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Sovereign Silence: Immoral Trafficking (Prevention) Act and Sex Work in Sonagachhi

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Sapna Yadav remained stubbornly silent the entire morning. When she spoke later that afternoon, she changed her life story four times. I first met Sapna at Abinaash Clinic, while she was being presented before the Self-Regulatory Board of Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Samiti (henceforth, Durbar). Formed in 1995, Durbar is a grassroots sex workers' organization presently comprised of about 65,000 members. Durbar works in three interrelated areas: preventing HIV-AIDS, anti-trafficking of unwilling women and minors, and instituting sex work as legitimate labor. The Self Regulatory Board (henceforth, Board) was founded by Durbar in 1997, as a surveillance body comprised of sex workers and counselors, to combat trafficking. The Board is Durbar's effort to, first, express its anti-trafficking stance to the State and second, indicate the necessity of delinking trafficking from "prostitution", which are now conflated under the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act (ITPA).

Working as a quasi-legal¹ surveillance device alongside the state apparatus, usually the police, the Board, however, is not merely an appendage of the state. Nor is it solely an initiative to debunk state power. Rather, the Board occupies an ambivalent location: the replication of state power on one hand versus its emotional assurance to women new to the district—and/or the profession—based upon a sense of sisterhood amongst sex workers. Women who were presented before the Board often found the police-like interrogation by fellow sex workers very confounding since the border between the state and Durbar seemed internally rather than externally drawn. The relative newness of the Board as another checkpoint added to this conundrum. Despite intermittent attempts made by the Board members to commiserate with the new women during the interrogation process, it rarely mitigated the ambivalence, at least in the first few hours.

In this paper I will examine the relationship between the Board and those who come under its surveillance. I mainly focus on the nature of the response the Board evokes and its implications for anti-trafficking and sex work discourses. I argue that the ambivalence of the Board incites a curious sequential strategy among many new entrants: first, the women cling to

¹ I use quasi-legal to indicate that the Board members do not possess any formal legal training. Rather they learned about the ITPA through informal knowledge sharing in Durbar.

silence as long as feasible, and, second, when they finally speak, they offer incoherent biographical narratives. Though they are interconnected, for the purposes of this paper, I will concentrate on silence and analyze the incoherent biographical narratives elsewhere to continue this discussion.

It is tempting to interpret this silence as a sign of fear and vulnerability as the women confront the legal and quasi-legal forms of power and struggle with the ambivalence that weaves these forms together. However, to confine our understanding to vulnerability alone is to overlook the complex reality that underscores the silence. Subsequently, at a later time I asked the women who were cross-examined by the Board and had stayed to work in Sonagachhi after they were permitted about their silence. They emphasized the state-like nature of the Board and their attempt to resist legibility when their *only* option of livelihood was being threatened. Silence, in this context, was the best alternative since as they pointed out, “Whatever I say will go against me;” “Yes, I was brought in by my husband who pushed me into sex work but what could I do, give him up to the police?” “This (the Board) is a new thing, I have done this kind of work before secretly, it is not good for your prestige, why will I tell anyone?” “Weren’t some of the women who were asking me questions brought in by somebody else?” As they disclosed to me that they were acutely aware of the frustration this was causing the Board, some used an apologetic tone, while others did not. Some new entrants even admitted that they scarcely understood the word, “trafficking,” let alone its legal tentacles. This is not a matter of language alone since there is no term that can suitably translate “trafficking” into Bengali or Hindi and most women were also illiterate. Above all, they were dealing with a new set of legal vocabulary, which provoked a new set of resistance strategies. However, this paper is not about understanding the silence retrospectively. I am interested in capturing its politics in real time.

I contend that while women have continued to arrive in Sonagachhi for eras now, the nature of this silence – defiant and resolute – emerged alongside the anti-trafficking discourse and it denotes a unique engagement with the structures of surveillance. In calling this “engagement” resistance, I am ethnographically analyzing the silence as an indefinite *refusal of language*, that is, a refusal to engage. My aim here is to emphasize its persistent, anti-acoustic character. Though falling within the realm of gendered practice, the silence that I am referring to here is quite different from the portrayal of silence in feminist literature. Veena Das, for instance—in her analysis of the violence suffered by women during the Partition of India and Pakistan in 1947—posits that such silence refers to the “use of language that was general and metaphoric but that evaded specific description [...]” when asked to narrate their experiences (Das, 1997: 84). Certainly, Das’ analysis is a refusal to engage, but to refuse language *completely*

rather than simply evade a question is summarily different, as I show later. I characterize the silence of the sex worker as sovereign – one that first demarcates its space and then reigns in spite of the obscure legalese it confronts.

