vadapav* they have not had enough of when they lived in London. Care is the bangles on my hand during celebrations because “your hands cannot be bare; we are like your mothers”. Care is also taken for granted, coming in moments of anger and frustration as we fight to be understood through emotion, for the good of the collective.

Care is cyclical and moves around a lot. Second-line leaders waiting to lead the collective must not only learn how to lead but also be responsible for ageing sex workers in their kinship networks. This kind of care work is a necessary aspect of community living and the network they have built over the years. Older sex workers depend on younger, more able-bodied leaders to check up on them. Within this care framework are also active and non-active sex workers: identities that people take up and discard based on their current situation and needs. The freedom with which the women take up and get rid of the sex worker identity juxtaposes the stigma that follows a ‘once active’ sex worker all her life. From the outside, identity cannot be dropped, but within the collective, care is provided equally to those across spectrum points. One of the workers also mentioned that she likes this part of the collective where more people are trained to take her place, “I want to retire and go home, but the movement must go on”.

On the other hand, a form of pastoral care is provided to the young ones in the collective and even those not inside the formal collective. In Kerala’s extensive networks and collectives, care has also extended to migrant worker sex workers, who are particularly underserved because they are undocumented, and working in informal labour conditions (outside of sex work). Care is the trans women of Sangli putting money together for each other’s gender-affirming surgeries, taking care of their physiological and

mental health by offering housing and travel to neighbouring cities providing surgical procedures and everyday care: bathing, child-rearing, cooking, cleaning, medication for 40 days after the operations and before the transitioned person steps out into the community again.

Care and Rage

In response to many such 'care frameworks' sex workers (along with other marginalised groups) exist in, there are calls to move away from traditional imaginations of care, and to move towards an imagination of care with rage. Mutual aid, but also self-defence and protection for each other (Malatino, 2020) in a system created to hurt its users (Lorde, 2018). Rage is a crucial resource for an infra-political ethics of care (Berg, 2022) within formal and informal community networks that ensure its members are housed and fed but also storm police offices to release a community member. As Spade (2020) says, “Mutual aid is survival work” (p. 6). For sex worker collectives, solidarity means fighting back where the state views mutual aid with as much suspicion as self-defence. Sex worker theory, worlds, and community work fundamentally reorient key questions about political life, especially as it emanates from the body and the chains placed on it. By including and talking about sex workers in conversations of care, we are not just including how they care, but what care itself means (Berg, 2022).

However, exceptionalising the care sex workers have for each other or romanticising it as part of their lives and labour as *sex* workers would be unproductive towards their fight for rights. Grover (2009 has evidenced care networks existing among women in similar situations (slum-dwelling, economically disadvantaged) who view care, and caring for their and others’ families as a vital form of survival in a damaged system. Understanding sex workers as ‘natural carers’, making care a part of their work will only

further ‘domesticate’ our understanding of care, relegating it back to a ‘feminine’ aspect of labour. Cornwall and Majumdar (2022) in their paper on the care provided by long-term *malaks* (long-term partners) for the sex-working women in their lives in the form of cleaning, caring, child rearing, and little acts of love (heating water for a bath when the women return from work, or cooking while she earns) deconstruct hegemonic notions of masculinity in the lives of sex workers, which depict women in sex work as victims and the men in their lives as those bringing violence upon them.

Adding depth to the understanding of care in the lives of sex workers leads to understanding why sex workers ask for full decriminalisation, of not only themselves but their *malaks*, their clients, their network of community members that do not fit into known definitions of community and friendship: the *rickshawala* taking her to work, the lodge owner keeping an eye out and on call to help against violent clients, or the *chaiwallah* offering the seventh chai in the day for energy.

Having plotted various points of kinship, network, and care making in this section, I explain another aspect to this kinship formation and care – the identity document – in the concluding section of this patch. I do this to explicitly ground how chosen families and support networks of a marginalised community like sex workers are viewed through the lens of bureaucracy, an inseparable part of modern kinship since, in today’s world, a child is only a child with a birth certificate, passports need both parents’ names, and school documents trace back to surnames and lineages. I look at documentation and identity formation for sex workers through the lens of in/visibility and in/visibilisation where sex workers only exist and cared for if they are on NGO lists, trackable, traceable, and controlled.

ID Games: Care, Visible People, and Invisible Problems

> Public visibility is an important feature of sex workers' lives because of the criminalization and stigma associated with the work. In this sense, the visibility of sex work has concrete consequences: the criminalization of sex work means, in practice, the policing of all deviations from gendered norms in public spaces. (Grant, 2014, p. 9)

Visibility and invisibility are a major aspect of this section, repeated, prodded, and expanded upon. As I speak about the visibility and invisibility of the sex worker in the collective, the self in collective identity, the effort of collectivisation or the flattening of nuanced lived experiences of sex workers, visibility means something completely material as well for sex working communities in India. The bureaucratisation of identity has sent people who are beneficiaries of government schemes scrambling to not only prove, but also digitise their identities for Modern India.

There is a difference between being visible and being seen. The visible sex worker is a force: not only the 'rough street woman' trope but also the diplomat who walks into the police station to free another worker caught for carrying a condom. She is the person at the end of the phone line when someone needs help with an ID or with a home problem they need advice for. She is visible, but she also feels unseen. There is a sense of irritation when the work keeps piling on, and the tasks grow in breadth, parallel to each other, but not seeming to end. The irritation continues when it feels like colleagues, bosses, and learners in the programmes do not have the capacity to understand this frustration. Visible, but unseen.

For many sex-working individuals, an 'ID' will solve many things. The identity of sex workers intersects with being undocumented due to structurally oppressive systems (race, caste, poverty/class) and migrating

around the country for work. Identification in the form of Aadhar cards, Voter IDs, Income Tax Cards, and Ration Cards are expected from anybody who wants even the slightest form of relief in the country. More so, they are not at the receiving end of support to apply and gain these identity documents. Gauri explains that in this scenario, a leader of a sex worker collective needs to be at the front of the line to keep 'her people' first. "We will also get an ID – that is the hope I have", she says.

The circular nature of obtaining these ID cards and keeping the information in it similar is equally violent to those with no 'fixed' address, or 'fixed' family ties to get these documents in the name of. If they need a bank account, they need an Aadhar card, if they need an Aadhar card they need a residence proof, if they need a residence proof, they need water and electricity bills of one residence and the residence itself to exist. Caste certificates – a primary demand for many collectives of sex workers I work with – are not made in the mother's name who are usually single parents for their children, making this document game disadvantageous to their children, thus further perpetuating this violence. "Mothers should be given caste certificates, it should be in our name! Why is a father important?"

I cannot help but connect the need for identification for basic needs with the opposing end of the push from state governments everywhere to move towards the Nordic Model of sex work legalisation and zoning sex workers into areas where they can work and where they cannot, making them hyper-visible to the state and its actors. The criticism for identification documents is plenty[76] in a country like India where identification and data is

[76] I refer to the growing criticism of state surveillance of citizens through identity documents like Aadhaar that has failed to protect the privacy of the citizens, while also being a requirement for other basic needs like bank accounts, sim cards, government schemes etc. For detailed work on the doing and undoing of identity card

used to target 'radical' individuals[77]. Being able to identify those who push for rights and using the same documentation for access to food is a negotiation workers have to make. As Foucault (1995) says, "visibility is a trap" laid out by a state that desires a panoptic view of its subjects, especially the ones performing invisible, sexual labour. Therein lies the irony of the situation. Legalisation adds to this structure of surveillance through its ID cards and zoning measures to keep 'immoral workers' in control.

Documentation is further tied to funding issues. Over 10,000 representatives from Key Populations across India petitioned the Global Fund on AIDS Tuberculosis and Malaria (GFATM) to release emergency funds for affected populations during the COVID pandemic. GFATM approved USD 10 million for sex workers, injecting drug users, transgender people, and MSM populations. Along with 3 other networks of sex workers and sexual minority groups in the country, NNSW successfully applied for and won the GFATM Emergency Covid-19 Grant to provide food and cash grants to individual community members across the network. The network worked with its member CBOs to collect the names of community members who needed the support, shortlist the names of the most vulnerable from the list and coordinate efforts to ensure the cash and food support reached each member. From 2020 to 2022, the network tried to distribute funds and

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surveillance, see Bhandari, 2020; Chaudhuri & König, 2018; Henne, 2019; India Today Tech, 2020; Khera, 2019; Nair, 2018; Nayar, 2012; Sen, 2020). These methods of surveillance and accounting for individual identity have only pushed already marginalised populations out of citizenship lists, as seen in the case of the National Register of Citizenship (Mathur, 2020).

[77]India's BJP-led Right Wing Nationalist government have been using policies to harass and criminalise journalists, activists and critics through raids and censorship (e.g.; the BBC office in New Delhi and Mumbai for featuring a documentary critical of Prime Minister Narendra Modi) allegations of financial irregularities and using the FCRA, which regulates foreign funding to NGOs to shut down programs and operations (e.g.: Amnesty International), and curtailing the freedom of expression and peaceful assembly of citizens across the country (see reports from The Wire Staff, 2024; The Polis Project, 2021 and Human Rights Watch, 2021 on the connections and trends between hate speech, Hindu nationalism and curtailment of freedom in India).

despite various challenges. Community members were reluctant to give Aadhaar cards and bank details as they were unsure whether the government would maintain confidentiality, and there was no attention paid to data protection. Peers could collect only 10 members' data in a day due to lockdown mobility restrictions.

Many community members had to re-submit documents and there was a lot of back and forth – there was no leeway given to issues of slight changes in different documents. The back and forth led to further distrust in the process. The formats prescribed for GFATM changed twice, and the helpdesk workers had no support to keep up with the requirements. There were no funds for assistance, and communities had to bear the charges of typists themselves. Groceries took almost a year to be distributed and the remaining money took more time, making a 'rapid relief grant' a painful, arduous process for communities. In this mixture, community leaders were directly targeted and asked what they were doing with documents – sex workers fear surveillance, lest their identities are leaked to raid/sting operations for medals of honour or TRPs.

The ID is also about being visible beyond representation in the media – to assert an identity as a sex worker and not *just* any worker, but a sex worker. In August 2021, the government released the option of applying for 'e-shram' cards (under UMANG, a new initiative to move towards e-governance in India), which, seeded with existing Aadhaar cards, could be used to create a form of identification and centralised database for unorganised workers. On the government website, the worker groups mentioned are Construction Workers, Migrant Workers, Gig and Platform workers, Street Vendors, Domestic Workers, Agriculture Workers, etc. The card is supposed to provide security in the form of pensions and insurance

to informal workers, as well as portability of welfare schemes based on the ID card. One of the collectives from Maharashtra created 200 cards for workers, although there was no option to identify as a sex worker. Only 200 cards could be made since only these many workers' documents were 'in order'. Collectives around the network started registering as unorganised workers under the scheme to get access to the benefits and be as seen as is currently possible. Even then, hidden sex workers, sex workers who do not have the correct details and corresponding information in their documents, cannot apply for another record. Amending documents takes money that most workers do not have.

> When we say sex work is work, people, even within our movement, have questioned me on why we need to say this with a sign around our necks. It takes a lot of time, sometimes years, to strengthen individuals and get them into the movement. The network is more vital for the sex workers than for leaders like myself. They face a lot of violence at work and face problems from their husbands, and they are outcasted from their societies. We had instances in various places (Krishna district, Karimnagar, Nellore) where the authorities would try and stop the COVID relief work that is distributed to the sex workers; they would speak about sex workers in a demeaning way initially. Still, I had to step in and talk to them over the phone firmly and explain in clear terms that these groceries are for sex workers, and even the police listened to it. This is the type of leadership we have to show, and I have to build in this movement. We have to develop these relationships painstakingly by spending hours on phone calls. All the power we created didn't happen overnight. I was taught to question (power structures) by NNSW and Me and My World.
> (Durga, 2020, Andhra Pradesh)

There is a gentrification of the identity of the sex worker through controlled, standardised, streamlined and 'correct' documents through which they can be identified, and traced: a security pushed onto people who cannot have any security if not by the hands of the state, and

narratives that suit state control. By taking away power and resources from those undocumented, the state ends up becoming the saviour one has to look towards, even to escape the violence of a care-less 'welfare' state. Visibility then, is violent because it brings the violence of being seen, accessed, or hurt due to stigma, but it also opens many doors to escape the violence of poverty, and resourcelessness. These problems that sex workers face are not visible at all when the preoccupation is only about saving sex workers from themselves, or placing them in factory or domestic work (deemed 'better' than sex work, even if extremely lowly paid) while social access to services and schemes continues being a consistent problem.

Conversations about sex work have historically been focused on entry and exit from sex work and less on those who do both – sex work, as well as 'enter and exit' from 'other' work: in this case, activism, and community building interventions sponsored by the Indian state through NACO to prevent HIV. For a lot of these women, the shifts of working as a sex worker, and doing other work alongside/instead of/despite is the only constant. This section places entries and exits in the background along with the hovering of violence around the lives of workers by examining the tumultuous emotions activists share with their work based on their identity. It complicates the role of the activist with lived experience of identity-based violence to deal with the continuum of unending crises, as well as being activist-sex workers. Social psychologists have noted that it is from community mobilisation that beliefs and collective identities emerge (Munson, 2008). The more involved activists become, the more their collective identity solidifies (Klandermans et al., 2002). For sex workers, networks are not only spaces of care and community making, resisting violent structures and events, but also tools to reorder public-private ties

by visibilising, identifying and eventually asserting their right to socially reproduce[78] within their communities of choice.

Regardless of the abstract meanings of collective, sisterhood, love, and care that I was trying to plot and connect in the matrix earlier on in this patch, the narrative experiences of people that followed show that at the outset, it is the everyday, face to face relations and ways in which people care for each other that offered them a sense of relatability, and identification of who they are in relation to other sex workers. The identity of the sex worker is also decided on the basis of who other people (read *non* sex workers) are not – promiscuous, 'bad' women with no 'shame', 'family values' and 'too independent'. In this process of self-determination of who they are, there is always a coming out into one's personal identity, however it is constructed and performed, in relation to other identities to make a conscious effort to become what they already are/were (Bauman, 2001, cited in Leite, 2017, p. 124).

Once out, and visible to other members who can relate to the experiences singular sex workers have experienced, they are able to create a collective identity of understanding and safety to respond to violence. This adds another layer of the sex worker's collective identity, one that is formed at the global level for policy changes and movement building, but also one that is required for everyday crisis management and care giving. The collective identity is collective strength: from 'masses of faceless women', to a

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[78] Social reproduction theory has been used to analyse sex work before as a form of reproductive labour, which like house work, needs to be visibilised and counted as "productive" in its capacity but to take it one step further, social reproduction theory can go beyond trying to understand "why sex work happens" to advocating for the right of sex workers to socially reproduce (Kotiswaran & O'Connell Davidson, 2022) (a right continuously snatched by eviction, stigma against child care by sex workers, forced abortions, not giving them the right to a family or be seen as a functioning family, to have networks of support, to care, etc.).

collective of women built to fight for justice and rights for all, those both visible and not: the collective comes first.

Part III: Leaving the network

A couple of days after my 'proposed' fieldwork had ended, I considered staying back in India to travel to Bangalore for the board meeting being planned. In the end, I did not end up going, but I was still in the throes of preparation for the network to convene. While the board meeting was happening over three days, there was both complete silence and chaos in the WhatsApp groups. The groups, during the day, were silent, since everyone was in the board meeting, but came alive at night with voice note exchanges on what happened in the day, what members liked and disliked about activities and discussions. I stood by, patiently waiting for anything I could support with from London. I was both in the network and outside it again, like I had been in the beginning. Looking at people sitting in circles, looking at power points and drawing on paper, I was reminded of my own additions to this network practice just a week ago. It felt the same, but different since I knew all the members in 'real life', and they had put a moving breathing person in my place instead of a flat image they were used to earlier with the name *Jo* on their Zoom screens. Friends from the network and I sent 'I miss you' messages back and forth throughout the meeting.

On the last day, I woke up to messages asking me to take down some images I had posted of the board meeting, and I did. I then received calls from two members telling me that the person asking for pictures to be taken down has been looking for a way to get out of the network, for which she raised the problem, when she never had before. This moment caused a lot of anxiety within the WhatsApp groups, which translated to calls

between me, the coordinators, supporters, and the person asking for images to be taken down. A lot of the tension of the moment was also directed towards the person wanting to leave.

'Getting out' of the network is not as simple as it seems, but it also is. It could be as easy as sending a text, or deleting contacts, refusing to keep in touch, or migrating away. With exiting the collective comes the pain of having to build community again – of people who understand the exact situation one is in, know people who know other people, and can support you, leaving bygones be bygones. People are in the network because they need resources and connections, and the network provides them with a larger framework to work within. But people also want power. In this case, the person in question (allegedly) had been using resources from the network for personal benefits and creating connections and going to events as a representative of the network, but without consultation of the board of the network.

Getting out of the network by oneself meant that some responsibility had to be taken by the person walking out, but pointing a few fingers meant that some of that blame could be transferred to the network and its people. I was called to be told that I should not be anxious because it was not my fault; as far as I was concerned, I had taken the required permission for all pictures and quotes used on social media sites for the network. I wasn't anxious, but it made me think about how leaving the network was, maybe in someone's mind or in reality, a much bigger process than just leaving. From one side, network members do not want to and cannot 'kick someone out' because of the resources that the network holds and the individual collectives and members' needs. On the other hand, the person who wants to leave will do so in a way that takes responsibility away from them and

also attempts to keep relationships intact. Interestingly, as I write the second draft of this chapter, the person never ended up leaving, but just went quiet for a while until things had boiled over. Heated words were exchanged, but everything was forgotten in the wave of the next crisis, the next job. At some point, Ayeesha mentioned that nobody has time to be angry in the *sangatna*, because there's always something new happening, work that must be done.

Leaving such a closely knit space is especially tumultuous for those heavily involved in the groundwork of collectivisation. When Ayeesha tried to leave once, she moved from Sangli to Ranchi. She changed her number, 'lost' her contacts and tried to begin anew. A year later, she was added back to the collective WhatsApp group under the pretext of being a sex worker leader and ex-organisation member who was to be updated on the work happening in Miraj – mitigating a raid where 14 Bengali girls were caught, many of whom Ayeesha knew. Feeling like she betrayed them by leaving, Ayeesha returned to Miraj. The precarity I mentioned in earlier paragraphs plays into the ability to leave as well. Leaders recognise that they have a lot more to gain and lose by staying and leaving, especially with people who have put their faith and trust in them within the community. If they do decide to leave, it becomes a problem with the community whom they must convince to let them go, adding more pressure and sometimes even anger to something that could be much simpler.

My entire conversation with Ayeesha felt this tumultuousness – the bittersweet feeling of anger and love for the community intermingling with how tired she was fighting and leading. I began this section by leaving, after speaking about being invited into the collective, but I am aware that this sounds like the entry-exit dichotomy I critique. However, leaving the

sangatna still remains a dream unfulfilled for those who want to leave, and being tied (this can be both good and bad) to the collective is what carried us through this patch – in the roles that the women play for each other, the community of care they have to build and their selves that they have to protect in this work.

Tu Apni Hai: An 'outsider' inside the collective

> I have been working with SANGRAM and VAMP for the past 15 years. The journey of my life is weird. I am from a farming community, but we had a lot of land as well. My father used to work in the railways, but he then joined politics. Until my father, everyone used to do state jobs, but after him, even my brothers joined politics. I am the youngest. I am from the Maratha *samaj*, I am upper caste. The daughters-in-law and girls of the house do not go out. I used to do all the work in the house and the farm. I always felt that as a girl, I was restricted from living life. I was told I need to play with dolls, I need to wash dishes and care for the house, and someday, I have to leave my home to go to someone else's home. It was put in my head. This was the *mahaul* (environment) in my house. I always thought, how does it matter that I am a girl? I want to play with sticks, I want to play *gilli danda*, I want to run around. I am also working on the farm, just on the same level as a man. I felt stifled. First men will eat, and then we will eat. In my village also, only men could eat non-veg. When my brothers would make chicken, I would go and see if I could get a piece of chicken to taste.
>
> I never fell in love with anyone in school because I was scared for the life of the boy who I would fall in love with. Nothing would happen to me, but that boy would be killed. I felt like this was a cage, so I ran away from home. I had never stepped out of the village before that, all our relatives also lived close by. I sat on a bus to Pune, but I had to hide because I was scared, if someone caught me and took me home, I would be beaten up. I got down in Pune. I am human, so I got hungry. What do I eat? I went to Budhwar Peth. I didn't know what *dhandha* (translated to business, typically meaning sex work) was. I was not

even allowed to watch Umrao Jaan[79] and was beaten up when I watched a little bit of that. When I went looking for work, I found Budhwar Peth. I met Rewa bai there, and that was the first time I felt the joy of my own money earnt from my own work. I had not seen or learnt anything about the world, but that money was mine, and I could spend it like I want. I felt then that the decisions I made were correct – I never had to open my hands in front of anyone, not my grandfather, not my mother, not my brothers.

Eventually in Pune, some homeowners started taking larger cuts of the money we were earning, and I was unhappy with that. I was speaking to a friend who told me her aunt lives in Sangli and that she would be a much better person to work with. It was 4 am when I left Pune, and I felt the fear of being caught again. I went into the public bathroom and sat there the entire day until the person who cleans the bathroom came at 9 pm and asked me what I was doing there. She then helped me on a train to Sangli. An old man on the train told me when to get down. I got down in Sangli with only the sari I was wearing. I sat for an hour in the middle of the town circle. An auto driver asked me where I wanted to go, and I told him, as my friend said, that I want to go to Gokul Nagar. He told me to go walking, and I told him I don't know the way. He asked me to get into his auto, took no money and dropped me off at Gokul Nagar. It was 5am in the morning. Everyone was sleeping. There was a *katta* (verandah) and I sat there. A client was leaving the house I was sitting outside of, and he looked inside the house and asked Bhimavva, the woman who lived in the house, which ghost is sitting outside her door? She came out and started talking to me in Kannada, and I told her I didn't know the language and to speak to me in Marathi. I told her I came from Pune. I hadn't eaten anything for 2 days, and I just kept crying when she was asking me questions. She heated the food she had in her house and gave it all to me. I slept till 10am the next day, and that is when I felt like I was in the right place. I always felt, as a child, that I wanted freedom and openness in my life. I got that now. Bhimavva took

[79] *Umrao Jaan* is a 1981 (remade in 2006) Hindi language Bollywood film about a woman sexually trafficked by a police man seeking revenge from her father who testified in court against him. The film focuses on the different axes of violence perpetrated on the woman who, as the plot thickens, becomes an accomplished poetess.

> care of me, she taught me everything about how to understand everything about the world, make my own decisions, and how to judge different situations.
>
> In 1997, at a camp for HIV testing, I found out that I am HIV positive. I felt like my life was over. I have watched people suffer slowly and die. At that time, we used to take sick women to the civil hospital, and they would be turned away and we would bring her home, and just wait for them to die. Bhimavva always told us that don't lead life as a sick person. She told me, "*zindagi ka naam lauda rakho aur chalo*" (Life is a dick; move on). I thought only of that and walked, and I am alive now because of this. All the rest in my circle have died. Like this I joined SANGRAM also. I was a little educated, and I wanted to work for our women so why not do it through a collective?
>
> A sex worker has to live many lives. I am a sex worker, so I have to take care of the customer based on what his needs are. In another life, we are mothers, we have to take care of our children. In another life, we are also partners with personal lives. In 24 hours, we have to live so many different lives. At the same time, sex workers are also resilient. Even at work, it is not like we only get good clients – some yell, some hurt us. We have to deal with the violence every day, the responsibilities every day, the leadership every day, the office every day. And a sex worker can do all of it. (Kiran, 2021, Maharashtra).

A sex worker can do all of it.

I end this section on the self with Kiran's story to echo not only this sentiment but the depth, and breadth an understanding of this layered identity offers in terms of who a sex worker is. In this section on the self, expanding, reducing, duplicating, and disappearing in relation to others and a larger collective goal, Kiran's story of unparalleled violence before and after she found sex work points to the person she became through the collective's care, through Bhimavva. The care she offers as the president at VAMP and NNSW, comes full circle.

Kiran voice-noted me many days after I had left Sangli, asking me how I am and about a project we were working on together. "*Tujhse milke bahut accha laga*" (I feel very nice having met you). I was immediately transported to the hot air on my face on the bus that morning Kiran and I were going to Karad, "*tu apni hai*".

"*Tu Apni Hai*", simply means "you are ours", which I've truly felt through my individual connections within NNSW, the sense of -not ownership-, but that of going home, taking my shoes off, and feeling the ground. As I worked with the network and the movement, I became part of the struggle, and someone they could trust (as many people are, who have joined a worldwide network of allies of NNSW). The care that is extended to members of the collective extends to me – an 'outsider' – as well. The way sex workers embody care adds a different sense of vitality to how various communities understand and feel it. There is an intimate connection between care, and crisis – care in the face of constant crisis, and crisis breaking the momentum of care cycles. When a new problem arises, a new form of care is required to fight back. In fighting back, some voices have to be louder than others to ensure a little rest. This *apnapan* (oneness, or ourness) – I'm trying to find the right word in English for this feeling, the comfort of being in the known – that maybe I'm in the in-group, and care is in the way the self is open to a different self like me. The *apnapan* is how you know you belong, and I started belonging in the collective.

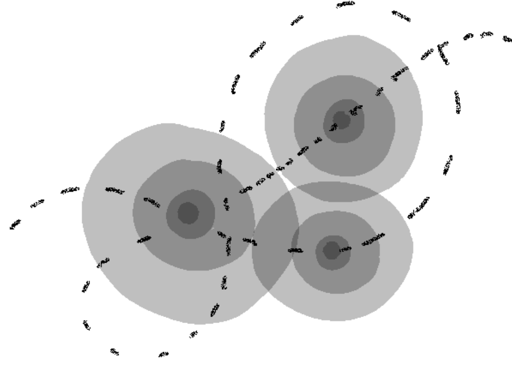
The sex worker's world appears simple. Either you are a sex worker or a non-sex worker. Sometimes, the existence or lack of experience makes you a 'community' or 'non-community' member. All civil society is understood as the 'non-community' member and is spoken about with sympathy for not being able to understand 'community' members, their needs, and lives. The

sex workers' networks include, of course, practicing and former sex workers, who could have entered sex work consensually or been trafficked into it in the beginning, and then ‘chose’ to stay in the *gali*. Many CBOs work not only for sex workers but also for their families, especially their children. Outside of the heteronormative family structure, sex workers’ collectives and advocacy initiatives include the partners and lovers of sex workers. Personal relations tie the community together. In a few separate conversations with leaders across states, there is a use of the phrase ‘my people’ with an inherent understanding that the community is not homogenous but ‘wants the same things’. This care for the community thus travels across and throughout the network of individuals and groups that do not make the cut when one talks about the sex worker on paper, in policy or in the webs of legality.

The tension of care for the collective and care for the self are underlying currents to all these stories. Beneath each personal story and narrative presented within the patch are negotiations made between personal principles, learnings from activism, networks before joining and after joining the collective, different meanings of care, and who ‘family’ is, all coming together to create a system of survival and move-ment. This reconception stretches the content and bounds of what ‘kin’ and ‘family’ or even ‘care’ might mean, for those involved.

But how do these different, contested, clashing meanings come together at the level of the collective? Through the interviews in this patch, my understanding of the network from the last two patches on the network as experienced from the outside and through workshops went from being a network, to being a community of care where workers get to socially enter, exit, and negotiate their multiple identities to keep the work of the

collective going. The next patch builds on this community of care to see the network 'at work' during Ambedkar Jayanti being celebrated in Sangli – an annual celebration that brings together all these shared meanings, explored in patches before, but one that also brings up new assertions, and retellings.



V

नाच, गाना, खाना

Dance, Song and Food: Ambedkar Jayanti in Sangli

"Naach, Gaana, Khana"[80]: Reordering Public-Private Space through Ambedkar Jayanti

This patch of the thesis focuses on the 'obstacle' I encountered while doing the workshops mentioned in patch three. The celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti in Sangli caused some of my participants to leave the workshops midway to prepare, and it became the main topic of discussion throughout my fieldwork in Sangli and eventually in Vijayawada. The fervour and flavour of Jayanti celebrations buzzing both on WhatsApp as notifications, as well as the excitement I felt while in Sangli made Jayanti a bigger part of my thesis than I thought it would be when I first heard that I would be doing my workshops during Jayanti season.

The celebration of Ambedkar Jayanti opens new possibilities for the collective and layers another identity (that of being Dalit, Bahujan or Adivasi) onto the identity of being sex workers that I explored in the patch before. This layering has implications for the sex workers in Sangli, offering a peek into the political turmoil that Ambedkarite sex workers face being Ambedkarites in sex worker circles, being sex workers in Ambedkarite circles and finally, being Ambedkarite sex workers in a casteist and whorephobic world.

Celebration here happens in the face of violence, and despite it, where sex workers hold off the violence they face around them just at the borders of their *sangatna*. *Sangatnas* in this way, become places of healing for members within which they can rest and recuperate as they continue the

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[80] Dance, Song, and Food translated from Hindi to English.

fight ‘outside’. This patch explores and complicates the nature of identity, collectivisation, and social relationships in and around the *sangatna*, and *gali*.

Even with the documentation of the *work* that sex workers do, there is much less documentation sex workers’ access and experience of public space, beyond their places of work (bars, brothels, streets, and private residences) or living. Barring Debolina Dutta’s (2018) account of Durga Puja celebrations at Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) in Kolkata, and news articles on usually marginalised groups celebrating ‘traditionally exclusive’ festivals as a way of subversion, there is less work in India connecting the transformative nature of sex workers’ political collectives from solely being resource centres, to being places of meaning and joy making in the face of violence.

Festivals and celebrations are places where large networks of people converge and when it is done for a publicly visible event and celebrated by a marginalised group of people, it does something to the people celebrating it, the people watching the celebrations and the celebration itself. Beyond concepts like resistance and subversion in festival making, Dutta makes a case for the concept of ‘reordering’, (p. 226) which I find useful in talking about some of the more difficult ties that sex workers share with people who are often perpetrators (the police, or other state actors, medical staff in the nearby government hospital, as examples):

> Re-ordering for me, is distinct from resistance in so far as the former is actively invested in acknowledging and re-configuring relational ties, even those that are oppositional, rather than a severance of ties (Dutta, 2018).

The sex workers of Sangli are doing what Durbar's sex workers organising Durga Puja are – reordering public ties with the state, the people, and the

neighbours, inviting eyes into their usually mystical appearances. To go one step further, the Sangli's sex workers are also rebuilding (from the fragmented identity applied to them of only being a sex worker, or only a mother, or only an Ambedkarite but never both, for example), fighting the identity they have been given, and affirming the identities they do not have the freedom to keep. They are not only reordering ties to 'the public', but also the identities they have, fighting double, often triple marginalisations, offering a peek into marginality within marginality and complex community dynamics. As Cheng (2013) states, for sex workers in India, this would not have been possible without first successfully imagining themselves as strategic, rights bearing, self-mobilising beings that have undone colonial, heteronormative imaginations and constructions of the "third world prostitute". Some of these identities require more advocacy and assertion, like that of being decent workers or being good mothers of their children while other identities are more easily or forcefully attached, like that of the sex worker or more so, of being a Dalit sex worker.

This account complicates what political assertion means and who they are being assertive to beyond the state, police, and known perpetrators of violence, to members of anti-caste spaces – those that could have, should have, might have been allies.

Part I: Caste, Sex, Work

When I first started working and drafting research plans with NNSW, I had not entirely understood their relationship with Dalit, Anti-Caste and Ambedkarite politics in the states they worked in. For context, an Ambedkarite is a person who follows the philosophy of Dr. Bhimrao Ramji

Ambedkar (1891-1956)[81], a social reformer who advocated for the annihilation of the Indian Caste System[82]. Caste-based discrimination has led to centuries of structural and historical violence experienced even today in the subcontinent and in the Indian diaspora. In this context, the key dimension of Ambedkarite ideology has been to inspire a radical revolution of caste-governed Indian society to move into a casteless future where all persons live free of suffering in a selfless and ethical manner by focusing on social justice. The primary objective of the self then, is to fight caste in one's personal life and become totally casteless, and then encourage others to fight their caste identities, so that they too can become casteless.

The first time I heard about this friction was when Kirti, one of the members of a collective within NNSW told me about the 'Chalo Nagpur' (let's go to Nagpur!) incident. 10 March 2017 was marked as a day when several feminist organisations and individuals interested in social justice issues would march to Nagpur to meet each other, and (re)ignite solidarities. Many Ambedkarite sex workers from Sangli marched to Nagpur

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[81] Ambedkarite thought has emerged from multiple spaces through readings of Ambedkar's seminal texts (for example, The Annihilation of Caste) along with the readings of other anti-caste thinkers like Jyotiba and Savitribai Phule, Periyar E.V. Ramasamy, Ayyankali and others. It is difficult to find a condensed version of 'what Ambedkarism is', since people on various axes of marginality interpret and are in conversation with Ambedkarite thought to make Queer/Trans/Feminist/Black/more interpretations of Ambedkar's work. Trying to define it in this way might be reductive, and counterintuitive to the spirit of anti-caste politics, which is meant to affect and grow from multiple places cutting across social locations and work on different aspects of social life in India. Still, some thinkers have attempted to explain what Ambedkarism is, in the interest of providing easy and transferable understanding for the growth of the movement and Ambedkarite thought (for example, in the writings of Gail Omvedt).

[82] Trying to explain the caste system in India in a footnote risks reducing centuries of historical and structural oppression that individuals and communities have faced in its name. Still, it is necessary to provide a short introduction. India's caste system is a hierarchical social structure that categorises individuals into hereditary groups based on birth. It operates through endogamy, where marriage and social interaction are restricted within one's caste, and determines social status and access to resources. The four 'main castes' are Brahmins (priests and scholars), Kshatriyas (warriors and rulers), Vaishyas (merchants and farmers), and Shudras (labourers and service providers), with Dalits (formerly known and treated as 'Untouchables') historically marginalised and subjected to discrimination. For detailed inquiries into Caste in India, see B. R. Ambedkar's *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), Gail Omvedt's *Dalits and the Democratic Revolution* (1994), and Anand Teltumbde's *The Persistence of Caste* (2010).

to participate in the celebration, but the group was met with resistance from other Ambedkarite individuals and groups. They were asked to get off the stage during speeches, and their monetary donations were refused as 'dirty money' because it was earned from doing sex work. In protest, the sex workers stayed at the event but refused to eat the food being served. Talking about the anger they felt at solidarity being refused by 'their own people', Kirti said, "They do not accept Dalit women in sex work can have a voice, can speak. We are only seen as victims". In the next few paragraphs, I trace the tension between Ambedkarite groups and Ambedkarite sex workers in India to provide background for the rest of the chapter. By understanding the relationship between caste, labour, and gender, one can understand why the celebration of Jayanti by Ambedkarite sex workers is a seminal event for multiple movements and solidarities between them.

Due to a variety of factors like poverty caused by social oppression based on caste, many women in sex work – no matter how they enter (for survival, traditional means, by choice, regardless of other factors or forced) – belong to Dalit and Adivasi groups. For this reason, many otherwise 'progressive' (supportive of gay marriage, bodily autonomy, etc.) Anti Caste and Dalit activists have called for the abolition of sex work in its entirety, stating that sex work is a form of caste-based labour and violence, much like manual scavenging or bonded labour that is forced on the Dalit body, and that there is no 'choice' in sexual labour. Other conservative Dalit/Anti Caste activists believe that there is no 'moral' place for sex workers in the movement, and don't believe sexual labour can be labour, instead calling sex workers polluted, and dirty (ironic considering the history of concepts like purity/pollution with caste oppression).

This stance is much like M. K. Gandhi's, who repeatedly refused to admit 'prostitutes' into the Congress Party and its work across the country. On several instances, Gandhi used the figure of the 'prostitute' as an emblem of corruption, against the virtuous body politic of modern, independent India had to stand test (Tambe, 2009b). For Gandhi, 'prostitutes' were only useful if they converted them into spinning (a key emblem of Gandhian self-sacrifice and virtue). Those who resisted conversion only failed the test of virtue and feminine subjectivity of the Gandhian ethos, and ultimately could not be dealt with through the social inclusion he otherwise proclaimed he practised (p. 33). It is important to note Gandhi's desexualised construction of women's participation in Indian politics given how successful women politicians in India like Indira Gandhi, Jayalalitha, Sonia Gandhi, and Mayawati have all projected "post-sexual personae" drawing on their identities as widowed, divorced, or unmarried women (p. 21).