Scholars, especially anthropologists whose ideological and intellectual positions align with mine, that is, who employ the sex work paradigm (in relation to the abolitionist paradigm), have highlighted the strategies women embrace to survive in an environment that has long marginalized them. Susan Dewey and Patty Kelly's edited volume, *Policing Pleasure*, is one such powerful compilation where authors bring together ethnographic evidence from across the globe to argue that in order to frame policies we need to set aside the unexamined moral narrative underscoring commercial sex (Dewey and Kelly, 2011). They invite us to attend to the “diverse and multidimensional nature of sex work, moving well beyond previous binary debates about structure versus agency and exploitation versus liberation [...] [which] de-historicize, de-contextualize and homogenize sex work limiting our understanding of sexual labor and those who engage in it” (Dewey and Kelly, 2011: 3).

An earlier volume edited by Tiantian Zheng, *Sex Trafficking, Human Rights and Social Justice*, is another collection that recasts the meaning of sex work at the intersection of anti-trafficking, human rights and social justice discourses (Zheng, 2010). In depicting the lived experiences of those we have come to label as “trafficked”, Zheng's volume “[...] offers a critical reading of the competing definitions of trafficking and the complex ways in which the intertwined configurations of gender, race, ethnicity and nationality complicate the hegemonic discourse of trafficking” (Zheng, 2010:1). These works provide a new map to navigate sex work as a terrain that denies the moral binary of the good and the bad. Sapna's silence vis-à-vis the Board, as I see it, offers an opportunity to embrace this new direction of research. My aim in this essay is not merely to provide another ethnographic account of sex work; instead, I utilize silence as an audible tool to speak back to the legal and quasi-legal structures against which the women new to the district are held accountable.

This paper is based upon ethnographic work I conducted with the Self Regulatory Board in the summers of 2010, 2011 and 2012 as part of my ongoing research with Durbar. The ethnography was comprised of discussions with members of the Board, attending interrogation sessions and informally interviewing sex workers. I develop my arguments depicting a singular ethnographic vignette – Sapna's encounter with the Board—for two interrelated reasons: first, Sapna's experience is paradigmatic of women who arrive in the red light district to seek livelihood. Second, Sapna's silence was particularly unyielding compared to the other women. The paper is organized as follows: I begin by theoretically framing my argument based upon the

subaltern historiography proposed by Ranajit Guha and its subsequent elaboration by Gayatri Spivak in her seminal piece, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” where she discusses subalternity and representation as in relation to gender. I further discuss the ways anthropologists have woven subaltern theory with ethnographic work, both extending the theory beyond South Asia, as well as pointing to its limits in studying power dynamics.

Next I offer a brief overview of Durbar followed by a section that discusses the practices of the Board as it overlaps and deviates from those of the police. Here I also examine the conflicting feminist positions, especially stressing the Indian context since feminists heavily influence the ITPA. The next two sections offer the ethnographic details of the transaction between the Board and Sapna to support my argument that silence here is an act of resistance. In concluding the portion, I reiterate my own political commitment regarding the research, specifically highlighting how in academia one can be in a quandary when it comes to the question of the subaltern, especially underprivileged women, and how we come to represent them.

Subalternity and Sovereignty

Ranjit Guha’s subaltern framework and Gayatri Spivak’s subsequent extension to ask “Can the Subaltern Speak” are particularly relevant to my argument. Guha delineates the “subaltern” as “a name for the general attribute of subordination [...] whether this is expressed in terms of class, caste, age, gender and office or in any other way” (Guha and Spivak, 1988: 35). Guha argued that subaltern resistance “...was an autonomous domain for it neither originated from elite politics nor did its existence depend on the latter” (Guha and Spivak, 1988: 40). However, if we were to think of the “autonomous domain” ethnographically, we would neglect the discursive practices that organize the relation between the elite and the subaltern. For instance, Donald Moore in his analysis of the Kaerezi Resettlement Plan in Zimbabwe from the perspective of the farmers and the herders, critiques Guha’s formulation of the “autonomous domain” of subaltern resistance (Moore, 1998). Instead he argues that subalternity is relational and occurs in “multiple fields of power”. The negotiation of these multiple fields of power evolve from manifold relations – sex workers versus the Board who are sex workers themselves, new entrants versus the longtime residents of the red light district. It is in and through these negotiations that silence carves out its sovereign space as resistive agency. In this context, Saba Mahmood’s work on the women’s mosque movement in Egypt decenters the Western feminist discourse of agency (Mahmood, 2001). Instead, she suggests, “we think of agency not as a synonym for resistance to relations of domination, but as a capacity for action that historically

specific relations of subordination *enable*² and create” (Mahmood, 2001: 203). In my own work with women whose sex work position has often been dismissed as a lack of agency by the abolitionists, I am particularly keen on what is enabled by the forces of domination. Stated differently, what is it about the power of the Board –its practices and ideology –that empowers Sapna to resist? Does Sapna find her agency in exploiting the ambivalence of the Board, where the members are simultaneously scrutinizing and sympathizing with her?

Drawing on Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” I develop my arguments along the following lines. First, I contend that this silence is not necessarily the absence of language; instead it casts an uncanny gaze upon the hegemonic ‘audible’ language of trafficking and sex work. By language, I mean the metonymic associations through which one understands “normative”—good and bad—life trajectories. In this case, the normative is supplied by the *bhodrolok*, middle class Bengali woman who can be successively categorized as the daughter, wife and mother in an unruptured, coherent and totalizing sequence of belonging to one man after another. The relationship between the sex worker and the men in their lives, on the other hand, is tenuous and multiple. Similar to Spivak’s argument, the difference between belonging to and sacrificing one’s life for one man (as she discusses in the practice of *Sati* or widow self immolation), as opposed to earning a living through sexual engagement with many and sacrificing her life for none is critical (Spivak, 1988). Yet, it is fascinating, as I will argue, how the linguistic juxtaposition –*stree* (wife) vs. *beshya* (prostitute)- while being a constant reminder to the sex worker of their stigma as a *nosto meye* or “spoilt woman”, also offers the possibility of resistance through the refusal of language. Second, I extend the framework to argue that one way to understand the nature of this resistance is to understand the social vulnerability that impairs sex workers and their everyday lives. Finally, I explore the silence of the subaltern and its representability in academic discourse.

Durbar, Labor and Trafficking

Durbar is a grassroots sex workers’ organization formed in 1995 in Sonagachhi, Calcutta, the iconic red light district in the country. The founding of the organization has a serendipitous history. In 1992, under the supervision of the All India Institute of Hygiene and Public Health, sex workers in Sonagachhi were recruited as peer-educators to educate their fellow sex workers about condom use in the state sponsored STD/HIV Intervention Programme (SHIP). However, the peer educators soon realized that their marginalized social location was an insurmountable

² Emphasis mine

barrier to effectively implement the use of condoms. The need to organize arose from this sense of collective disenfranchisement. By 1999, Durbar took over the management of SHIP with an aim to own the grassroots initiative and form a collective identity of sex workers to demand workers' rights. It is interesting to note that in place of seeking social recognition, which is rather diffuse, Durbar emphasized the medical risk of HIV-AIDS as an impediment to work and livelihood and configured the movement to make labor rights its primary demand.

Importantly, for the question of labor to occupy a central place in the movement, it had to be delinked from trafficking. Before delving into Durbar's initiative in this delinking, let us first look at the legalese of trafficking in the 1956 Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, or the ITPA. Clause 5A of the ITPA explicates trafficking as: "Where any person recruits, transports, transfers, harbours (*sic*) or receives a person for the purposes of prostitution, such person shall, until the contrary is proved, be presumed to have recruited, transported, transferred, harboured or received the person with the intent that the person shall be used for the purpose of prostitution."³ Following this, Clause 2(f) states, "'prostitution' means the sexual exploitation or abuse of persons for commercial purposes or for consideration in money or in any other kind, and the expression 'prostitute' shall be construed accordingly."⁴ There is not only an absence of 'sex work' here but the Act rests on the "vulnerability" of the "victim" and does not allow for a space where agency can exist (Merry, 2007; Wilson, 2007).

Several policy revision to this Act were proposed by the Indian State after being downgraded from Tier 2 to the "Watch List" in the US "Trafficking in Persons" Country Report in 2006. On May 22, 2006, the then Minister for Women and Child Development, Renuka Choudhury, placed the ITPA Amendment Bill to the *Lok Sabha*. The Government of India swiftly proposed the aforementioned changes to the Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act (ITPA) and was subsequently elevated to Tier 2⁵. Imperial politics (of such Country Reports) aside, the anti-trafficking discourse in India evidently intersects with national and international stipulations. That year Durbar organized a march to the Parliament and successfully stemmed the Amendment on the following grounds: "Section no 4 would snatch away the sex-workers of theirs right to maintain and look after their children and relatives. The children, without being able to access educational privilege would fall short of becoming true citizens of the country and would go astray indulging in anti-social activities. Section no 5(C), 13.2 would evict the sex workers from their present dwelling places, it will also allow the police to torture them at their

³ [http://ncpcr.gov.in/Acts/Immoral_Traffic_Prevention_Act_\(ITPA\)_1956.pdf](http://ncpcr.gov.in/Acts/Immoral_Traffic_Prevention_Act_(ITPA)_1956.pdf). Accessed, Nov 6 2011