These ideas of moral impurity and disgust follow into otherwise progressive (anti-caste, socialist and secular) politics in the country where constructions of 'bad women' are very much alike to the constructions shared by Brahminical Patriarchal society that constructs upper caste women 'at home', living within the confines and permissions of caste society, while lower caste women exist as 'surplus women', considered deviant and sexually available for all castes and classes, reducing women across castes to sexually passive subjects.

In *Bans and Bar Girls: Performing Caste in Mumbai's Dance Bars*, Sameena Dalwai (2019) explores caste as a central question to sexual labour – a provocation many feminists shy away from. Dalwai notes that feminist understanding of sexuality and labour, and its acceptance of sexual labour as labour then as a choice after intersecting with queer, trans and

reproductive labour movements becomes a contested site when it intersects with anti-caste theorisation (2019, p. 147). Much of the argument against sex work as a form of labour from anti-caste abolitionists is traced back to a speech that Ambedkar gave in a meeting with 'prostitutes' in 1932 where he asked *devadasis* to give up their livelihoods, and not be afraid of poverty so that they can live with self-respect (Pawar & Moon, 2008, cited in Dalwai, 2019, p. 149) in a larger move from previously so-called 'untouchable' castes to stop all 'defiling' work and practices imposed by the caste hierarchy on them[83]. For many communities, this shift became a dilemma between self-preservation and self-respect (Dalwai, 2019, p. 149). Paik (2022) explains the context in which Ambedkar understood Dalit women's sexuality:

> Unlike touchables' new ideal of female domesticity in the form of *grihalakshmi* (goddess of the home), Ambedkar's ideal was the *kashtakari-mahila* (working woman) with a work ethic, engaging in hard, menial labour. Mainstream touchable reformers, including Gandhi, were little concerned with Dalit women's lives and also did not engage with prostitutes. They focused on rights and respectability for high castes and saw prostitutes as overtly sexual figures who contrasted with ideal Hindu nationalist womanhood. By contrast, Ambedkar's position on the prostitute is located in his critique of caste hierarchy, untouchability, and social exclusion. Fighting sexual inequality and sexuality of religion were essential in annihilating caste slavery and for the larger project of social equality, social responsibility, and liberation of the community (p. 131).

[83] For a robust archival analysis of the sex-gender-caste complex with reference to women who perform *Tamasha* (a traditional travelling form of theatre in Maharashtra), and the figure of the 'prostitute' in Maharashtra, Ambedkarite thought, and Dalit lifeworlds, see Paik (2022).

It is vital to understand the historical oppression from which Dalit and Anti-Caste activists view the question of caste and sex. Dalwai (2019) argues that the reaction of anti-caste activists to bar dancing (and I add, to sex work) must be viewed in light of the gendered and sexual nature of caste marginalisation Dalit, Adivasi and OBC women have faced. When 'upper' caste feminists ignore, or feign ignorance about these factors, and Ambedkar's role in Dalit women's activism, they alienate Dalit feminists and fail to recognise that "Dalit feminists are Dalit first, and feminist later since their politicisation took place in the Dalit movement as an enslaved people, not as women fighting for equality with men" (ibid, p. 151).

This fracture in the women's movement in India can be understood as a 'right to work' versus a 'right to dignity' problem, wherein the 'right to dignity' within the Dalit rights movement is conceptualised by an 'educated urban middle class', mostly employed in the service sector or government service long distanced from the battle against hunger and the struggle for survival that afflicts much of the Dalit masses. Dalwai argues that "what is known as the Dalit consciousness presently, represents the Dalit elite, yet it depends for its validity on its connection with rural Dalit masses, and claims to represent them" (2019, p. 150), ending in the moral panic and push to punitive correction of a marginalised group within a marginalised group (sex workers) blamed and targeted for new social problems (Dalwai, 2019, p. 115), causing further fractures even within the Ambedkarite movement. The 2005 Mumbai ban on bar dancing, which affected caste-oppressed women from traditionally dancing communities the most by shutting down their access to social mobility and caste capital is a form of caste governance[84].

[84] Dalwai further explains that during colonialism, communities that had access to an English education, and administrative jobs opted for government jobs in the post-independence period, while those familiar with trade entered the new market. However, within the capitalist framework of competition, oppressed caste communities

This aligns with VAMP members' opinion that the issue is not sex work or erotic labour that is expected from oppressed caste bodies, but that it is done in exchange for money and social capital, and I argue, a place of visibility and networking in places sex workers and Dalit women would not be before.

Dalit feminists embody double consciousness of seeing reality from both caste and gender-based perspectives using bell hooks' theorisation of black womanhood (1984, p. vii in Dalwai 2019, p.144). I suggest that Dalit sex workers occupy a triple consciousness that not only intersects caste and gender, but also the question of labour, sexual morality, decency, and control extended by states/societies on marginalised bodies looked at as deviant and immoral within already marginalised groups. Sex workers believe that they have the right, and consciousness to self-determine their futures based on what is available to climb social ladders. Punching down on marginalised people within marginalised groups using marginality, however, is not productive.

Dalit sex workers believe they are the working women that Ambedkar dreamt Dalit women would be: agents of social transformation in Indian society fighting caste patriarchy. Periyar E. V. Ramasamy, another influential anti-caste thinker has had radical views about the word 'prostitution', saying that words like prostitution and chastity are usually only assigned to women as a form of patriarchal control, holding little relevance to a life of freedom, and equality for all sexes (E.V Ramasamy,

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"remained on the periphery of this change and were trapped within the cycle of caste obligatory occupations and humiliating labour relations". Similarly, women from traditionally sex working and dancing castes took the opportunity of earning more when the dance bars of Mumbai opened up in the 1980s, providing an opportunity for these communities to change class locations and provide for families. She argues that it is not the space of the dance bar, but the changed position of bar girls that poses a threat. Bar girls come from traditional dancing communities that have remained within the sex work circuits, outside the boundaries of decent society, but with dance bars, they are visible, live 'within the decent society' and work like anyone else.

2007) and that accepting some forms of labour (law and business) and not others (being a *devadasi*/performer) considering one 'low' and the others 'high' is 'indecent, devious and selfish' (p. 40).

Caste, gender, and multiple marginalisations have been at the centre of collectivisation and political assertion for sex workers, and accusing them of not being conscious (in response to abolitionists, and anti-caste activists saying that sex workers are falsely conscious) is patronising and to a certain extent, recreating the same power structures many of these movements are trying to fight. Sex workers are painfully aware that their identity as sex workers is what first makes them vulnerable to violence, followed by their identity as Dalit women. Understanding that this violence is targeted at them because they are *sex* workers brought women in the collective together (Murthy & Seshu, 2014, p. 25). Dalit conservative voices and saviour Savarna abolitionists sound uncomfortably similar when they use these arguments against sex workers instead of listening to them. There are however, 'younger', feminist-progressive Dalit groups and individuals who work with sex workers to attain labour and unionisation rights in the country today, especially in Karnataka, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh.

Sex workers working within VAMP, WINS and other collectives within NNSW, as well as within DMSC (as evidenced by academics like Debolina Dutta (2018)) believe in the annihilation of caste, that they are consciously choosing options available to them on one hand, and affirming their bodily autonomy as Dalit Bahujan women on the other to change their social status. There is a need to have a textured, brave understanding of gender intersecting with caste intersecting with labour, violence, and deviance to be able to consider how we can find solidarity across these lines. I use the word brave because Dalit/Bahujan sex workers have been provoking us to

think further than we do about these intersections. At the same time, critiques coming from lived experiences and embodied historical violence must be taken seriously and understood both ways, whether from Dalit feminists or from Dalit sex workers.

In this larger context, celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti means many things for the sex workers of Sangli – it is where they get to assert their identity as sex workers on a day reserved for the celebration of their beloved Babasaheb, along with other Ambedkarites who may/may not support them[85]. It is also a day for them to assert themselves as Ambedkarites in front of non-Ambedkarite people around where they live. It is a day they get to celebrate Ambedkar through dance, food, and sharing space with each other in the collective, inviting people to come celebrate with them, like a wedding. The process of inviting people across districts, police personnel, and political figures in the locality is an essential part of the celebration. The visibility of Jayanti being celebrated by the women and being put together in this way is important, and inviting the people who will come anyway is vital to show respect and hospitality. I do want to note that festivities and community-led spaces risk being romanticised, as though event planning is not already a tense ground involving competition, money and raised tempers in a background of visible and invisible work and identities.

This ethnographic account of celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti with VAMP is a result of participating in the preparation for the festival online and offline in Sangli and Miraj, Maharashtra. My interpretation of the festival is carried out in discussion with my interlocutors at VAMP who I had worked with for

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[85] *Babasaheb* (translated to respected father) is a term of endearment that Ambedkarites and Dalit-Bahujan-Adivasi communities use to refer to Dr Ambedkar.

a year up to Jayanti. I also relied on voice notes, reports of Jayanti celebrations, and a video made for the community archive by a local video producer (Tejas Snap Shot, Sangli) thus noticing how Jayanti is viewed, recorded, experienced, and shared within the community.

Part II: Preparing for Jayanti

Two weeks before Jayanti

The moment Ayeesha knew I was going to be in Sangli around the weeks of Jayanti, she sent me a text saying, “plan in a way that you can stay in Sangli for the day of Jayanti”. A few days later, I received a text asking whether I had a white blouse, “We will arrange for the sari, just get a blouse”. I dug into my grandmother’s cupboard for a blouse that would fit me, and this turned into a family adventure involving all the sari wearers scouring their own cupboards for a blouse I could wear. Packed up and blouse in hand, I left for Sangli on a bus from Hyderabad. The electric excitement of Jayanti was in the air from the moment I stepped into Sangli. Many roads already had poles erected on either side with blue flags denoting either the Dhamma Chakra or the political organisation/collective/student organising group that had arranged for these flags to be put up. Kiran, who had insisted that she would come to pick me up a few days ago, said, “You don’t know Sangli. You are our guest”, and quickly gave me the lowdown about what everyone at the office was busy doing. Some were excited about the workshop, most were running around for Jayanti preparations.

In Sangli, my seemingly well-thought-out two-version workshop plan (described in the earlier patch) I had discussed with the coordinators, peer leaders and friends did not go according to plan when I tried to facilitate it. The leaders and participants had both asked me to do the workshops two

days (11th April at 12 PM) before Ambedkar Jayanti – Dr. B.R. Ambedkar's birth anniversary – a festival which, by the time I was travelling to India and then eventually to Sangli, I had understood was extremely important for the network members in Maharashtra. Maharashtrian collectives, like all Ambedkarite groups in the region, celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti by putting up a *mandap* (marquee) around residential areas for people to gather and commemorate Ambedkar as well as Gautam Buddha, and their devotion to Ambedkarite Buddhist thought and the annihilation of caste. The *mandaps* are erected a couple of days before and stay up until a couple of days after Jayanti, and the *mandaps* are where large feasts are prepared overnight, music systems are brought in for entertainment, and where larger-than-life idols of Ambedkar, the Buddha, and monks to denote Buddhism are placed on trucks to be carried through the streets, and eventually to the roads of the city, much like how Ganesh idols are ferried on trucks during Ganesh Chaturthi in Maharashtra. Within the *mandaps*, there are images of Buddha and Ambedkar, side by side, where residents of the neighbouring streets around the *mandap* come to pay their respects and join in communal reading, children's activities (dance, poetry reading, singing, art competitions) and discussion. All of this takes a lot of planning, people power, and money. Traditionally, like with most publicly organised festivals in India, the money for the festival comes from collections from each house, where festival organisers create a committee that goes door to door to collect a minimum each house has to contribute and a maximum for houses that can part with more wealth.

I realised that a lot of my participants who made the crisis intervention teams of the Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP) in Sangli were also the main points of contact and organising team for Ambedkar Jayanti celebrations. This year was the first time they were celebrating it after the

two-year-long pandemic lockdown. This year also saw the organisation of festivities split into two *galis*: Miraj, that usually organised the event and Gokul Nagar (in Sangli), a new entrant even though the people participating were all the same. This meant that they were extremely busy, and had very little time to engage with me on matters that I wanted to discuss, even after we had tried to plan around Jayanti. The participants were only 10 minutes by rickshaw ride away from their homes, and left at the 45-minute mark of the workshop stating Jayanti organisation. In the time that we did have together, the room was filled with excitement about Jayanti, and the conversations we had about leading, working as a collective was inspired by their experience working for Jayanti celebrations in the *gali*. This excitement makes its way into my thesis, because while I knew Jayanti was happening when I was there – I was specifically told to be there for Jayanti by my friends and interlocutors at VAMP – I did not expect to experience the network and its working through Jayanti. In retrospect, I possibly thought of it more like a break after the 'work' of the workshop, a place where we dance and relax together.

Figure 47: A mandap being constructed at the Goku Nagar Jayanti Celebration in Sangli, Maharashtra under which invitees and organisers will congregate during Jayanti.

In the days that followed, I joined in on the preparation for Jayanti: going to the market to buy flowers, walking around the *gali* to invite everyone, going to the police station to get permissions for the procession starting from Gokul Nagar, and even travelling to Karad, a nearby town to invite the women there to join in on Jayanti celebrations and meals in Sangli. Most of my involvement in the preparation was in the Miraj *gali*, because I was hanging out with Ayeesha.

The women in Gokul Nagar were both used to preparing for Jayanti and not – used to because they had done it with the location in Miraj for so long with the sex workers there, and new because they were doing it for the first time in Gokul Nagar. It then took a splitting of contractors, sound systems, catering, police permissions, decorating teams and two locations where people known to the community had to attend celebrations. These next few sections are based on my observations and a voice note from Jaya, one of the organisers for the Miraj committee.

Jayanti preparations in Miraj start a month before 14 April every year, with a committee meeting to decide what the collective wants to do for Jayanti that year, how it should be arranged, and who will be involved in the preparation work. A list is drawn up stating who will do what: logistics of food, music, stage setting, renting chairs, a truck, getting statues commissioned, etc. Separate committees are made for people who will collect and manage money, keep accounts, who will decide the menu, cook and manage catering on the day. The menu is decided based on what the committee and community like and thinks is best for that year. Three caterers are spoken to, their menus discussed and the caterer with the best value for money and quality is chosen. The committee then decides how much money should be collected from each individual or household, and

from supporters of the *sangatna* (police officers, people who work in the public offices within sex workers' networks).

After making these decisions, a committee goes to the local police station to discuss plans and negotiate permissions and restrictions on movement introduced by Covid, especially because there hasn't been a Jayanti for two years. The local police have a committee of their own to deal with all the different gatherings throughout the year, for example, for Ganesh Chathurthi, Muharram, Jayanti, or Christmas. A member of VAMP is also invited on this committee to decide sound levels, lighting, where the rally is allowed to move, where people can gather within the *gali*, etc. Then, the collections begin. The accounts committee keeps track of the *chanda* (money collected) gathered from individuals and families.

Since Jayanti happens in multiple towns and neighbourhoods, bookings with water tanks, permissions from the municipal corporation, caterers, lighting providers, and flower sellers need to be made well in advance. For the *mandap*, three people give cost quotes, and a committee chooses the provider based on the services they are giving and value for money. A week before Jayanti, during VAMP's weekly meetings on Monday, all members are tasked with invitations to be sent out to various groups-local officials, office persons in other wings of VAMP, representatives from all five districts that VAMP/SANGRAM works in, political connections and those working with the local police. A list is also made of all the donations and gifts that VAMP has been given by supporting organisations, community members, etc. for Jayanti.

One Week to Go: Networking During Jayanti

A week before is also when a check is done of the status with food, flowers, *mandaps*, lights, and anything else. If anything is missing, plans are made to buy it from the market. It was towards the end of this final check week that I was in Sangli. The three days before Jayanti are both the most chaotic, and the most fun because of the adrenaline rush – I'm guessing most event planners would agree. Running around for Jayanti to check that everything is in place, and the last minute realisation that some things aren't where they should be, no matter after how much planning, reminded me of my days in college putting together student festivals – making sure everything is exactly or at least close to where it should be on the day.

My involvement in the preparations for Jayanti started while the workshop was running. As we started wrapping up, the participants, now done with the network workshop, got into small groups of Miraj and Gokul Nagar committees to discuss Jayanti as they sipped on little cups of freshly made chai. Once the room cleared out and we rolled up the mats, Ayeesha and I had one last cup of chai and started walking to the Sangli police station, where other members of the committee were waiting for the police committee to arrive and speak to them about Jayanti permissions for the day. Once the committee finished their meeting and met us outside, the five of us piled into a car that a friend, and fellow local Ambedkarite group member had driven here to pick us up and drive us back to the VAMP office. On the way, we took a pit stop to eat *vada pav*, a potato fritter put in between traditional Goan bread (they took it very seriously that I did not have access to *good vada pav* in London).

Tired after all the activities of the day, we first sat under the fan and sipped another cup of chai, as other VAMP members came from their homes

around the office to join in on the discussion on what is left to be done for the event now due in less than two days[86]. Ayeesha and Jaya pulled out a list, asking committee members whether the raw materials for the food had arrived, whether the *mandap* had been put up, and if the speakers were working. Listening, and thankful for the cold tiles beneath my feet in the scorching weather, I explored corners of the office, 'decorated' with images of meetings, maps of the Miraj *gali*, slogan posters and photos of icons like Ambedkar and Savitribai Phule, shelves with condom cartons marked *Nirodh* (the condom brand provided by NACO) and files of information of the intervention work happening through the office. I finally stop at the fridge, quickly opening and closing it out of habit in a place that feels to my body, like home. Before I went back to my hotel that night, and just before dinner at Ayeesha's, we walked around Miraj doing another round of collecting contributions, checking if everyone gave according to their means. The next day, Kiran and I went to Karad, a neighbouring town, where I was to document a fire that ravaged the houses of the community members there.

Figure 48: Photos of Ambedkar and Savitribai Phule in the VAMP office.