⁴ *ibid*

⁵ There is disagreement about the reasons why India was elevated to Tier 2.

free will.”⁶

Further, feminists in India are divided over the ITPA, which impact the Board. However, those who strongly oppose and demand the abolition of prostitution have unevenly influenced international and national state bodies and agencies. Somewhat risking dilution, the central tenets of the abolitionist position can be summarized as follows: first, prostitution is seen to reiterate and reinforce the power difference between men and women, second, prostitution is a paradigmatic instance of general violence against women, while also being its extreme form (Mackinnon, 1982; Barry, 1995; Balos and Fellows, 1999; Pateman, 1993; D’Cunha, 1997). The sex work advocates, put simply, critique the abolitionist attitude as Eurocentric and a failure to untangle the difference between forced prostitution and women’s agency (Kempadoo, 1998; O’Connell Davidson, 2005; Doezema, 1998). However, some scholars have constructively moved beyond the pro- and anti- sex work positions to attend to the complexity of sex work on the ground. For instance, Svati Shah argues that we cannot detach sex work from the flows of global capital (Shah, 2003). She points to a “double standard” where capital now moves freely across borders due to agreements like NAFTA but those who are displaced by such agreements such as agricultural laborers, are barred from such border crossings reducing their livelihood, mainly for women, to sex work (Shah, 2003). Several women I worked with migrated from villages fleeing the erasure of agriculture as a sustainable form of living. The material conditions of sex work, as Prabha Kotiswaran puts it – “the sex market” –presents a reality that does not align with the legal debate of pro and anti sex work positions (Kotiswaran, 2008). Kotiswaran contends that stakeholders, including the sex workers in Sonagachhi, are “differentially endowed by the rule network” and participate “in routine bargains...such that the outcome of their bargains cannot be determined a priori” by the law (Kotiswaran, 2008: 581). My exploration of the Board in the following section is an attempt in this direction: understanding lives in the interstices of the law.

The Board and the State

Durbar established the Self Regulatory Board in 1997. It was located in the red light district reasoning that sex workers are best positioned to identify a newcomer immediately. Also, as fellow sex workers they could laterally intervene to gain the confidence of the entrant to help determine whether she has been coerced into work⁷. The Board is modeled on a public-private partnership where 60% of the members are DMSC branch committee members and peer

⁶ http://www.durbar.org/html/protest_action.asp. Accessed, March 10, 2013

⁷ http://antitrafficking-durbar.org/srb_objective.html. Accessed, March 1, 2013

educators and the remaining 40% are drawn from the local intelligentsia and elected officials. However, I never met any members other than sex workers and a counselor, at the Board in Sonagachhi. Every morning around 10, the Board members individually or in groups of two, went around the district visiting houses assigned to them to check for new entrants. The several times I joined the members, it was obvious that these inspection trips were more collegial than investigative and often led to socializing amongst the women. Sometimes we just spoke to the *malkin*⁸, since the sex workers, especially if they were A-category (highest paid), were sleeping in after a long night of work or getting ready for the day. Though there is no legal contact that binds the *malkin* to the Board, the expectation is that she would present a new entrant to the Board voluntarily since this is a far safer way to pursue business in the district than to encounter the police. Around noon the members returned to the Abinaash Clinic, the community center, and filed a report based upon that day's activities.

Nevertheless, it was also apparent that not all *malkins* or sex workers cooperated with the Board, as in the case of Sapna. These days were different. The Board would convene in the morning immediately upon receiving news that a new woman or girl had been located the previous night. One of the members would go to the specific house and ask the *malkin* to hand over the girl/woman to the Board. Often this would lead to an altercation, but very few *malkins* contested the Board and would often try to mitigate the circumstance by meekly stating that, "She arrived very late at night" or "I would have brought her over this morning" which was seldom admitted as a credible reason. Often, the members narrated these transgressions as a demonstration of Durbar's anti-trafficking pledge to the state, its main interlocutor. In general, the Board has been very proactive in establishing working relationships with various state agencies, especially the police, who was their worst adversary in the pre-Durbar era⁹.

It is important to locate this emerging transaction within the still active memory of the horrific raids conducted regularly by the police. These raids, as the women often recalled, were intended to harass them and their clients, culminating in arrests, frequently followed by demands for free sexual services and bribes. The narratives further detailed the atrocities the women would have to face when sexual services and/or the bribes did not suffice. If for some obscure reason, the police deemed them trafficked and/or a minor, they would be banished to one of the state-run women's shelters, usually referred to as 'homes'. Some would be imprisoned where they would wait indefinitely for a court date for their *bhagya* (fate) to be decided and

⁸ The *malkin* is a critical link to the Board because most new entrants usually rent a room for their work and the half of her income goes to the *malkin* as rent.

⁹ Women, especially who were long-time residents of Sonagachhi, narrated the formation of Dubar as a watershed in their lives.

their legal representation in these cases was at best shoddy. If they were not indicted on criminal charges, they would be sent “home”, the place they were escaping from in the first place. Several women I knew were previously “rescued” and “sent home”, but they returned to Sonagachhi unable to bear the stigma that “stuck to me like glue” or being expelled by the family for “tarnishing their honor”. It was rather unsettling to note that the women could not unequivocally determine which was a better option, the prison or the “home”. Nonetheless, their narratives often ended with an optimistic remark on the humane practices of the Board aligned with the quandaries of sex work.

The Board, on the other hand, typically adheres to a legible structure in terms of its practices. It starts with interrogation of the new entrant, with the objective of determining if she was trafficked or coerced into sex work. The questioners sought to gather the name; age; where she arrived from; with whom; whether she is married; how many children, if any, she has; if she has engaged in sex work before; if she understands the specific hazards of the work, particularly related to health. The leading challenge, which often resulted in protracted silent sessions, was to determine the entrant’s willingness to work voluntarily or if she is being forced and if she was 18 years old, the legal age of consent. Seldom a clear answer emerged. To determine her age, the Board would schedule a bone scan with a local clinic with which it has formal arrangements; the results would be available usually within a day. During the interim period, the woman would wait at the “Short-Stay Home” run by Durbar, located a few streets away from Sonagachhi.

The other issue would be resolved by the woman signing a form designed and administered by Durbar that would indicate her willingness to join the profession voluntarily or by her confessing hours later that she was trafficked into sex work. In the latter case, the Board would contact her family members to pick her up or often members of the Board would themselves travel to return her to the family. However, the members categorically emphasized to me that they were themselves *prochondo sabdhan*, (extremely guarded) to conceal the fact from the family and community that the woman was rescued in the red light district to protect her honor. Some ways they explained the return were, “Well she had come to the city and got lost and we found her” or “Even we never identified ourselves as sex workers; we said, we are social workers who rescue lost women.” Those who did not want to join the profession and were also rejected by their families were relocated from the Short-Stay home to state run homes for battered women.

In all my time I spent with the Board in the interrogation process – at the Short-Stay Home, the bone scan clinic, the shelter for the battered women – I never encountered the police. This is not to propose that the police or the state is now irrelevant, far from it. Instead I want to

draw attention first to the shifting identity of the sex worker from a simple victim to a worker with some form of agency and second, to the shifting terrain of the red light district as a labor zone. The Board is instrumental in creating a space for sex work that is distinct from trafficking. The vision was to end the indiscriminate and inhuman practices that guided the police raids, which rather than addressing the issue of trafficking, were criminalizing sex work¹⁰. In embracing self-regulation (Self Regulatory Board), the Board also claimed a dual ethical space: from the state and for the sex workers. For the Board to be effective both in the realm of the state – to substitute the police raids – and the sex workers’ collective it replicates and resists state power simultaneously. In case of new comers, especially those who have been in police custody for trafficking, the Board resonates as another checkpoint that they have to clear. I have often observed women being reluctant about the bone scan and/or waiting at the Short Stay Home. To reiterate my main argument, to think of this reluctance merely as a response to fear is to miss the unyielding nature that plausibly arises from a persistent state of disenfranchisement.

Dismantling Silence

Sapna had arrived in Sonagachhi the day before I met her. Like others, when she stood outside her door that evening with garish make up on to attract customers, neighboring sex workers spotted her as a new face in the district. As per the rules, the neighbors contacted the members of the Board and Sapna was taken to Abinaash Clinic for questioning. The *malkin* acquiesced and tried to explain that she would have brought Sapna to the Board the “first thing in the morning”. The Board ignored the *malkin’s plea* and instead asked her to pay the standard Rupees 150 (approximately, 3US Dollars) to cover Sapna’s expense for the two days that she would stay in the Short-Stay home before a decision could be reached.