[86] In Built lives: Khwajasaras, Jouno-Karmis, and the Politics of Non-Normative Kinship and Citizenship in South Asia (Hussain and Dasgupta, 2023), Simanti Dasgupta describes a similar scene in Kolkata with Durbar, where sex workers come together at Abhinaash Clinic, a 'drop-in centre' to eat lunch together, and share *sukh-dukher golpo* (stories of happiness and sorrow). The predominantly 'female space', as Dasgupta puts it, offers a restorative space for the sex workers, while also introducing people like the researcher into the sisterhood through stories.

In Karad, the women had returned after the crisis to their homes being rebuilt, slowly from funds the network was able to provide – houses enough for two people built with tin sheets, bamboo and cement. The fire is not different from a raid. The women return home again, whether after a fire or raid, to rebuild their lives, signalling reclamation and subversion of crises (whether as an apparatus of the state to undermine the labour movement or in the case of the fire, 'just another tension').

The women return to a broken home because of the networks and the space they have managed to build for themselves in this area, where they do not want to be 'saved' from their own homes. The brothel as a home challenges the work-home distinction between the public and private, while the sex workers' existence and unionisation efforts point to their own forms of control that they have created in a space where most things seem out of their control. Looking at the 'raid' in this lens highlights the disconnect between sex workers' rights movement and the state curbing of trafficking to 'save' its victims who, when the fire comes, must return to its detritus.

At the end of the trip to Karad, we invited them all to come to Gokul Nagar for Jayanti. Back in Sangli, I went to see preparations happening in Gokul Nagar with Kiran where I met the other half of my workshop participants, some apologetic, others mainly happy that we got to talk over snacks in their homes rather than in the office. Ambedkar Jayanti, especially this year, was representative of how the collectives, first based on condom and medicine distribution for the community through government-supported Targeted Intervention projects, created the need for peer leaders in the community who are focal points of the web of personal networks in the *gali*. These leaders were further able to use the networks they built over

time to collectivise for their place in regional politics by being able to organise their own festivities.

On 13 April, the eve of Jayanti, the day starts with rounds to check if all the final touches are done: whether the *mandap* is in place and tied together, if the lights tied to the lamp posts across the *galis* are working, whether sound systems have been working throughout. The committees then meet to look at what is done, and what is remaining, distributing tasks accordingly. One of my tasks was to go to the flower seller and order bags of rose petals, garlands, and bouquets for the stage with Razak, a committee member. We zoomed on Razak's scooter, and reached the centre of the market where we quickly placed the order, shoved the receipt into a bag and then went to eat kebabs. On coming back, I was whisked away onto the next task, doing more rounds to see if all houses had contributed to the *chanda*, and do a last round of collections. This felt a lot like going to a string of relatives' houses in the same town, something I was used to. Each relative asks you to come inside, sit, and provide you with snacks and a cold drink. I quickly realised that I must prioritise some snacks and drinks over others, and have a little everywhere to keep the relatives happy, but also conserve my ability to consume more goodies by strategising how much of what I eat and drink.

Once back in the VAMP office, we sat down to put *mehendi* (also called *Henna*, a form of skin decoration with an herbal paste made from *mehendi* leaves) on each other's hands. This activity was kept as one of the last things to do on the day, because putting *mehendi* meant not being able to touch anything, at least for thirty minutes until the paste dried. If one took off the dried paste too quickly, the *mehendi* would not bloom in its orangish-red colour. *Mehendi* was another thing that reminded me of being

at a wedding – it is a traditional marker across the country of celebrations. Putting *mehendi* together and drawing on friends' hands are moments of gentle intimacy and love shared, often with music and chatting about life and times. With the *mehendi* only half dried, we went to the back of the office to see where those cooking food had set up their station. The smell of *ghee* greeted us, while there was something more to do here too: a rickshaw with large rice bags had arrived and almost immediately, we all stood in a line to pass the bags from the road to the burners and vessels. Even though the dried *mehendi* crumbled from our hands and fell everywhere we walked, the colour still bloomed bright and red the next day. We sat on the parapets of some of the houses in the *gali* drinking cold drinks (I had Fanta, if you must know), while the first dishes for lunch the next day started getting prepared.

The making of the festival is a collective enterprise with the entire neighbourhood and network that I spoke about in the earlier chapter chiming in to materially provide for a day of joy making in the neighbourhood. This drastically changes the way we think about *galis*, about brothels, and about sex workers. I insert here a note on the *gali*, its safety and how it is distinguished as a 'brothel': what makes this *gali* different from any other *gali* in India? Most of India's urban centres and big cities have poor and increasingly poorer people living in its *galis*, ghettoised and overflowing with people squeezed out of its gentrified areas of living, working, and 'developing'. Even though *galis* have existed for generations, the slow, ongoing, and recently rapid gentrification is both forcing people who cannot afford to buy into new developments into the *galis* of the city, as well as forcing those in the *galis* out of their homes as they are razed for new developments. These occurrences both concentrate sex work into

galis and disperse sex-working communities of people into the 'outskirts' of the city (Seshu & Pai, 2022).

The brothel is a singular building, owned by a landlord who rents rooms to people for business. Most, if not all landlords in the brothels are usually senior sex workers who become *gharwalis* (housekeepers), using the money they have earned from sex work to become landlords. It is also a collection of houses attached, forming a *gali* connected to another *gali*, and capillary networks next to major roads. However, the architecture of the singular brothel has been manipulated to suit the nature of the work; singular brothel rooms centre on 'showing' or 'looking'. Regular houses would have a wall, window, and curtain to separate the road from a view of the inside of the house, but sex workers sit in their road balconies (I call them that because they're shopping for customers too) or verandahs built for the purpose of window shopping the service and service provider. The rest functions like a *gali* anywhere else (food flowing, vendors walking through, cooking outside the step of the house). The showing is what differentiates one from the other: open to the public and closed to the public. Some have rooms on both the outside and the inside of the *gali* – one for sleeping and the other for working. If the worker is not sitting in the single chair on the verandah, she is either at work or closed for business. Chai is served often.

This semi-public nature of the *gali* is also what makes a brothel safer than the street to work in. A shout will bring the entire neighbourhood to your living room. In the street, for miles, there is no one like you. It is easiest to situate collective offices that run Targeted Intervention programmes (and other services) through one of these rooms in the *gali* rather than outside, thereby making it less alienating and far to reach for the women, to access advice, condoms, a friendly ear for issues no one else beyond the *gali* could

possibly understand. Dasgupta similarly notes how for sex workers at Durbar, these spaces are both brothels and *bari* (Bengali for home), simultaneously a public space and a private dwelling, shifting kinship arrangements between sex workers, *malaks*, sisters and so on (Hussain & Dasgupta, 2023, p. 251)

In both Miraj and Gokul Nagar, the VAMP offices in the *gali* became centres of Jayanti organising and planning. Peer coordinators became donation collectors because everyone knew them from their work in condom distribution within the targeted interventions. The *gali* that housed the office at the far end of it became the hub of Jayanti operations. The *mandap* was erected in the *gali* next to it. The temple ground of Goddess Yellamma, where the Gokul Nagar VAMP office was made, became the centre where food was served after the rally. Yellamma (also known as Renuka) is a Dravidian goddess revered by Devadasis and Jogathis in South and West Indian states of Maharashtra, Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh, and Telangana. Yellamma's origin stories are known to change according to the community one asks about her, even though the main plot points are the same: Renuka gets married to Sage Jamadagni who banishes her, after which she gives birth to Parasurama who beheads her. The reasons for both these occurrences change from community to community – why she was banished, how she gave birth to Parasurama, and whose son Parasurama really is. A popular version of the story ends with Renuka ridding herself of all the men in her life and settling down in a village to form a community of *devadasis*. The story that is told and believed in the communities has been since lost to time because of the way both Devadasis and Jogathis, once learned scholars in village society have been shamed for being non-normative: sex workers, transgender people, and queer people. Yellamma's

story rings inspiration, strength and a fire within the communities that worship her because she is after all, a woman like them in so many ways[87].

Imagery and Visibility

Cold drinks downed and refreshed in the heat of the weather and the open stoves, we took a walk around the *gali* to see all the lights that were functioning and twinkling together. Two giant billboards in commemoration of Jayanti were to greet visitors into the *gali* from two sides, and they were just being mounted up: in one, for visitors coming from the side of the town, was an image of the leaders of VAMP Miraj and the committees who put together Jayanti, while the second one, for those entering the *galis* from the highway, was a large billboard with three popular portraits of Ambedkar in Marathi, and a dhamma chakra in the background are the words *Vishwaratna Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar tumhala vad-divasachya hardik shubhecha* (to the gem of the World, Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar, wishing you a happy birthday).

Similar billboards are placed at multiple entrances to neighbourhoods that celebrate Ambedkar's birthday around the country, but are a popular method of commemoration in Maharashtra, Ambedkar's state of birth. From the highway, the audience for this billboard are clients, passers-by of the *gali*, and Miraj before going on to Sangli or crossing the border the other way into Karnataka as well as traffic police stationed on the highway, one of whom added to the donations we were collecting the day before Jayanti. Entering the *gali*, smaller versions of the blue flag with the dhamma chakra

[87] The women I work with agree with this explanation of Yellamma and her devotees.

adorned the lampposts dotting the main *gali*, and flags were also being attached to bikes, scooters, and auto-rickshaws.

Figure 51: Left: A billboard facing the highway. Right: Small blue flags say Jai bhim, attached on scooters in preparation for the rally on Ambedkar Jayanti.

Among the blue flags on the lamp posts, is a second, much smaller banner from the 14 ft high one of Ambedkar – of Meenakshi, a former matriarch of the *gali*. Meenakshi was the president of VAMP, and a mother-figure in the *gali*, like Kamalabai from the flood relief event in previous chapters, and Bhimavva who saved Kiran, like Kiran and Ayeesha are being looked at now, and how the next president will also be chosen by the *gali*. In the poster, Meenakshi wears a white sari, like I was asked to, and she is seen waving the blue dhamma chakra flag at the front of a procession like Kiran would do this year at the procession I witnessed.

Figure 50: Left: Renuka, a committee member holds a well-known Ambedkarite symbol, a blue flag with the dhamma chakra on it, saying 'Jai Bhim' translating to victory for Bhim (another term of endearment for Dr B. R. Ambedkar). Noticeably, Renuka stands like the image of 'Mother India' as has been constructed decades before, subverting the image of the morally pure Indian woman, questioning who the mother is, who India is, and who the sex workers of Sangli are. Figure 51: Right: an image of Meenakshi holding the same flag from decades ago.

Meenakshi's portrait was an important addition for the committee because the sentiment of ancestry and respect, summed up in sentences like "we must remember who came before us" that I heard across the time I was working with the collectives runs in every day decision making, as well as event-planning. There is a need to remember the ancestry of sex worker led struggles for recognition and resistance that forms the fabric of the women's political struggle today.

The word 'ancestry' in sex work usually reminds people familiar with the fabric of social structures in India of Devadasis or 'ritual prostitution'. In this case, though, the ancestry I speak about is of collectivisation. When *Gangubai Kathiawadi* (2022), a film about sex workers in Kamathipura in the 1960s was released in India, the story of the sex worker matriarch piqued the interest of multiple parties interested in a 'different', powerfully and

aesthetically shown narrative about sex worker collectivisation. Members from VAMP booked a full shows and watched the movie together, and a few days later, speaking to Kiran, I was told, “We are here because she was. We must never forget the women who stood before us and did what they could”. On the all-India member WhatsApp group, pictures of people from the network visiting Ganga Harjivandas (Gangubai)’s bust in Kamathipura, Mumbai’s 'red-light district' and offering salutations to her and her story flooded the chat. Whether Gangubai or Ambedkar, this shared history does not permeate circles occupied by ‘outsiders’ who use the Miraj brothel as a stop before taking business elsewhere. These outsiders, usually women who travel city to city to do *dhandha* (business, literally, meaning sex work) also do not settle down enough to eventually collectivise with the local communities of sex workers. Ayeesha, who also travelled to work in Miraj, who is still seen as an outsider, is an integral part of the Miraj *gali*, speaking for the other women there, known by everyone as ‘Ayeesha from Miraj’. Time and involvement in the networks, and the things the network finds important – Jayanti, for example – makes an outsider an insider.

The third and last banner is one of some of the insiders in the collective – the committee that planned Jayanti for the year. This banner is placed at the other entrance of the *gali*, from the town of Miraj. This is the same road that connects to the main *gali* and through which we would walk the Jayanti procession before lunch on the 14th. A copy of this billboard is in the main *gali*, in full view outside the VAMP office and *mandap* so that those who organised Jayanti this year can be duly credited in front of their work. Billboard advertisements of politicians and community members during important events (especially those political in nature) have always been used to advertise the personality of politicians, their work and those who support them. I got to see the banner before it was put up the night before

Jayanti, so the photo looks devoid of the action that was otherwise around it: being looked at, being shown off to family and friends.

Figure 52: A billboard shows all the leaders involved in Jayanti preparation.

Visually, the billboard (pictured above) has 21 of the committee members and photos of previous Jayanti processions collaged together with a photo of Ambedkar. The text on the billboard reads, *Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar*, *131vi jayantichya haardik shubhecha* (Best wishes on the occasion of Dr Babasaheb Ambedkar's 131st birthday!), followed by a quote from Ambedkar that reads *Stri unnati shivay samajaachi pragati shakye naahi* (there can be no progress in society without the progress of its women), and Ambedkar’s signature, a design element seen in various material relating to Ambedkar: photos, posters, paintings, and in this case, billboards for Jayanti.

All leaders pictured chose to do so in the *pheta* (turban) that is tied traditionally during Jayanti celebrations, possibly taken the year before –

some choosing to pose with friends, and one with her child rather than alone. Curiously, there were no names on the billboard like there usually are when it comes to politically placed ones for certain powerful people in the town/city. The choice signals to me again, as recognition for the community being more important than any one person, which does not serve the collective in the end, as they have learnt. Signing off, the text below the billboard reads *Shubbhechuk* (well-wishers), Uttam Nagar community, Miraj, denoting the *gali*'s name in Miraj – Uttam Nagar[88].

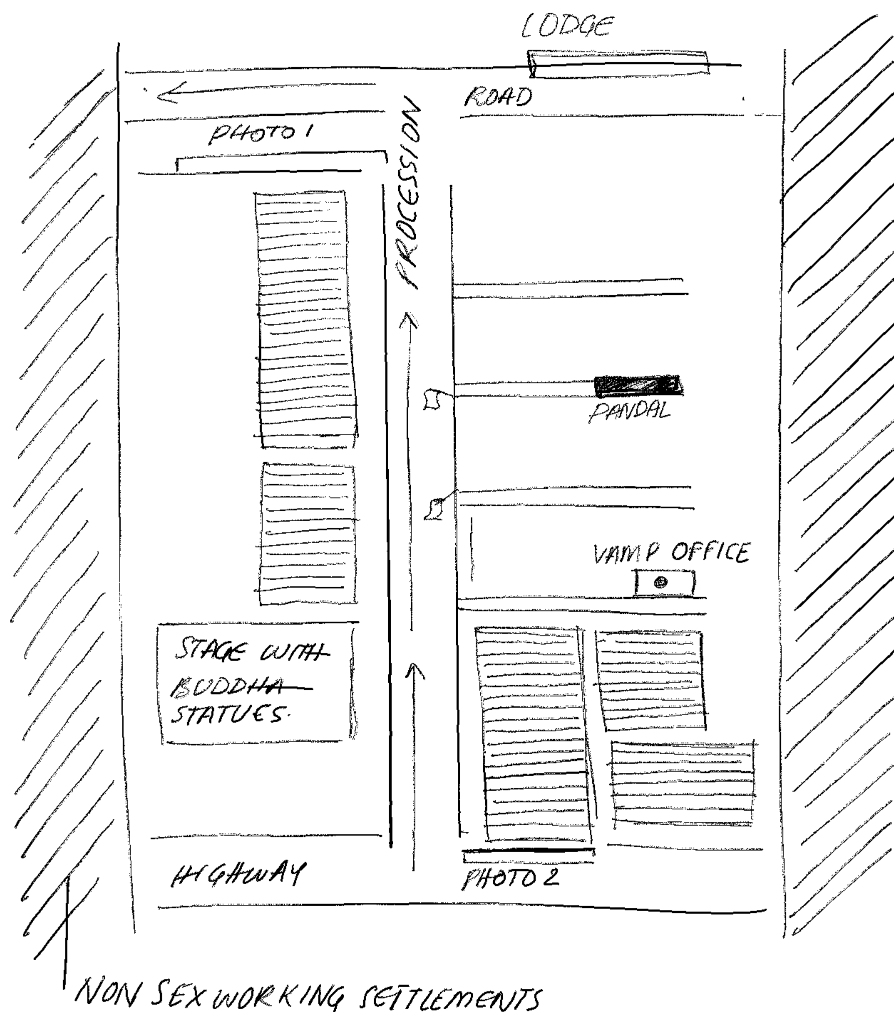


Figure 53: A sketch of the Miraj gali, the direction of the Jayanti procession, the two billboards on both sides of the gali, and the gali itself being surrounded by houses of non sex workers, a highway and the main road.

[88] I use the demarcation the collectives use for both *galis* as they refer to them: Gokul Nagar and Miraj rather than Gokul Nagar and Uttam Nagar.

Tied to this visibility at Jayanti is the importance of shared history and collective decisions, not only as sex workers but being Ambedkarites in Miraj and Gokul Nagar. This shared history as sex workers is also shared with the history of being Ambedkarites in Miraj and Gokul Nagar; the practice of organising and putting up a visual, social, and emotional representation of the love they have for Babasaheb is an integral part of the story of Sangli's sex workers. The network here extends from just other sex workers, police personnel, political connections, and sex worker collectives around the country to a more localised network that forms the lifeline of Jayanti – friends with auto rickshaws, friends with catering businesses, logistical planning groups, local flower sellers and more. This large, low density extending network that becomes less and less recognisable as individuals but remain as tasks and roles that people play in the lives of the sex workers we are talking about cement Granovetter's (1973) theory of the weaker, farther ties in the network of the individual – away from family, friends, and collective members to include almost the entire town that knows the sex worker leader, and who the sex worker leader knows.

Part III: *Naach, Gaana, Khana*: Celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti

At midnight on the 14th, Dalit Buddhists, and Ambedkarites offer Buddha Vandana (salutations to Buddha) and burst the first round of firecrackers of the day marking that the celebrations have commenced. At 5 a.m., lunch for later in the day starts getting prepared. "We need to ensure that food is prepared on time, especially since we have guests from outside. By 10 am, the food is ready for Jayanti,", explains Jaya.