I reached Abinaash Clinic around 2PM that afternoon. After greeting the women on the first floor, I proceeded upstairs. The members of the Board, Purnima, Arati and Sikha all sat on the wicker mat that always lay spread in the center of the room. I found my spot on the far right corner that by some habitual programming remained unoccupied. The room was used as office space. However, considering that office spaces in India are generally fluid in nature, this space too often transformed into a space for impromptu social gatherings. Therefore, women who had little relation with the Board were often present and routinely participated in the discussions. A desk was reserved for Ravi, who worked as a data entry operator for Durbar, in the corner. He fielded jokes hurled at him by the women usually with a smile; he seldom spoke. The woman

¹⁰ Though the raids have not stopped altogether, they are definitely infrequent and are often conducted, as I have witnessed, on the behest of abolitionist groups working in the city.

who was being presented before the Board, sat on the chair at the table near the window. So did Sapna. She was dressed in a *salwar kameez*, with a *dupatta* that sometimes shifted to reveal the golden necklace around her neck. She wore gold earrings and a couple of gold bangles but had no makeup on except for the *bindi* on her forehead. It was difficult to tell her age, but it was clear from her face that she was exhausted. The strong afternoon sun was directly on her face, but she made no effort to move away. The sound of the ceiling fan above was the sole comfort of in the midst of this awkward silence.

Arati and Sikha lived in the same house and usually shared their lunch; they were serving dollops of rice and lentils from their tiffin boxes on the stainless steel plates before them. They brought fish curry, usually the high point of the meal, in a separate box and they placed it alongside the plate. They checked if everyone had lunch and when we confirmed, they proceeded with their meal and somehow the conversation gravitated towards recipes for fish, especially for *hilsa*, a Bengali delicacy available typically during the monsoon season. Sapna sat quietly through all these discussions. For a while the Board members seemed to forget her, when suddenly Purnima, usually referred to as Purnima-di to show deference towards her older age, intervened. She turned to me and said, “She has been quiet since the morning.” Then she sharply looked at Sapna and asked, “What is the matter with you? Why can’t you speak?”

The women were already exasperated at her silence, not because it was unique; rather, they were confronting a patterned behavior. “This is what happens every time, Didi knows” Arati said, referring to me as *Didi*. She continued, “They just don’t want to talk.” *Didi*, meaning elder sister, is how the women usually referred to me and I did the same in return. This was not based upon age, which was unknown to us, nor was it based upon any estimation. Instead, it was *intended* to cultivate a sense of sisterhood, that is, a lateral bond amongst the sex workers themselves and also women like me who were with Durbar in varying capacities such as researchers, office workers etc. However, despite my ongoing involvement with the women and my deep desire to establish seamless connection with them, in my case the sisterhood was limited by my *bhodrolok* (educated middle class) status where the women routinely felt anxious, for example, when I sat on the floor with them; they always offered me a chair, which would symbolically elevate my social status. Even in this instance, in pointing out ‘Didi knows’, Arati enlisted my perceived authority to protect the interrogation process.

The transaction between the social hierarchy and a desire for lateral collation had ramification for the ethnographic process where I reluctantly occupied a place simultaneously inside and outside the sisterhood: outside, my words were unquestionably respected and trusted. Having witnessed several interrogation processes by then, I nodded in agreement to

Arati's comments above. Purnimadi was now looking elsewhere impatiently; she had sent Sikha downstairs to talk to the counselor, Parvati, who is the non-sex worker member of the Board, to see if she has knowledge of whether Sapna was presented before the Board, in another red light district in the city. This was because a neighboring sex worker seemed to have recognized Sapna from Khidderpore, a different district, the previous night.

The complex relation between language, or the lack thereof, and gender has been analyzed by scholars who specifically focused on the subalternity of women in a patriarchal society. In "Can the Subaltern Speak" Spivak clearly is not implying that the subaltern cannot speak, but that, when she does, her words cannot be "heard" because we are not linguistically equipped to recognize them as resistant speech (Spivak, 1988). Further, following Donald Moore's suggestion that subalternity is formed relationally, I would like to modify the question to ask, can the subaltern speak to the ambiguous power that has sequestered her? What is at stake for the speech act in this context? For instance, in the room, Sapna identifies many like her, but they are also *unlike* her- as representatives of the Board, they replicate the authority of the state. Perhaps Sapna knew, like many other women before and after her, that her narrative, though shared by the other women, could not be heard the way she would have intended and would have to be filtered through the legal framework that structures anti-trafficking initiatives. Is it also plausible that the sex workers who are now endowed with the work of surveillance do hear Sapna because her story resonates with theirs, but cannot accept her agency because it contradicts the anti- trafficking narrative?

Subalternity in this context is therefore constituted in 'multiple fields of power' (Moore, 1998). It is surely a hierarchy, say between Sapna and the members of the Board, but the lateral dimension is inescapable when the women finally come together as sex workers sharing their life stories, which have a deadening monotony to them. It is also important to mention here that sex workers who decided to join the Board also do this for financial reasons. For instance, Purnimadi, who herself acknowledges that she is passed her sexual prime, needs the paltry but steady income to sustain herself. Arati and Sikha, who are relatively active in their profession, nonetheless alluded to the fact that the salary they receive from Durbar for their work with the Board is an income source they rely upon for some of their everyday needs. Yet, every woman in the room privately acknowledged to me that the Board creates an uncertain space, which makes it difficult for women like Sapna to feel that they otherwise belong together.

The prospect that every utterance, mainly for innumerable women who have indeed been trafficked but have no way to return home, could be detrimental to the last hope of earning a livelihood means a heightened recurrence of silence. At times the situation is far more complex.

Several women engage in sex work primarily to appease the demands of a man in their lives, be it the father, brother, husband, lover or sometimes the trafficker disguised as the lover, in hope of obtaining male protection in a patriarchal society. However, what is nonetheless unique, as sex workers themselves recognized, is the intensification of silence as practice after anti-trafficking became a delicate juridical issue. Drawing upon Spivak, I argue that the current anti-trafficking narrative is the continuation of a discourse that frames the subaltern subject, especially women, as the subject of imperial power. Spivak examines *sati*, the practice of widow burning following the death of the husband, which was legally banned by the colonial government in 1829. She argues that, "...the protection of the woman (today the 'third world woman') becomes a signifier for the establishment of a *good* [sic] society which must, at such inaugurative moments, transgress mere legality or equity of legal policy...imperialism's image as the establisher of the good society is marked by the espousal of the woman as the *object* [sic] of protection from her own kind" (Spivak, 1988: 298-299). The abolition of *sati*, which Spivak notes was transcribed by the British colonial administration, as *suttee*, was on one hand symptomatic of the "white man saving the brown woman from the brown man" while on the other the traditionalists argued, "The women actually wanted to die" (Spivak, 1988: 297). Either way, the woman is present only as an absence: one who can be spoken for or about but cannot speak.

"There is no difference"

Parvati came upstairs after confirming with Board members in the Khidderpore red light district over the phone that Sapna was never presented there and this is indeed her first time meeting the Board. In the local parlance, the act of locating and presenting a newcomer to the Board is termed *tola*, meaning, 'lift', so as to lend visibility. So there was one confirmation, but it soon led to two questions: whether Sapna was using her 'real' name this time, and second, if she was, how could she have escaped the attention of the Board in Khidderpore where she was spotted earlier (which Durbar considers very effective in identifying new entrants)? Purnima-di posed both these questions rhetorically to Sapna, mainly to vent her own frustration. But this time, Sapna responded. Everybody looked at her intently, but it was only a faint mutter, and one could not even decipher what language she spoke in, let alone what she said. We all strained our necks; she mumbled again but with no avail. Purnimadi, mustering her authority, commanded Sapna to speak loudly and clearly and also in Bengali. Then she paused for a minute to check if Sapna was indeed a Bengali or if she knew the language. I was sitting relatively close to Sapna on the mat and from the few words I could capture I guessed she was speaking in Hindi. I leaned

forward to Purnimadi and told her that Sapna probably spoke in Hindi and possibly does not know Bengali and/or she is not a Bengali. I was not very confident about her linguistic abilities since in the past some women also *pretended* not to know Bengali.

At this Purnimadi, using the basic Hindi she had gathered from watching Bollywood films, asked, “Tumhara naam kya hai?” (What is your name?). Sapna responded with a low voice, “Sapna”. “Is this your real name?” Arati was immediately suspicious. Sapna merely nodded in affirmation. Sex workers often told me that most had changed their formal name once they joined the profession. For many, this move arises out of a pragmatic need to protect their identity. However, identity itself, from what I gathered through our conversations, is a curious amalgam of the formal and the informal. The formal identity, that is say, one bestowed by the state, say, by means of a birth certificate, is non-existent for many, considering that they were either born at home or in a public hospital, which maintain minimal records of birth and death. The want of a formal identity in effect makes their malleable and moveable as the women travel from one red light district to another, taking up a new name almost every time. Therefore, soon the members of the Board realized after a brief argument that whether Sapna was “really” Sapna or not, is not a subject worth pursuing. It is a predicament many of them shared.

The next question, about her escaping the attention of the Board in the other red light district, also seemed moot. Arati, Sikha and Purnima-di all have had similar biographical trajectories, electing different names but inhabiting the same subjectivity once they embarked upon their journeys. “There is no difference” quipped Arati, “between her life and most of us.” Arati’s comment inaugurated that moment of mutual recognition, which happens on a regular basis once the Board fades away and the sex workers’ collective emerges to embrace the new women in their sisterhood. This process was not unknown to any; it was a matter of time before Sapna’s unyielding silence and her eventual mumble brought it to completion. Purnima-di turned to Sapna and with an incredibly tender voice, unheard till then, said, “We are like your elder sisters; we are here to help you. So don’t be afraid.” Arati and Sikha chimed in.