On the morning of Jayanti, I reached the Miraj office at 10 a.m. Razak asked if I wanted to return to the market to collect the flowers we had ordered

yesterday. On the way, we also picked up a petticoat to wear under my sari. We come back quickly, and the office in this short time is filled with people dressing up – some at the end, touching up on powder, and others just starting by wearing a blouse. Jaya asked one of the women in the *gali* to come and tie the sari for all of us. I quickly change into my petticoat and blouse and stand to have the sari tied on me, as still as I can be and my hands raised up to not be an obstacle. After the sari was tied, Suman, one of the older leaders from the *gali* asked me to go with her to visit a few houses, asking people to come get ready for the festivities that were already beginning. Since they all lived next to each other, it became convenient to see who was still dressing up, who had finished and then to enlist people who were dressed up and assign them little tasks.

Figure 54: *Mehendi*, blue and white bangles.

We found most of the women ready to leave. Still, many of the women from outside Maharashtra and new to the significance of the day were busy soliciting customers; although sparse on Jayanti morning, business continues as usual. Jayanti is a day all eyes are on the *gali*. This can mean good things for those working, since more thoroughfare means more business and there could be enough clients to go around.

At the doorstep of one of the houses, a bangle seller sat, telling the woman who lived in the house that despite her insistence, he could not give her tighter bangles. The bangles kept breaking; they were made of glass. Glass

bangles are delicate, even dangerous if they break while you are still wearing them. Still, glass bangles were what was worn usually, especially because of their vibrant, exciting colours and because they are cheaper than metal bangles (steel, copper, brass, silver, gold). Some women who already had gold or silver bangles on their hands bought colourful glass bangles to space between the gold, creating a shimmering contrast on their wrists. On Jayanti, we only bought white and blue bangles. Suman, pointing at my hands, tells the bangle seller to measure and put bangles on my hands next. I feebly protest as I do with my mother, and within the next few minutes, I had shiny blue and white bangles on my wrist, placed next to a silver *kada* (thick bracelet) with my grandparents' name etched on the inside, and a copper *kada* I always wore, that with each little turn of my hand crashed into each other and sounded like a soft giggle.

At this moment, I thought, a large part of being an ethnographer is having things done to you. Want to visit this haunted house? Yes. Want to climb a mountain you know you can't? Yes. Want to wear clothes you want to squirm out of on any other day? Absolutely. I say this because I would never, in any other case, let myself be feminised more than I am comfortable, especially since I worked so hard to be this comfortable with the gendered expectations laid on me. Yet, in this space, with these people, I didn't feel much discomfort. Meena, a friend and fellow NGO worker laughed at me and pointed out that I let them feminise me too much. I followed on to the next house with new bangles on my wrists, which already had *mehendi* on them from last night, and a necklace that was put on me after tuts from more *gali*-moms, until the end of the *gali* after which we went back to the main *mandap*.

It was quickly approaching 10 am, and the rush to get ready and go to the *mandap* by the time the dignitaries arrived was in the air. I stood with the large blue flag for some time as the person holding it was fixing her sari and greeting her friends from neighbouring towns. At the same time, colourful powder *rangolis* (patterns drawn on the ground with different mediums: coloured chalk, limestone, rice paste, or flowers) were being drawn at the entrance to signal positivity, festivity and to add a pinch of colour. Plates full of flowers and tea were being prepared so that guests to the *mandap* could be welcomed. In the middle of the commotion to get one more cup on the tray to balance it out, I heard my name being called.

Ayeesha pulled me to the far corner of the *mandap*, where a *pheta*-tying professional had set up shop. Traditionally, a *pheta* is a Marathi turban that is tied for special occasions, like weddings. Like *mehendi* on our hands, getting a *pheta* tied is an important activity during Jayanti – almost as important as chai. The *phetas* are the bright navy blue of the blue flag. The professional, tying a *pheta* on a head in under a minute had a stool on which people were placed, mostly by their friends, and an accompanying table on which there was a large fabric cover with neatly cut and pleated fabric, held together with a rubber band so that the *phetas* can be tied at lightning speed for the crowd that gathered.

As more people came into the *mandap*, my duty became to break up conversations and seat everyone along with other volunteers. At 10 am, with half the crowd seated and others standing on the sides of the *mandap* and even outside the *gali* to watch, the large blue flag would be unfurled by the invited chief guests on the flagpole outside the *mandap*, and once unfurled, a slightly smaller version would be waved for the first time in the day with chants of *Jai bhim!* (long live Bhim!) after which the statue of

Ambedkar at the front of the *mandap* on a small stage would be garlanded with fresh flowers. Later, this garlanded photo would have small mountains of flowers in front of it offered by visitors to the *mandap*.

Figure 55: On the stage is a table, and on the table two small figurines of Babasaheb and Buddha.

The second *Buddha Vandana* of the day is recited, after which the chief guests give short speeches about Ambedkar, his work, and the relevance of his writings and principles today. At this point, the stage has the entire committee, and the children of the neighbourhood sitting down in front of the banners and figurines. The mic is passed from one chief guest to the other and then finally, to committee members who will present the programme for the day.

Among the invitees, was the sub-inspector of Sangli police, apart from other friends and allies of the community. For some reason, and perhaps because I was only with collective members in this space and their allies and supporters, I felt a little uncomfortable that the police officers had stepped outside the committee meetings in the *thana* (police station) and

come here to give speeches. Especially given the stories I had heard over the time working with the collectives online, I did not expect the police to come into a community celebration space. I soon learned that keeping members of the local law enforcement within your networks is strategic for the *sangatna*'s work, and it would be more difficult to not have anyone on your side when the raids happen.

Figure 56: Chief guests, committee members and children from the neighbourhood on the stage in the mandap reciting the *Buddha Vandana*.

Many of the officers are also people who have grown up in the same neighbourhoods, who end up being 'good apples' in a structurally abusive system for sex workers. Not all people from the community create these connections. The strategy falls more upon leaders who can permeate these spaces and make connections so that others don't have to talk to and act chummy with people who have so often been the perpetrators of violence. Some women also have more access to law enforcement officers than others, out of friendship, relationships, and sexual favours given and returned. In terms of practical use, one must have a sympathetic ear in the

force to get the police to hear complaints about perpetrators, including the police themselves. Through their collective effort at VAMP, the women had, for decades before, kept dialogues open with the police in Sangli, actively protesting and fighting illegal raids and police violence in the areas. Inviting the current deputy of the police force in Sangli, or someone else who is in a position of power was one of the many gestures of 'allyship' they performed. In some way, even the police performed as they agreed to and attended these celebrations. The same officers who smile and wave for Jayanti in the *gali* would have once visited the same *gali* during a raid. In his speech, the officer thanked the women who invited him, and talked about equality, secularism, and the importance of celebrating Ambedkar, without much detail into how, why, or what.

Aarthi Pai, a lawyer and advisor for the VAMP Institute was the second chief guest. The VAMP institute uses sex worker led research and writing as a means of advocacy for sex workers, and both VAMP (the collective) and the institute are offshoots of the parent NGO, SANGRAM, with whom I worked. Aarthi brought attention to the current state of affairs in India, focusing on intolerance, and how in the constitution, written by the person being celebrated, Ambedkar, there was no place for the kind of mental and physical violence that is currently being inflicted against marginalised communities in the form of laws like India's new Citizenship Act of 2019, and rising communal agitation fuelled by an increasingly violent group – the Hindu political right. Ambedkar's constitution, still recited in many schools today, promises justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity for citizens in India, a sovereign socialist democratic republic. Calling the audience to remember this revolutionary framework that governs modern India, she asked everyone to read the preamble of the constitution out loud:

WE, THE PEOPLE OF INDIA, having solemnly resolved to constitute India into a SOVEREIGN SOCIALIST SECULAR DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC and to secure to all its citizens: JUSTICE, social, economic and political; LIBERTY of thought, expression, belief, faith and worship; EQUALITY of status and of opportunity; and to promote among them all and FRATERNITY assuring the dignity of the individual and the unity and integrity of the Nation. IN OUR CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY this twenty-sixth day of November, 1949, do HEREBY ADOPT, ENACT AND GIVE TO OURSELVES THIS CONSTITUTION.

(capitalised emphasis from the original)

Figure 57: The oath-taking ceremony in Gokul Nagar.

In Gokul Nagar, where Jayanti was also being celebrated at the same time, I came to know later that the preamble was not only read out and made part of the celebration itself, but also designed as an oath-taking ceremony. Two weeks later, in Vijayawada, I was reminded of this oath-taking ceremony as I sat on the floor of the social service centre, hearing the women in the room sing V*ande Mataram* together before we started the annual meeting. The national song of India is a piece I did not hear often. The national anthem, *Jana Gana Mana* was still forced into moments before a film began in the theatre, or in the heat of a morning assembly at school with each

passing generation understanding less and less the meaning of the words. On asking the women in Vijayawada why they chose to sing *Vande Mataram* when asked to start with a prayer, they said that the song for them, 'denotes the freedom struggle'. In conversations at dinner that day, when I brought up the question again, they told me that they always sang the national song to signify beginnings:

> When we start any good thing, we have an earnest desire to start anything with that feeling of being free. We are in a similar position to the freedom fighters who sang *Vande Mataram*. The song for us signifies independence, dignity, reduces division and promotes unity and brings us away from colonialism.

Sex workers, like many marginalised groups in the country, use symbols of national unity like the national song, the preamble, the written law, and the constitution to fight injustice, discrimination, politically motivated hate, and structural inequality, to assert their rights and identity, as citizens of the country. The Indian constitution, especially, has been actively used by rights movements[89]. For example, the Dalit/Anti Caste movement has used the constitution as Babasaheb Ambedkar's creation that includes them in the fabric of societal mobility and outside of historical oppression. Words from the preamble, like 'secular', have been invoked to remind the Indian public that the nation must not descend into Hindu fundamentalism and that there is strength in the linguistic, cultural, and religious diversity of the

[89] Various anthropologists and political scientists have written about the 'vernacularisation of democratic practices' as an action of citizens in a country politically engaging with and using the language and tools in the law of the country to fight for/win rights. Michelutti (2007), notably, has written about how democratic process becomes a part of cultural and social practices and how, as Mitra (2010) says in the Indian postcolonial state, citizens have been inspired to both be legally entitled and morally engaged with the state through the law, often using the law to reproach the state (p.47) and its actions. The law in India, argues Baxi (2004) is unique in its conceptual linkages between governance, development, rights, and justice making it imaginable for citizen groups to have what scholars call legal mobilisation (McCann, 2006; Randeria, 2007) in social movements, and Eckert (2006) has called a 'legalism from below'. Sundar (2011) notes how different rights groups across classes access and use the law, especially those that are 'reformist' and nonviolent social movements like the Narmada Bachao Andolan or the Right to Food campaign who "try to transform the legal framework of governance by exploiting democratic spaces within the state and within law", much like sex workers in the same scenario trying to write themselves into laws that do not mention them, but hurt/seek to control/are used against them.

nation. Similarly, sex workers have always used the constitution to talk about their own civil liberties/against violence by using phrases from Article 21, the right to personal liberty, equality, and dignity in protests, both public (on the street) and private (in state offices). Sex work advocacy is also intrinsically tied to the law because it is bound to anti-sex trafficking policy measures and projects[90].

Sex workers start existing in the liminal space between being victims in the eyes of their saviours, and being criminals, the moment they assert uncomfortable, layered identities, and their rights (more than other workers have to) using words like choice, consent, work – words that seem to be reserved for the intellectually elite. I must mention as I have before in my other patches that I do not agree with or argue for a liberal empowered sex worker narrative, but instead want to question how some words, mediums, and actions are acceptable when in the hands of the economically secure, or someone on a 'moral high ground' when the same tools, language, and action used by those in intersectionally marginalised positions are seen as 'selling out' and being less from 'the grassroots', as though being invisible and struggling is the only space that can be occupied by those with a history of such violence on their bodies.

Connected to the stories sex workers get to tell, that I elaborate in patch one on documentary film, for a network of sex worker collectives like NNSW to register the network in the public eye, make political statements in support of other minoritised groups, put out sex worker led writing, research, and even create digital identities on workplace applications like

[90]A lot of sex work advocacy, as explained in the introduction and context setting parts of the thesis are tied to and governed by anti-trafficking projects and policies in India, no matter how much they try to separate themselves, making it impossible to talk about sex workers' rights without seeking to change how they are written into the law.

LinkedIn, or social spaces like Instagram, Facebook, and Twitter so that people can connect, follow, and keep in touch, is a part of assertive resistance, accepting and showing that sex work is like any other form of work/labour rather than staying informal, but it is also not as 'simple' as being visible or asserting only the right to be seen in the way they want: as decent workers. This assertion signals how historically marginalised groups have always used the 'objective' eye of the law to validate their rights, their needs and their access to government as explained.

After the oath is taken and the speeches are completed, committee members and guests get down from the stage chanting *Babasaheb ki jai ho!* (victory to Babasaheb!). Once away from the stage, guests in most cases, like the sub-inspector and a local politician who had also come, hurry away to the next Jayanti celebration they have been invited to. Aarthi from SANGRAM stays and talks to the committee and the other members from VAMP about preparations, and most importantly how to get to Gokul Nagar for the celebration already underway there. On the day, supporters of the community like Aarthi and Meena Seshu (who lives in Sangli and is known for the movement building here) had to visit both places instead of one, and rickshaws were going back and forth from neighbouring towns as people tried to make it in time for each celebration (or at least a part of the celebration in the town they did not go to first).

Kiran who was handling the Gokul Nagar celebrations came in the morning to Miraj to take pictures with us and to see if help was needed. Friends were divided, SANGRAM's office staff divided themselves, and other usual visitors from neighbouring districts created plans and strategies for eating in one place and dancing in the other. I, too, had to strategise because I didn't want any of my friends to feel like I came all the way from London and did

not partake in their Jayanti preparations. After a little thinking, and mostly just doing what some of the other people from the office were doing, the best option was to walk (and dance) the rally from Miraj to the B R Ambedkar Park, take transport to Gokul Nagar where I would eat lunch and dance a little more before taking the bus back to Hyderabad. The next day was *Vishu* (a festival celebrated by Hindus in Kerala) and my parents were insistent on me being home since I would get to celebrate with family for the first time in over two years. All the women from Gokul Nagar planned to come to the rally and then attend to lunch preparations, a throwback to the collective efforts both the VAMP wings have been involved in until 2022.

Rallies being planned on the day of Jayanti differ in the way they are planned in several ways. Routes have to be planned well in advance so that the other rallies being walked on the same day do not clash. Times have to be carefully planned so that people make it in time from the rally start point back to where lunch is being served. The rally from Miraj was planned to be a 20-minute walk from Uttam Nagar, the *gali* to the Bharat Ratna B R Ambedkar Park. The entire rally, starting at 11 am, would be on foot, and once we reached the destination, people would disperse for lunch based on where they had promised someone that they would be. The path to the park is on the main road through the city, and the rally would be visible to different groups who would come to watch: non Ambedkarites, non sex workers, upper/dominant caste Hindus and other groups of people who do not realise the significance of the day for those walking the rally.

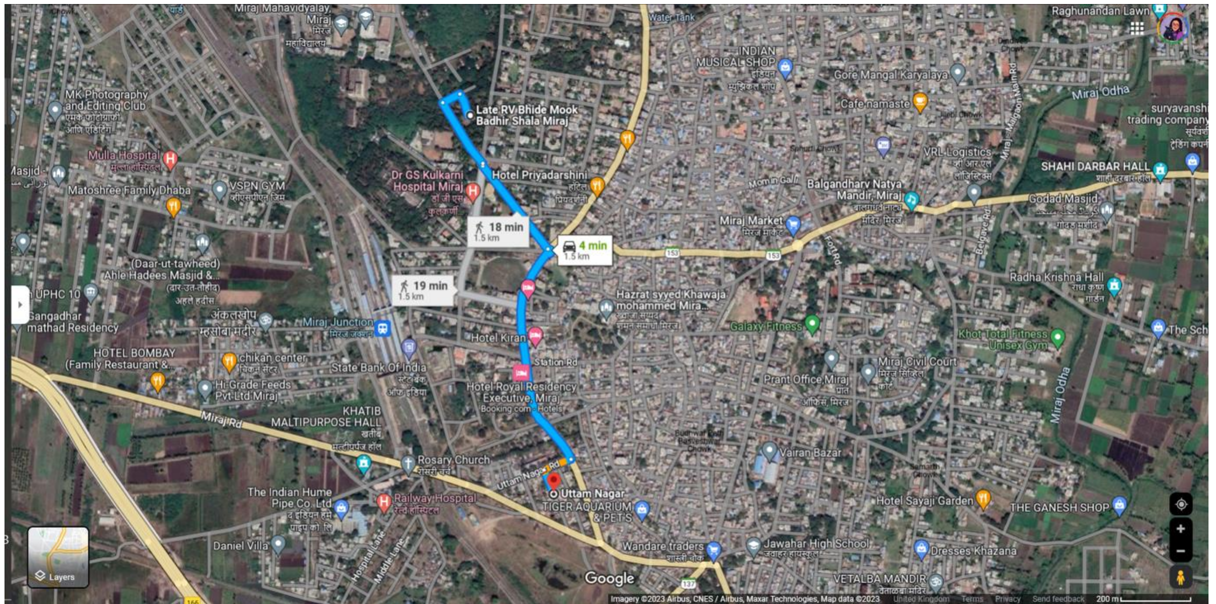


Figure 58: The route of the rally, from Uttam Nagar (down) up to Dr. B R Ambedkar Park. This route is busy and lined with residential buildings, shops, and is just bordering the town centre.

The committee in Miraj had hired two trucks to carry statues traveling with the rally. On one, was a statue of Ambedkar with his right-hand index finger pointing upwards, signifying teaching and leading. Behind this statue was a background of Buddha's head to signify enlightenment and Buddhist-Ambedkarite thought. On the other tractor, was a full body statue of Gautam Buddha, and four monks placed behind him, as though following, as his disciples. While the tractor with Ambedkar would travel at the front of the rally, the tractor with the monks would travel at the end. Before the rally began, all the statues are garlanded with fresh flowers. A shout of "Jai Bhim!" commences the rally, and the music begins, drums first.