Next Purnima-di turned to me, “Didi, why don’t you tell her that we will not hand her over to the police?” Others agreed. This was another instance when my *bhadralok* location outside the sisterhood mattered since my voice was deemed to have more authority than theirs. Again, despite my opposition to this superiority I supposedly carried, when I assured the newcomers the last few times, they did speak. Therefore I was routinely called upon to comfort her and urge her to speak. Simultaneously, I was never able to decline the request for help or successfully explain to anybody my resistance to class hierarchies. The entrenched social

structures that have marginalized the women for decades crept in and my remonstrations were minor and rather futile.

I moved a little closer to Sapna and said, “Yes, we all are your sisters and friends”. Then referring to Purnima-di, Sikha and Arati, I wanted to assure her, that, “Though they are part of the Board, they all understand your fears.” Sapna made eye contact with me, which she had mostly avoided with the Board members. Her engaging gaze and a slight nod conveyed to the group that she felt assured by my words and was now at a place where she could connect. The sisterhood, to recall Moore, is formed relationally by the subaltern collective rather than existing as an autonomous domain. Moreover, the relational aspect, as we can see, is also strengthened by my presence inside/outside the collective. Finally after five hours of complete silence, Sapna spoke but it resolved very little in terms of determining whether she was trafficked or not. Without going into the details of the conversation that followed, what is important in terms of my argument here is to map the course sex workers like Sapna and others traverse before they can or are willing to talk about their lives.

Conclusion

I never met Sapna again. I came to know that her bone scan revealed that she was about 20 years old and the Board allowed her to work. However, she left Sonagachhi for “some other red light district”. Perhaps. Nonetheless, her departure is significant; it says something about the intersectionality of the Board located ambivalently between the sex workers’ collective and the state. My intention throughout this article is not simply to uphold the ethnographic particularities of Sapna’s life or the quandaries of the Board. Instead, I propose to reinforce the idea that these putatively “disrupted” lives are constitutive and fundamental for us to think about the limits the hegemonic language of the anti-trafficking narrative. Such ethnographic interventions offer the opportunity to extend our understanding of subalternity and the agency of the subaltern that is distinct and contingent at the same time. As I see it, such silences are not the absence of language but as Spivak has suggested, it signals the impossibility of speech given where one is located in the social hierarchy. On the other hand to refuse to speak is also a refusal to engage linguistically. It signals that the awareness most women like Sapna have, that their words will be evacuated of truth and meaning even if they spoke. The pursuit of who Sapna is, as I showed above is itself quite an inane effort since most of the women have been trafficked but cannot divulge that for legal consequences. Therefore they embrace silence expecting to avoid the trafficking legalese. The effort is undoubtedly transient because all the cases that I have

witnessed were resolved but it does offer the women a temporal space to negotiate power on their own terms.

Before I end, I would like to draw attention to one issue that I face regularly since I embarked upon this research, which alludes to my representational task as a researcher. I am questioned if I am supporting “prostitution” and the exploitation and subjugation of women through my work with Durbar? When our politics as individual researchers, especially in relation to feminism, does not align with our analytic framework, then the work is suspect or as Mahmood phrases it is a, “suspension of political judgment, if not an outright “embracing” of a whole set of practices that are injurious to women” (Mahmood. 2001: 223). Mahmood evokes Marilyn Strathern’s piece in *Signs* titled, ‘An Awkward Relationship: The Case of Feminism and Anthropology’, where Strathern describes the relationship between the two as ‘neighbors’ in tension’, an awkward relations which is more about ‘door step hesitation rather than barricades. Each in a sense mocks the other, because each so nearly achieves what the other aims for as an ideal relation with the world’ (Strathern, 1997). In my case considering that I am also using the subaltern framework, this has an added layer: am I reinforcing the subalternity of women?

I am perfectly aware that throughout this article though my politics may have come across as sympathetic to the sex work position, I have not articulated it clearly. I have done this on purpose. As much as I am keen on representation, I am also conscious of its politics and what certain political commitments may mean in this regard. What I intended to do is a portrayal of the lived experiences of the women I came to know, especially their everyday struggles as they encounter a hegemonic discourse, larger than their lives. ‘Trafficking’ is a word that has descended upon their lives and means of livelihood and the resistance strategies they embrace to fend it yield very little in terms of changing their lives. To inhabit that place of destruction and transform it into one’s home is not a “happy” story of fortitude. For lives that are already on a continuum of deprivation, language and the refusal to engage with it is, maybe, a desperate gesture to cling to the last bit of human agency.

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