Figure 59: The statue of Ambedkar with the background of the Buddha on the tractor ready to start the rally. Pictured is a local politician, Source: VAMP Jayanti 2022 video by Tejas Snap Shot, Sangli.

The sound of cymbals, a drum called the *halgi vadak* akin to the more popular *parai* (a traditionally Dalit made and used leather hand drum played with two wooden sticks), and a *dhol* (a traditional North Indian, bigger drum played with a stick in one hand and the other hand) filled the air along with more slogans and chants. The four-person musical team assembled at the front, those walking in the rally, about 150-200 people from both Miraj and Gokul Nagar, families, as well as the VAMP teams from neighbouring towns grouped together on the road behind them. Kiran, the president of VAMP picked up the blue Bhim flag and took her spot at the front to lead the crowd. This flag would be shared among all the women forming the committee, and members of VAMP as the rally proceeded, each woman holding the stick of the flag and making circular movements as the flag swirled in full, bright and blue. Behind Kiran and the flag, two banners follow: one of Ambedkar, wishing everyone a Happy Jayanti and a second one, saying Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (assembly to fight injustice against

sex workers), the full form of VAMP. Both these banners further visibilise those walking this rally to everyone who will watch along the route.

Figure 60: The banner saying Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad, the rally, and at the end, Buddha and his disciples. Source: VAMP Jayanti 2022 video by Tejas Snap Shot, Sangli.

The sound of rhythmic cymbals fill the air, and this is from the *lezhim* dancers that have been hired by the committee this year to lead the dance. The *lezhim* team dances to the *dhol*, but also hold the *lezhim* in their hand, a small Marathi musical instrument of small cymbals held together by a stick and connecting chains (first mentioned in the collectives chapter) that make a shimmering soft sound when the sticks come together. Following the rhythm, the rally has borders of people walking, but the inner dancing members create a circle to start dancing (pictured below), as we look, talk, make faces that match the step, and follow each other's lead as a new song and with it, a new step is introduced to the circle. Not everyone dances, many stand in the outermost circle clapping and cheering for those dancing; a rise in cheer follows the entry of a new dancer into the circle, or a new step performed with fervour.

Dancing, chanting, talking, and occasionally taking a quick sip of water, we reach the park, where there is a 10-feet tall statue of Ambedkar, in a similar position to the statue we brought from the *gali*. To show respect, many people started taking their footwear off, but immediately put it on because the tiled ground risked burning their feet – I learnt this the hard way. Hopping onto cold tiles under the shade of some trees, I stood watching as a big garland was brought from the tractor to be offered to the statue. Once the garland was tied on, the whole crowd chants “Jai Bhim!” three more times to end this part of the celebration. After the chants, people quickly rush to the places they need to get to for lunch.

Figure 61: A shot of me dancing in the circle during the rally. Source: VAMP Jayanti 2022 video by Tejas Snap Shot, Sangli.

In Miraj, tables had been set up for people to eat in batches under the *mandap*. Once we had finished offering our respects at the park, I got a lift in a car to go to Gokul Nagar with some of the NGO employees who also had plans to eat there. Once I reached Gokul Nagar, I changed into a *kurta* (thigh-length top made of cotton usually) and jeans from my now extremely

heavy after-dancing sari, and quickly went to the Yellamma temple courtyard to get a plate of food. Familiar wedding party food of *pulao* (a one pot rice dish of chopped vegetables like carrot, beans, and spices with basmati rice), mango pickle, vegetable curry and *kheer* (a wet pudding made of a grain and milk sweetened with jaggery or sugar). Full plates and friends on each side, we sat down inside the office within the courtyard where there was a fan on. We discussed how the rally went, and I said my goodbyes, a little sad that I would miss the dancing that would come in the evening: night dancing involves alcohol and is a mood I wanted to partake in, but could not enjoy this time.

Figure 62: Dr. Ambedkar's statue being garlanded in the park at the end of the rally.

A lot of neighbourhoods that have *mandaps* set up for Jayanti keep it for an extra day, on the 15th, to run talent shows for children where all who participate are awarded for their contributions. On the bus back on the 14th, my ears rang with the fleeting conversations that had happened as we danced, ate, planned, and ran around together. As my brain slowly began to process everything from the past four days, my phone rang with photos

from my friends, and on the NNSW group of Jayanti celebrations: candid photos of me, and photos to be uploaded on Social Media. In the weeks after Jayanti, as the *mehendi* on our hands faded, the Whatsapp groups seemed quieter, even though we all got back to work within a couple of days. The next task came up, and the next, and the work of the network went on. I was added to a SANGRAM programs group 1 year after joining NNSW, where I saw everyone talking every day and giving activity reports of work they completed. I didn't know such a group existed or why people didn't provide daily reports in the NNSW groups, and it felt like one more door I didn't realise existed opened and made more sense than it did before.

A month after Jayanti, we were sent a video on the WhatsApp groups, which I realised on opening, was a completely shot, edited, and sound-engineered video of Jayanti 2022. I did not know there was a professional video team involved in producing this video for VAMP. A lot of the pictures I use to show moments from Jayanti in this chapter are from this video, which reminded me of a lot of wedding videos in South Asian countries: a chronological documentation of everything that happened, everyone who came and all the food that was prepared and eaten to the sound of popular, regionally specific music. The only difference with the Jayanti video was the devotional songs to Ambedkar that were edited into the background, except for when there were speeches. This video is also an important form of documentation and collective memory for the community and is made, like wedding videos, to share with family, friends, and possibly those useful in the networks of the leaders of the *sangatna*.

Part IV: Anxieties and Decency: Futures in the *Sangatna*

At the end of patch four, I spoke about visibility controlled by state identification mechanisms. In the conclusion to this chapter, I take that formulation further to talk about two arenas: the sex worker's layered political identity that escapes these identity cards, and liberal governmentality that has, since the 90s AIDS epidemic, governed the construction of the sex worker in public consciousness. I argue how sex workers still exist in the subcutaneous place, beneath their static, publicly consumable construction, a body living and breathing through the performance of governmentality patched together with experiences of assertive reordering and subjective narratives of the self, the collective, and life after the day has weaned into the night, when only what comes tomorrow matters in the form of community, work, or crisis.

Sex workers, as 'Key Populations' (KPs) in HIV intervention circles have only existed as populations bearing the state's welfare promises for the health of 'people like them'. State subsidiaries like the National AIDS Control Organisation (NACO) and its state wings delegate interventions to end sexually transmitted diseases towards KPs as a form of care. State-led campaigns, like the 90s AIDS campaign, become spaces of governance to direct people towards activities for the 'greater public good' as a management tactic instead of actual welfare (Foucault, 1994, cited in Mokkil, 2019, p. 100) while sex workers become defendants of the social body from AIDS, taking them from subjects targeted by state AIDS control initiatives to becoming 'condom teachers' (Jameela, 2010, p. 93). Joining and becoming a part of these interventions, and the community-based organisation (CBO), become an alternative 'civil' job under the watchful eyes

of the state that the sex workers have an option of doing while spreading the message of safe sex and being docile beneficiaries of the state, while living out happily married monogamous reproductive family lives (Mokkil, 2019, p. 207). Cooperation with Targeted Intervention programmes gives sex workers access to institutions like banks, hospitals and welfare schemes – getting a bank account, applying for ration cards and other identity documents – that may be useful for enrolling children in school, and even caste certificates, making many sex workers stay within this care system, because it is also sold to them as a system wherein only they can care for other women in their position. But we know from my patches on collective work and leadership that this neatly packaged dream does come with its fractures, unsettling the global romantic language on human rights and empowerment.

Not having identifying documents to receive care, and having to respond to crises like raids that affect state-run Targeted Intervention (TI) projects, sex workers are only allowed to exist in this, made an example of-providing state support-receiving, imagination that allows no room for shifting subjectivities lest they start getting 'ungovernable'. Liberal governmentality uses words like choice and freedom, used for self-emancipation, for sex workers to instead extend state control to where sex workers can exist (either as victims, as consensual workers in state AIDS control ledgers, or as women working in demarcated, visible zones), what they can do (NGO work, sex work, gig work) and how, making 'community' a mechanism of state control that sex workers cannot (or choose not to) challenge visibly, since it is also often the only site of social access to benefits. The cruelty of localised governance (localism as different from localisation) is that those who are not on government Targeted Interventions (TIs) lists fall through the cracks of governance, getting no support. It becomes the job of those

affected in these communities and networks to be grateful for the little help they do get through government schemes – at least they are on the list – and then help those not on the list with their grocery bills, transport, and documentation in time for the next government scheme. The sex workers in this thesis localise whatever they have permission for from the state – extending the meaning of community, using targeted interventions to create spaces of care and family within the *gali* for people to meet, talk, exchange ideas, and reorder the relationship they share with the state and its actors.

Dutta (2018) contends that sex workers have fought to create connections and networks with structures in power, also evidenced through this thesis, and set themselves apart from a generalisable 'mass of street workers' to regroup themselves as leaders, activists engaging with the state in multiple ways for the state to take them seriously. Calling them 'subaltern' voices would be a disservice to these efforts. Sex workers are participants and negotiators in this governmentality. It is harmful to think of sex workers' engagement with democratic tools as solely 'willing participation'. There is discomfort and unwillingness in the bureaucratic governmentality they have to perform because they keep getting pushed into the framework of being NGO subjects, and without performing within these projects and programmes, they cannot play the more dangerous game of creating and using networks to live, celebrate, and eventually, use these networks to write themselves into legal, social frameworks. Since global efforts on sexual reform and intervention are linked to national and local development projects (as explained in patch one on film), the 'health' and 'life' of its citizens become nodes of control, dominion, and erasure under new technologies of governance (Pigg & Adams, 2005, cited in Mokkil, 2019). I use related concepts of localism and localisation (Hines, 2000) to think

about what sex workers have had access to and how they negotiate its borders. While localism refers to the focus of governance relations and on the subsidiarity, devolution and decentralisation of the state's powers, localisation refers to a process that discriminates in favour of the local to reverse globalisation trends (p. 27).

The sex worker's identity in this patch is fraught with political and personal turmoil. They layer their sex working identities with their identities as Dalit and Ambedkarite women for whom assertion, visibility and using their networks to also celebrate and show love for their beloved *Babasaheb* becomes important. Through these celebrations and conversations, they have also been able to open possibilities of understanding and solidarity with other Ambedkarite groups joining forces with sex worker collectives for the sake of progressive thought. The banners about Ambedkar and the banners about the sex-working community in Miraj tell us about how the women want to be seen: as Ambedkarites as well as sex workers, with equal importance to both.

By celebrating Ambedkar Jayanti publicly, sex workers across the network engage in re-creating a spectacle. What was initially about their 'sexual promiscuity', 'suffering', 'victimhood' and 'pity' (as Shah, 2006 and Beckett, 2008 have conceptualised), moves on to become a spectacle of networks, kinships, friendships, and identities asserted. Networks made for their communal physiological health, primarily for peer education and condom distribution, become networks to advance social and mental health through the assertion of self-determination and human rights as women, mothers, sex workers, and Dalits. Peer support workers, otherwise alienated from the national and global health industry existing only in the confines of health intervention lists, re-order their engagement with these spaces through

festivals, reclaiming their right to the city. Through food, community making in person, and relationships with the urban and natural around them, celebrations are intensified and amplified, creating a subversive revolution from the programming and control they otherwise experience.

In Modern India, being an Ambedkarite is as, if not more, stigmatised than the identity of a sex worker. For workers to identify with and assert both these identities challenge known stories of social progress and transformation, complicating understandings of caste and sexual labour. This further creates a possibility for solidarity that is potent in its capacity to question neo-liberal politics for a range of movements: feminist, queer, trans, and, anti-caste and labour rights movements, by seeing all these spaces as connected in their messiness, in response to state control mechanisms, and in their dreams of more – care, family, community, security in the nation-state.

Not all the women who celebrate Ambedkar Jayanti in Miraj are Dalit, Other Backward Caste (OBC), Bahujan or Adivasi women. Many started celebrating Jayanti after they began working as sex workers, experiencing Jayanti as a way of collective celebration, giving way to a textured understanding of who Ambedkarites are, and who gets to be one in Modern India. Some Ambedkarite thinkers argue that Ambedkarite thought is being co-opted by groups that do not have an anti-caste frame of thinking, that Ambedkar is now popular enough for *Savarna* groups to reconfigure Ambedkar's work, stripping away its radical and socially transformative power. However, groups like sex workers, fighting age old notions of purity and pollution, co-opt (as in adopt), and eventually co-conspire with Ambedkarites, using Ambedkarite thought to fight for social transformation, since many sex

worker collectives believe in a 'syncretic culture' where survival is the only goal.

Durga, one of the movement leaders in Andhra Pradesh, narrates her experience working with Dalit and Anti-caste groups to bridge tensions and build solidarity between both movements. Because of her strength and capacity as a ‘principled leader’, members within the Dalit rights movement have persuaded people like Durga to be a part of leadership and steer boards of their organisations within Andhra Pradesh. In this context, writing about and experiencing Ambedkar Jayanti, an unexpected gift by my friends, is an interesting example of how I was ‘added’ to the community and its tasks in the weeks ahead. All the work going into organising Jayanti was shared on social media days prior, with posts on celebrations happening in the towns published on and in the days after, which were reposted by a few anti-caste publications on Instagram and Twitter – a small, but significant win.

This move-ment (the verb) in the *sangatna* through the festival I explore is different from the mainstream movement. It starts in the ‘small Indian town’ (different from ‘the Indian village’ but said in the same tone, not by me), challenging narratives that sex workers exist only in the framework of governmentality and NGOisation, that they do not have agency to talk about their lived realities, have no *own* subjectivities or that they are brainwashed, supposedly by ‘the NGO’ with no sense of self, consciousness or concepts of dignity, justice and a future attached to them; as though the small town does not dream, but only serves the dreams (in the case of films about sex workers, the nightmares) of those in the cities. Dominant national and global discourses of the transnational language of sexual progress have muted regional experiences and subjects (or figures) in search of a singular

sexually liberated subject: the sex worker, the queer person, the trans person and so on, argues Navaneetha Mokkil in her book, *Unruly Figures* (2019), where she reconstructs the 'figure' of the sexual subject (the Lesbian and the Sex Worker) with a focus on Kerala, a south-west Indian state. Mokkil argues that the world-making capacity of cultural practices is ignored when the emphasis of social transformation often lies solely in the language of law and policy-making, but not as much in the memory-driven process of subject formation, which then tells an institutionalised, supposedly linear story about coming into consciousness and 'being empowered' (p. 5).

Figure 63: A committee member sits outside the VAMP Miraj office holding a garlanded image of Babasaheb.

My thesis seeks to challenge this linear story as well, told and retold to serve different arguments, but never quite appreciating the messy, in between, non-linearity of identity formation, collective consciousness, and

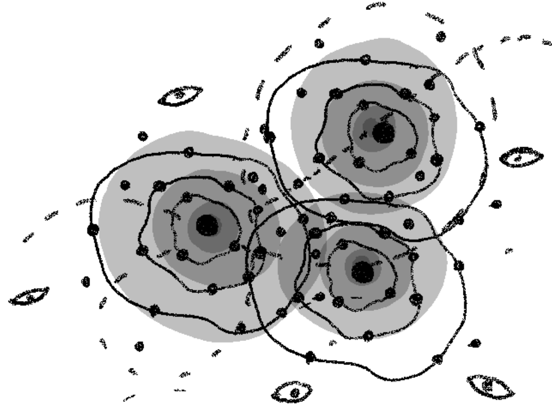
the fight for rights. It makes understanding the nature of sex work(ers) globally 'easy' to slot into larger theories of neoliberal market logics, simplifying them into words like 'choice' and 'freedom', without understanding what that might mean for people beyond a certain class-caste-economic background. Moving beyond the remit of law, legality, governance, and health, it becomes pertinent to see what people do with systems they have been 'given' and governed by, how they negotiate and complicate their existence in a parallelly layered world.

Sex workers in this thesis fight the simplistic notion of what it is to sex work, and who a sex worker is by presenting their subjectivities as humanely as possible in the face of inhuman simplicity. The question rounds back to the Films patch: what do sex workers want to be seen as? What does the reordering of these identities, seeing what comes first and what is seen and unseen, say about who sex workers want to be seen as? What does it say about vernacularisation, not only of the law but of visible movements from the big city when these subtle but big, yet invisible acts of resistance and persistence take place in the *gali*?

Can one simply be a sex worker without responding to violence, or within governance structures, or unseen by a neighbourhood tracking every action? Sex workers know who they are but what of those discounting their capacity and consciousness to have that knowledge? Is there a choice of self-determination for marginalised groups when everything is pre-determined, the stories they experience and narrate remaining within collective (safe) spaces because outside of it, they are treated as dreams, idealisms, fallacies? Those whose selves have always been determined by others or in relation to good women, caricaturised and redetermined, who

are refused identity and forced again to be ‘endless faces on a street’, as documented by films and photographs.

> Whoever wants to run away, go. And whoever wants to fight, stay back. This is all I know. I’m going to stand up for what’s right. I have no fear. We’re fucking whores. We’re going to be whores here. Tomorrow we’re going to be whores somewhere else. So, if being a whore helps us survive, then stay here and whore around, no? (Ayeesha, 2021, Maharashtra)



वो थे तो हम हैं

We are here, because they were there

~ a conclusion ~

“Wo The Toh Hum Hain”[91]: An Unending Fight to Be

> The cry of the Have-Nots has never been 'give us your hearts' but always 'get off our backs'; they ask not for love but for breathing space.
>
> Saul David Alinsky in *Rules for Radicals* (1971)

In November 2023, a year after I formally became an ‘ally’ from an ‘employee’ of the network, the Supreme Court of India backtracked on the language it advocated to speak about sex workers, to calling them “Trafficked victim/survivor or woman engaged in commercial sexual activity or woman forced into commercial sexual exploitation”. NNSW WhatsApp groups buzzed into action, as they usually do when crisis occurs. After years of advocacy from sex workers across the country to bring attention to the labour that goes into sex work, the question of whether sexual labour is even labour is yet to be understood by multiple stakeholders. Like many times before, activists, allies, and friends wrote thought pieces, signed petitions, and staged demonstrations in their towns and collectives, inviting media organisations to protest the lack of perspective from the sex workers’ movement in matters that concern them.

In 2014, the anger with *Prostitutes of God* (2010) fuelled a video movement within SANGRAM and VAMP, who earlier focused on written material. The response to *Prostitutes of God* by VAMP is part of a larger body of work by SANGRAM called *Sangli Talkies*. NNSW’s worker-activists are highly

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[91]“Because they were there, we are here”. Translated from Hindi to English. Referring to the spirit of the collective that resides in the leaders that came before, who make possible the work of leaders today.

attuned to the narrative violence they face, taking every opportunity they can to counter it with counter-stories. Now, digital storytelling programmes are constantly run by the VAMP Institute, training collective members to use audio-visual methods to share their own stories. The pandemic only accelerated this learning curve. In recent times, NNSW has been collaborating with tech+sexuality spaces like Point of View, Agents of Ishq, The Centre for Law and Policy Research, and CREA India to make accessible info-videos and graphics for social media.

Figure 64: Kiran (VAMP) did 6 mini videos with a Hindi media organisation, *The Lallantop*, answering misconceptions on sex work(ers). The thumbnail of this video asks, "Sex Workers get married and have children?" The videos are made for a Hindi speaking audience.

The anecdotes I mentioned have a gap of 9 years between them, but the effort it has taken sex workers to respond to ongoing crises through collectives makes the story sound familiar.

Over the past few decades, sex workers have increasingly been constructed (solely) as targets of biomedical intervention and care, recipients of

government schemes, and heart wrenching stories that ‘must be told’, and for an equal amount of time, sex workers have responded, reordered, reasserted, and reconfigured the world in which they are only seen as passive members of society.

In five patches, this thesis traces how the figure of the sex worker has been constructed and what they have done with these constructions, how they have responded to the systems within which they are ‘placed’, decentred, and marginalised. I have looked at what is at stake when singular, binary stories are pushed and popularised, their effect on real-life communities of sex workers, and how sex workers have been responding using multiple methods and sites of collectivisation (film, networks, community organisations, crisis intervention groups and festivals) while at the same time, managing never ending *kaam* (work) of violence and visibility at the personal, collective, and national level. The thesis and its sex worker led collectives challenge known concepts used in reference to sex workers: identity, work, choice, agency, offering a different experience of these words, in addition to words like love, sisterhood, anger, collectivisation and joy that are not used in reference to sex workers.

In the introduction, I mapped out that research on sex work in India mostly falls in the ambit of the ‘sex’ aspect, the ‘work’ aspect, fighting for rights, and activism, but focus much less on how people become activists, how their personal identities negotiate with their collective, public identities, and kinship ties as both global and local sex worker activists. Vijayakumar (2018) has written about how sex worker activism in India especially, has grown from what she calls the 'shop floor' of transnationally funded HIV interventions, where sex worker individuals and groups found space to relate, share marginalisations, and eventually collectivise. These spaces sex

workers are ‘allowed to exist in’ as ‘at risk’ populations (Vijayakumar, 2021) are reconfigured, and become a catalyst for sex workers to experience a kind of “defacto decriminalisation” (Kotiswaran, 2011a) on ground through networks of safety and kinship that they have created in the neighbourhood, the collective, the national, and the global network.

In the thesis, I focus particularly on some of these playgrounds of resistance: responses through film, strategies sex worker-leader-representatives use to continuously run crisis intervention groups, work within the bureaucratic landscape of international funders and NGOs, and joy making through festivals, in specific a festival that belongs to the marginalised in India. All while they battle increased personal and structural violence based on their many identities. The next few paragraphs give the reader a recap of what each patch covers and its key arguments.

Decategorisation, Fluidity, and an Archive of the Movement

The first patch analyses documentary films from 1985-2015 on sex work in India to see how sex workers’ stories are constructed and narrated by a global industrial complex, to which sex workers respond. The global industrial complex of anti-trafficking-victimhood-funding-film creates and drives forward a narrative of sex workers from and in India being poor, brown women who are only worthy of saving.

Documentary film in this thesis has been analysed as an archive of a people, their identity, and political movement. By assembling documentaries in a genealogical sequence, along with how they came to be, who made them, funded them, how they travel and how they are consumed, I argue that films must be understood as a network of information that is made in a

particular context, but more importantly, is actively responded to by those subjected to the film. In the case of sex workers, films focusing solely on victimhood, trauma and saviourhood create possibilities only for saving, rather than shifts in power from those wielding funds, cameras, and pens to those only represented. By using single-stream narratives, funding bodies retain power in the hands of rescue NGOs, abolitionist activists and politicians who are less concerned about the well-being of those they want to 'save' and more about how much funding they can pull in from bodies in the US, UK, and Canada to rescue more rescuable bodies. The patch offers a peek into the mentality it takes to gentrify a population both in its physicality, the access it has to the state and public space, and in the minds of the public that enforce this gentrification on an everyday basis. The subaltern can speak, but only about certain things. In the case of the sex worker, they can only speak about pain and exploitation, sometimes sexual deviance.

The second patch steps into the National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW) to see how sex workers in the country have collectivised, democratised, and translated sex work advocacy across the network from the global sex worker identity to the local and back. It examines the social organisation of the network and how it responds to continuing crises, especially in the way it creates cross-movement solidarities with other movements, situating the sex worker movement with other movements in the country.

Connected to patch one, patch four on individual experiences of collectivisation and leadership within the network explored similar threads of identity formation and visibility. It explored how funding agencies primarily based in the Global North adopt fixed global categories of respectability that affect sex workers, queer, and trans communities (as

well as those on caste and class intersections). Sex worker-led collectives, and NGOs that support sex worker organising, contend with the conflicts this reduction of identity creates because it is either to take on board complexities of practice based on real life, and dynamic interaction or to be transnationally understood and articulated (Vijayakumar et al., 2019). While the use of fixed categories can be useful to construct a global identity that can be used for solidarity building, legal inclusion and social recognition, it has its costs. Not only is the diversity of culturally specific experience lost, but the self of the sex worker then falls solely along narrative lines of caste, and class (Shah, 2004). In this context, I add to the conversation by exploring tensions of wanting to have an umbrella under which to stand for safety, but at the same time being able to encompass these human and inhumane differences and realities of a community and social movement. Sex workers within these collectives are aware of the bureaucratic, visible work they have to perform to be seen as 'workers,' and at the same time, as respectable tax paying citizens of the nation-state. I suggest that it is the sex worker abolitionist industrial complex that keeps sex workers in the strict binary of being 'in' or 'out', 'saved' or 'waiting to be saved', pushing onto them further crises (forced rescue, misrepresentation in film, media campaigns, funding harmful programmes, and not letting sex workers direct any of the action mentioned before).

Diverse Networks and Social Bonds

The third patch goes deeper into the collective and deconstructs the *Sangatna* (collective) through workshops with Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP in Maharashtra) and Me and My World (Andhra Pradesh). In the patch, sex worker leaders talk about public and personal trust networks to push the nature of the collective away from network thinking, and more to

communities of care. At this point, sex workers align back into narrativisations of themselves because certain identity groups and categories are useful for identification, documentation and to be 'rightful citizens' of the country (as I mentioned earlier in patch 1 and 4). Meanwhile, localised collectives become a place for healing and responding to everyday experiences of violence that do not have space in the larger narrative. These collectives are not just nodes in the network and the network is not just a collection of *sangatnas* (collectives). The work at the network level is possible because of the rest and moments 'in between' the interventions that happen within the collective.

The patch evidences how sex workers' identities as leaders have opened up spaces that they otherwise would not have access to (for example, Durga in Anti-Caste Organising Groups, or relationships with local politicians that ensure small shifts in living conditions). As leaders, sex workers have a responsibility to the women who are part of the sex working community across the network, and as leaders, they diminish their individual needs to assimilate into the collectives. Their identity thickens further when they meet other sex worker leaders in collectives and groups, all with their own ideas of what it means to be sex workers, and leaders, and what the collective means for them. Through personal trust networks, and far-reaching, less dense networks, sex worker leaders 'get things done' as important actors in their networks, and in the networks of other people, creating a porousness in the sex worker-non sex worker networks. The identity of the sex worker here is deconstructed from the global identity of the sex worker to the individual identity of a sex worker in local collectives, remade again into a localised collective identity.

Sticky, Layered Identities

The fourth patch goes one step further into the network and uses interviews with sex worker leaders on the board of NNSW to see how they construct their identities as sex workers and as leaders. This patch offers a personal, qualitative texture to the network described in the previous two patches to see what the network/collective/community means to the people that make it. In the backdrop of the global sex worker identity, local experiences of the sex workers in my thesis evidence the complexity of layered identities, especially when a specific one (that of being a sex worker) sticks faster, and stronger than others do (that of being mothers, women, workers, Ambedkarites and so on).

By talking about what identities stick, the patch explores what within sex workers' lives is seen as work. I depart from the notion that it is just sex workers' sexual labour that is not seen as work. This is true, and is further applicable to the work they put into building and rebuilding care and kin networks that is not recognised as work (the effect of which is eviction in the name of development). However, sex workers return, and continue returning and rebuilding community, as is evidenced by Dasgupta (2019) on the remnants of communities and homes that are left broken by 'caring states' and its 'caring actions'. The effort put into creating care systems in the country's failing economy, spending days training to be legal advocates for themselves, or travelling state to state to challenge the criminal justice system is not seen as work. The conversation between reproductive labour and sex work has largely only been about whether the 'sexual' can be labour that is paid when it is considered feminine and domestic. But with stories on leadership, care, and collectivisation work, I offer examples of reproductive labour by sex workers that are yet to be counted and

understood – ordinary for many marginalised groups, but exceptional in the continued face of violence. The feminism the sex workers embody and talk about is a different kind of feminism – a belittled one of the women fighting from and in their homes (Federici, 1984) (and might I add, workplaces).

The final patch celebrates Ambedkar Jayanti with the sex workers of Sangli, where they evidence how festival making is central to collectivisation and struggle – from the Millenium Mela mentioned in patch one, to commemorative days, to the example I analyse of Ambedkar Jayanti.

In times of celebration, sex workers reorder their work as a collective, and their relationships in networks around them as both sex workers and as Dalit women in the *gali*, the town, and in the country. During Jayanti, sex workers reconstruct the way they are narrativised individually and collectively, how they are engaged with and the public space they have access to (both in the form of the *gali* and the form of repurposing sex worker collectivisation from pathological care to social care). In seeing how the network is created and works in the case of NNSW as well as during Ambedkar Jayanti, the thesis argues for an understanding of spread out networks and 'bridges' (Burt, 1992; Granovetter, 1973), which become more important than dense, close-knit ties between network members (for example, in crisis intervention groups it becomes important to have a large network of contacts, as is the case with festival planning or to be connected to other rights advancing groups) which have become key to understanding collective identity. Dense, smaller, personal networks are still vital to the work of leaders and collectives, especially when it comes to crisis intervention groups and work that requires trust, and immediate action but at the same time cannot sustain the pressure of continuing crisis on the network, or its people.

These patches stitch together stories and experiences from different parts of the socio-political landscape of sex worker led activism in India, challenging popular ideas of representation, care, identity, and activism as it is spoken, or left unspoken about in the sex workers' context. Sex workers are both hypervisible and invisible when it comes to what stories they are allowed to say, and whether stigma surrounding sex work allows all people involved in sexual labour to be 'out' in order to access welfare, and care schemes. Care and visibility are invariably tied in this thesis, as sex workers navigate both being cared for, being visible, invisible, and not being cared for, and this is where the collective steps in – to provide this care despite the invisibility, playing and negotiating with the way they are seen, and unseen. By looking at how sex workers resist, negotiate, and playfully reinterpret the tools and spaces they have been 'given' access to, this thesis offers a peek into a world of marginalised groups post-care and post-intervention, to go back to what many critics of Briski's *Born into Brothels* said from the first patch: who is to check what happens post film, post intervention project, post care, post rescue?

Final Reflections: Patchworks, crises, and unending *kaam* in a digital world

No thesis is ever written in silos, so it is important to situate how this thesis, its methods, and its conclusions are being presented, especially as it has gone through various shifts and slips. I started this journey by talking about how a traditionally marginalised group like sex workers respond to an ongoing cycle of crisis that they need to respond to, but also one that prevents them from moving outside of these cycles of crisis to live lives that they dream of.

The work for this thesis did not begin with the assumption that I would contribute methodologically to how anthropologists have traditionally used ethnographic methods. However, because of the pandemic and various other reasons outlined in the introduction, I was able to explore and play with different methods to answer the curiosities that led to this thesis. With the methods I used, I add to the discussion and work that argues for including political engagement and community leadership in critical research by practising 'genuine embeddedness' as Joseph-Salisbury and others (2021) term it, in the movement and its worlds to shift my research from interesting to useful so that researcher-activism is not merely time and space bound to gather information.

My questions in this thesis and beyond are strengthened by my resolve to be vigilant about the kinds of stories research encourages by over-reporting on specific aspects of specific communities that make some stories more true and visible than others. Marginalised populations perform to the lens they are viewed through, so they have access to what they need to survive. Often that requires them to perform victimhood (Agustin, 2007) and vulnerability (Brown & Sanders, 2017). The possibility of these stories and our genuine engagement with these uncomfortable questions should make it to the final cut of our research. By employing respectful ways to research, based on critical reflexivity, reciprocity and respect for self-determination, embracing "other(ed)" ways of knowing, and embodying a transformative praxis (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021), this thesis offers a way for research to genuinely be used for collective good in a post/de-colonial world.

By the time I finished writing this thesis, there were many more crises that erupted around the world. I had to manage the thesis when there was a

pandemic, and I had to manage to do the thesis when there was a genocide being live-streamed on television for the world to watch. In between, there were a thousand smaller 'abnormal' things happening: the rise of Islamophobic rhetoric and laws being passed in India, the rise of transphobic rhetoric in the UK, ongoing caste violence, deaths at NNSW of people I came to know and love, medical emergencies, violent legislative rulings, and the list goes on. As I reflected in the beginning about the use of a method like Patchwork Ethnography to deal with a crisis like the pandemic, I reflect again on its use at a time like this – where nothing is normal, nothing is complete and all we (as humans, as researchers, and as responders) can do is experience, write, and communicate in patches. At the point of each of these unending crises, again, my thesis felt very small. At this time, I called my friends in the *Sangatna*, and Ayeesha over a voice note said something that I hold close to my heart as I nervously finish writing: "When people read your thesis, Jo, I want them to know that the collective comes first. There will be a thousand Ayeeshas, and a thousand Kirans and Renukas born out of the power of our collectives, but this is our work – to take the collective forward. Through this collective, we will fight whatever comes, and we will do it together". I understood then that my thesis too, is a response, a fight, one like my interlocutors'.

Words will not be enough, and many words will get stuck in the throat, but care we must. Fight we must.

Epilogue

I sat thankful to the sun on the sofa. This sofa has seen everything, I now realise. An entire PhD was done on this sofa. Mostly horizontally.

The stubborn distance that had now become normal since I stopped working with the network seeped in slowly but steadily into daily life. No more calls, no more texts, but I was still part of a group used to keep in touch with people who had worked with the network in various capacities – updates were put there, occasionally a photo was shared, and deaths announced.

My phone starts buzzing. It said a familiar name.

My first thought immediately went to missing something. Did I miss something that I was supposed to do?

The board meeting is happening in a month. Were they still expecting something from my end? What should I say? Some of the guilt of stopping the active coordinating work I was doing sat at the back of my mind.

The buzzing stopped. I missed the call.

"*Busy ho*?", a text follows. Are you busy?

I call her back and step out, barefoot onto the pavement outside the door from my living room. The washing machine in my kitchen had just started tossing, shaking, and rumbling.

"*Humesha tai, par aap bolo*?" Always, big sister, but tell me?

"*Aise hi call kiya. Kya yaar? Kitna likhogi? Tum humesha kaam hi karti rehti ho!*" I simply called. What man! How long will you write? You are always working!

I laugh. She knows that she, too, is always working. The last time we met, we sat in a rickshaw to the office, let our heads hang backwards so that the cold seat of the rickshaw sat in the folds of our head and neck and sighed. Very loudly.

"Jo!" Her voice brings me back to the cool cement under my foot. "I called to check in on you. I know you're working all the time, so I wanted to check that you are also taking care of your health and eating".

I smiled, but she couldn't hear that, so I chuckled and told her that I'm trying to. Our conversation this morning was soft.

Usually, my calls with her are filled with quick tasks to do, reviews of other calls and catching each other up – coordinator stuff. But my number had somehow reached her "check in" list which usually had every single person in the *gali*, some outside the *gali*. Some, like me, in London. Just like that, I had been absorbed into this community of care she had created.

I walked back into my house and smiled to myself.

Shaking the cups nailed to the wall gently, the washing machine rumbled on in the background.

APPENDIX A: (Dis)Positions on Sex Work

Sex work is viewed as a polarising 'debate', both within progressive and liberal movements and outside of them. This sub-section provides a short understanding of the legal systems in place across the world to control sex work and the positions people tend to take on sex work beyond legislation.

Sex work activists, sex workers, and academics who study the subject agree that the UN definition of sex work falls short of capturing the complexities faced by individuals involved in this industry worldwide. Despite extensive research on trafficking, there is a lack of consensus regarding its precise definition and effective strategies to combat it. It is crucial to consult those directly affected - including sex workers themselves, victims of trafficking, and activists working closely with collectives - for their insights. However, there has been a tendency to conflate trafficking with all forms of sex work without considering these distinctions during research studies.

Legal systems

There are broadly four legal systems aimed at controlling and regulating sex work:

The prohibition model, as the name states, seeks to criminalise all kinds of sex work and sex workers. Countries like the United States of America and the United Arab Emirates criminalise all aspects of 'prostitution'. However, 'prostitution' continues to occur widely, but is often pushed underground, giving less options for those involved to seek support, enter or leave as they please. In the context of the USA, Anderson (2002, p. 748-749) argues that the laws rarely have a purpose beyond controlling some aspects of the

practice, especially those that offend middle-class sensibilities while underwriting the moralistic disdain for those engaging in it. The prohibition model is widely believed to exacerbate the harms sex workers across the industry face.

The Nordic model of governance (also rebranded the 'Equality model' in the UK as of 2023) seeks to criminalise those who purchase sex work, but not workers who solicit/sell sexual services. The logic behind the model is the belief that sex work is not only harmful for those within the industry but society as a whole so the focus should be on the removal of sex workers from their workplaces, instead of on harm reduction. The model is called 'Nordic' because the model was first implemented in Sweden where the belief surrounding prostitution (there is no word in Swedish for Sex Work) is that it does not affect only the prostitute, but all women in Swedish society (Dennermalm 2014, p. 230). For a lot of feminists, the Nordic model seems like a compromise between full prohibition and full decriminalisation. However, the Nordic Model not only disregards workers' agency and self-determination but also puts little focus on actually countering violence in the industry as expressed by sex workers themselves.

The legalisation model allows for both the purchase and sale of sexual services, but only from licensed providers and establishments (the state of Nevada within the largely prohibitive US state governs sex work through this model, as does Germany and the Netherlands). While this model recognises and has a far more progressive view of concepts like workers' agency, self-determination and consent, the stance still perceives sex work as a 'necessary evil' (rather than how the prohibition model looks at it as a 'social evil') (van der Meulen et al., 2013, p. 14). The governance of sex work

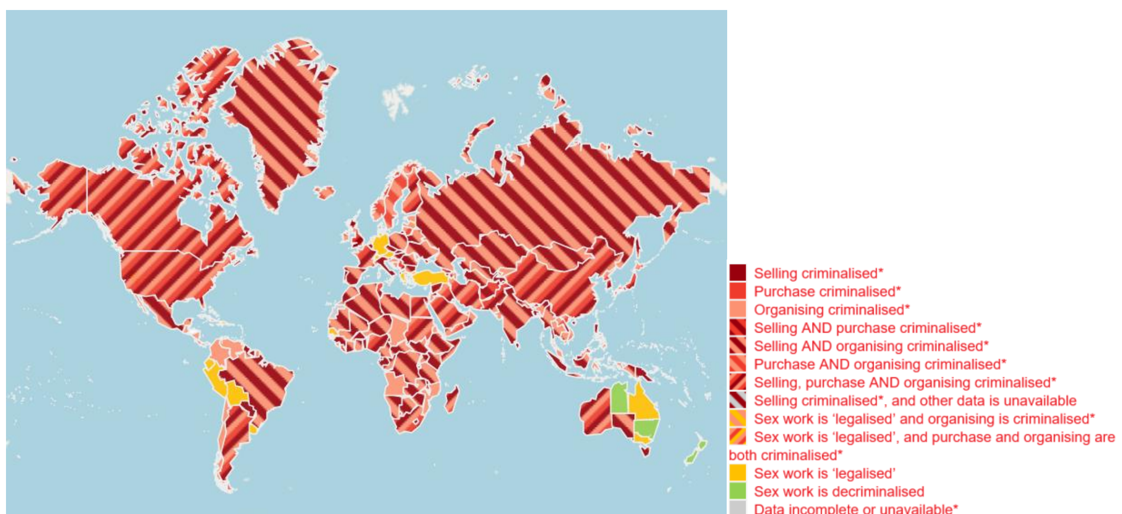
under this model remains a morality issue, producing intense surveillance and governance systems rather than even full prohibition leading to a form of regulation and control that never extends to other businesses. Moreover, there is evidence that legalisation can end up perpetuating class inequality by criminalising street-based sex work when most sex workers cannot access indoor work. In India, there have been discussions in public forums, and within NGO networks that there might be a governance model aimed at creating zones for sex workers. Based on these zones, workers would have to apply for identification documents that allow them entry into certain zones and not into others, restricting their right to movement within the country – a restriction not placed on any other informal worker or person involved in the business. As I mentioned earlier, in India, sex work is often one of many other informal jobs that people do. By tagging people as 'sex workers' through identity documentation that will be tied to their freedom of movement, the model will only create more surveillance systems that are already hyper-used on marginalised groups, disproportionately impacting people from already marginalised class, caste and gender positions like trans people, Dalit people, poor people, and seropositive sex workers.

The decriminalisation model advocates for the removal of laws attempting to regulate the sale and purchase of sexual services between consenting adults. Instead, by decriminalising sex work, workers would be able to demand that the standards, guidelines and policies concerning workplace conditions be applied to them and that employment benefits, and civil and criminal laws applicable to all workers and citizens be applicable to sex workers as well, which would ultimately destigmatise sex work.

Most sex workers' rights organisations have been pushing for full decriminalisation of sex work because they believe that removing

‘criminality’ from already marginalised people can break barriers to better health, social and financial services both supporting people in sex work as well as victims of trafficking. If sex work is decriminalised, there is an actual chance for hidden sex workers, and victims of abuse to ask for support instead of being pushed further underground out of fear of being incarcerated or publicly punished for what they do.

As of now, countries like Belgium, South Africa, New Zealand (the first country to do so) and Australia have decriminalised sex work. Research into different models of governance has suggested that decriminalisation might be the best model to reduce violence against sex workers because sex workers have reported better working conditions, security, occupational health and safety protections, and improved relations with the police (Armstrong, 2017). In most countries, aspects of all four models are mixed and matched to adhere to existing legal frameworks, and cultural and social realities (rarely prioritising sex workers’ lived experiences). The following image is from a review from the Network of Sex Work Projects (NSWP) studying the impact of different legal systems of governance on sex workers’ lives on the ground (2019):



Positions

While legal systems are in place for social control – not just of both sex workers and their networks, but even non sex workers and sexual life in 'public', the positions people take on sex work inform public discourse, academic work and funding priorities, and they are important to understand. From my years working with the movement and definitions provided to me by sex worker activists on the ground, there are largely three positions people take on sex work:

Feminists who are pro-sex workers *as well as* sex work believe that sex workers must have equal rights to that of other labouring people in the country. They believe that decriminalising sex work will create an opportunity for those in sex work to enter and exit as they please, free from stigma and with access to all services for their care and harm reduction. With sex work being decriminalised, and taking the lead of sex workers themselves, trafficking can also be adequately combatted.

Pro-worker feminists believe that sex workers must be protected, but that the right *to* sex work must be abolished for all now and in the future.

Sex work abolitionists believe sex work is a form of slavery that women are oppressed under and should be emancipated from. Sex workers who do exist and work currently should be 'controlled and contained' through licensed zones, and should ideally be rescued from their workplaces. This does not mean they believe in the legalisation of sex work, as they believe that "legalisation contributes to trafficking". Many radical feminists take this position and support prohibitive models to control sex work so that there can be an end to both demand and participation in the industry. It is important to note that while some radical feminists believe that women are

better off incarcerated than in sex work, adding to the prison industrial complex, other radical feminists reject carceral feminism (but support the Nordic Model instead).

More recently, many sex worker collectives in India and globally have been arguing for sex radicalism, and the possibility for sex workers to talk about enjoying the sexual services they provide, which has been controversial both for those viewing them only as victims, and those who are supportive of sex work but still only view them as workers alienated from their selves as they work.

Liberal, Marxist Frameworks on sex work

Liberal frameworks overestimate the freedom that migrant sex workers enjoy. Marxist feminist frameworks, for example, one that is offered by Katie Cruz (2018) question the liberal feminist paradigm of viewing sex work as inherently 'free' once extreme forms of violence like coercion, trafficking and exploitation are taken out of the equation. Currently, there are calls for a Marxist Feminist lens to view sex work, both 'free' and 'unfree' as exploitation that takes place in the reproductive continuum of capitalist structures. It is because of how sex workers are viewed in the public imagination that creates a culture of violence around them. Cruz calls to look at Sex Work as a political economy of activists, and workers advocating for freedom want to see the end of this fight against capitalist exploitation of reproductive labour that women are forced to undergo. For example, migrant sex workers don't actually have any sort of freedom, just the illusion of getting a fair wage for the labour they offer. In reality, through her study of migrant sex workers in London, she writes about how it is useful to understand that sex workers sell their labour power. Kotiswaran (2011a) similarly suggests a postcolonial materialist feminist understanding

of sexual (and reproductive) labour that contains a cultural appreciation of sexual commerce without ignoring feminist considerations of coercion and exploitation.

APPENDIX B: Democratically creating a network of sex workers – NNSW

The National Network of Sex Workers came together in 1997, during the first National Sex Workers' Conference in Kolkata. Sex worker collectives and CBOs from across the country (Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Karnataka, Maharashtra and West Bengal) came together to, for the first time, openly discuss sex and sexuality through the public conference[92]. These conversations led to a discussion on a network of collectives and individuals across the country working towards the common goal of emancipation and rights for sex workers (from solely working as peer support workers). From this conference, NNSW became an informal network of sex worker-led organisations and collectives with founding members: Uttara Karnataka Mahila Okkuta (UKMO), Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP), Me and My World, Vadamalar Federation, Saheli Sangh and the Karnataka Sex Workers' Union (KSWU). Kutch Mahila Vikas Sanghatan (KMVS) from the Kutch region in Gujarat and Srijan Foundation from Jharkhand joined later.

In 2011, there was a split in the network, leading to the formation of the All India Network of Sex Workers (AINSW) from The National Network of Sex Workers (NNSW). After the split, AINSW formally registered as an

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[92] A community Based Organisation (CBO) is defined as a grassroots-level initiative formed and operated by community members to address specific needs, emphasising participation, self-sufficiency and collective decision making. In most cases, community based organisations are supported by local NGOs, and state-led initiatives through which they can apply for funds and resources to lead the CBO.

organisation in 2011, while NNSW and its members remained an informal network. Today, the National Network of Sex Workers is ‘a network of sex worker-led organisations and allies committed to promoting the rights of sex workers in India’. The network consists of 12 CBOs/state-wise networks/collectives and 8 NGOs across seven states and has a strength of 1,50,000 members. NNSW was registered in 2020 in Bengaluru under the Societies Act. The network is managed by the NGOs in all states and has organisations and collectives based in Gujarat, Maharashtra, Jharkhand, Andhra Pradesh, Telangana Karnataka, Tamil Nadu, and Kerala, making it mostly a Western and South Indian Network.

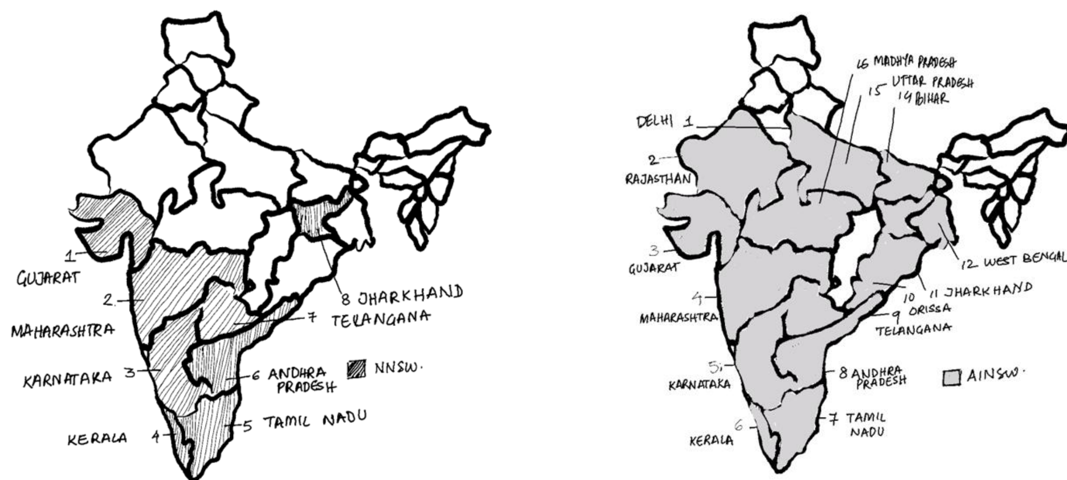

Figure 65: AINSW and NNSW: The two networks of sex workers’ collectives in India.

In the maps above, I’ve tried to look at what areas are worked in by AINSW and NNSW, but also what areas are shared. All areas that NNSW works in are shared by AINSW, but it may make more sense to look at this map district-wise where the collectives work. Collectives each work with only one of the two networks. This context is necessary to understand how the work of collectivisation and networks of collectives flow across the states and districts, and to situate who the network within this thesis are, and who it represents. I am cautious especially because some stories of sex work tend to try and represent all stories of sex work, and by adding detail,

and situating my interlocutors, fields and positions, I hope to offer clarity and specificity.

In 2015, NNSW was registered as a formal organisation in order to attain some 'structural legitimacy' as a network of sex workers' collectives. Madhu Bhushan, who was present at the meeting where members decided to formalise NNSW, notes in her report of the event, "some voiced the concern that registration could not happen unless the need and implications were as discussed threadbare by the sex worker communities who are part of NNSW since otherwise it would become an enforced process of belonging"[93]. This is vital to understand the dynamics of organising at the margin, that formalising a collective effort struck fear even after 21 years of work sensitising and working with communities[94]. I describe this fear in the section on visibilising the movement that furthers not only the standardisation of social movements, but also keeps them in control.

Electing a board of representatives, 'formally'

The call to register NNSW as a formal organisation began in 2015 when members started feeling that doing so would give the network some structural legitimacy and possibly, bargaining power as a 'legitimate institution' started and run by sex workers. This is in line with a core demand of sex workers organisations that sex work be recognised as decent work and be let to collectivise and unionise in order to create better working conditions as a labour force[95]. Sex worker collectives over the

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[93] Madhu Bhushan is an independent (re)searcher and activist-writer associated with the Indian Womens' Movement, Gamana Mahila Samuha, Vimochana Forum for Women and CIEDS collective.

[94] See Appendix B for details on election processes and NNSWs work/projects.

[95] See International Labour Organisation (ILO) articulations of sex work as decent work (Director General of the ILO, 1999, 2001) and responses by sex worker organisations and activists (Empower Foundation, 2016; NSWP, 2020b).

years have been able to provide a support system to sex workers to earn a living by providing sexual services without fear of abuse, stigma and discrimination.

NNSW held its first open board election from the 30th of April to the 3rd of May 2019 in Sangli, Maharashtra where collectives sent a nominee to represent the collective on the NNSW board. The election took place because the network needed to elect a board as part of its registration process along with writing bylaws. The board members would also be the first legal signatories on the registration document. The network's membership is limited to sex workers, sex work allies whose activism and advocacy work aligns with the larger movement, families and children of sex workers who want to be a part of a sex worker led network. The board membership position can only be occupied by sex workers or people who have been in sex work in some form.

Prior to the election, at meetings in Sangli, Bangalore and Madurai, documentation over the past 5 years was collected to ensure statutory compliance, discussions were held over how elections should be run, who should stand in the elections and responsibilities of both individuals and collectives to the newly formed network. Leadership roles were discussed, for example, should the first signatories of the registered entity still hold responsibilities after a fresh election is held? How should all states be represented on the board? The previous board then took these questions to their state collectives and organisations to discuss who they wanted representing them on the board. Supporting organisations had no say in these decisions. The member organisations unanimously decided to register NNSW in Bangalore with a minimum legal requirement of 7 members on the registered board and authorised a lawyer to start the

registration process. Four seats on the board were reserved for a trans person, a male sex worker, a member of a new organisation and a person living with HIV. Discussions also decided that the children of sex workers would be included in the voting member list, how much member organisations must pay and whether payment of fees is going to be a detail that makes joining NNSW inaccessible for members or what happens to members if a collective, network or CBO disbands. The Indian government does not allow any organisation to call itself 'National' without it being state-run. NNSW was named Nakshatra Network of Sex Workers (still abbreviated as NNSW and informally called NNSW). Registering the network also gave NNSW its secretariat.

As a registered organisation, the (new) task of drawing up the bylaws and sharing them with the entire network of organisations and collectives was a monumental one; the laws had to be written up, translated into all applicable languages for the community members to be able to understand them and comment on them, after which they were fed back for alterations. These consultations happened over online methods like chats, WhatsApp, and in-person meetings. All these changes shifted how NNSW had worked earlier and created new needs from its member organisations to be accountable and responsible for a nationwide network instead of only their state-run collectives. While they did work for and actively made the issues of each other their own issues, this now had to go on paper. The network created by the sex worker collectives still has ample wiggle room, because they already understood the problem. The process to see whether the network needed to be formally registered started taking concrete shape through multiple board meetings from December 2018 to March 2019 in Kozhikode, Bengaluru and Madurai.

These meetings were used for consensus building around the need to register NNSW, deciding the structure of the board, discussing the terms of the membership, voting rights and debates on how to make the network as inclusive and representative as possible. The meetings were also used to think about how the network would like to use their supporters (non sex worker allies to the cause). The process of bringing together such a multicultural, diverse group of people with language barriers who were previously only answerable to and functioning within individual CBOs, collectives and NGOs and their own styles seemed arduous. While most NGOs do not have any hand in the daily functioning of the collectives, collectives do learn the tricks of their trade from their parent NGOs. For example, even though Mithra, Muskan, Vidrohi Mahila Manch and Veshya Anyay Mukti Parishad (VAMP) are all part of SANGRAM, which is registered as an NGO, they run their daily affairs with separate meetings, and separate boards to make decisions. But since the collectives were created within SANGRAM, many of SANGRAM's principles where funds come from, usage of funds, and respectful working comes from the NGO's experience, and is reproduced with the collective. The collectives then slowly find their own niche, and negotiate their own manners of working or deadlines with problems – sometimes breaking away from the NGO's methods.

Through NNSW's time as an informal network, the supporting networks (run and led by allied organisations) usually took the work forward but registering the network meant that the power would shift to sex worker-run and led organisations. At the outset, this is a powerful shift for marginalised communities. It is also very complicated. Sex worker-led organisations have suffered from a gap in capacity building for various reasons: many sex workers from rural, low-income and marginalised caste locations were forming political bonds to enter leadership positions that

were not viable for a long term, secure career. Many lack a college education, and when they go to college, they would instead choose a job that earns them enough money for a livelihood (usually along with sex work). So while technically, it is powerful to have a sex worker led network, it is a slow, painful process to ensure that all members, collectives, NGOs and supporters are on the same page, and that power is shared (albeit unequally in the beginning).

By March 2019, the board started preparing their own agenda, analysing state-level problems, conducting press conferences and has become confident in holding public meetings in terms of financial knowledge, budgets, and logistics. NNSW prides itself on being the only network that brings together allies of sex workers along with sex worker-led organisations to create a singular voice forward towards collective emancipation, believing that the rights of sex workers across the gender spectrum, but especially on the fringes must be fought for, so that *all* womens' rights are fought for.

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