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Website- www.aarf.asia, **Email** : editoraarf@gmail.com

THE EVERYDAYNESS OF SEX WORK, LABOUR AND URBAN PRECARITY

By Sheetal Bhopal[1]

Abstract

This review essay critically engages with Svati P. Shah's "Street Corner Secrets: Sex Work and Migration in the City of Mumbai." Despite being published in 2014, the book remains relevant as it provides significant insights into understanding the everyday realities of sex work, labour and urban precarity. The essay situates Shah's work within the context of the feminist debates on prostitution, particularly the tensions between abolitionist and sex work perspectives. It then examines the author's position vis-à-vis sex work, which analyses the issue through the conceptual frame of migration across three urban sites, namely, *naka*, street and brothels. The essay concludes with a discussion on limitations and possibilities, simultaneously affirming its importance in the contemporary debates on informal labour, gendered survival, and urban precarity.

Keywords: Sex Work, Precarity, Migration, Prostitution, Informal labour.

Street Corner Secrets: Sex, Work and Migration in the City of Mumbai by Svati P. Shah (Duke University Press, 2014).

This review essay places Svati P. Shah's book, "Street Corner Secrets: Sex, Work and Migration in the City of Mumbai" (2014), within the context of feminist discussions about prostitution, labour and choice. It emphasises the book's distinctive contribution to reinterpreting sex work by focusing on the everyday survival strategies within urban informal economies. Instead of viewing sex work as a morally questionable activity, Shah's ethnography encourages us to reconsider our analytical frameworks. It positions sexual commerce alongside other forms of precarious labour that significantly impact the lives of urban migrants who earn

[1] The author is a doctoral research scholar at the Centre for Political Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

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paltry incomes. In doing so, the book challenges polarised feminist positions between abolitionist and sex-work paradigms and opens up an alternative space to understand sex work as embedded within broader political and economic processes of migration, informalisation and gendered labour.

This essay reads Shah's work not merely as an ethnography of sex work in Mumbai, but as a critical contribution to scholarship on urban precarity, informal labour and feminist political economy in contemporary India. The essay proceeds in three parts. First, it briefly outlines dominant feminist perspectives on prostitution in India to set the conceptual background against which Shah intervenes. Second, it analyses Shah's main arguments, methodological choices and ethnographic contributions, with particular attention to space, migration and everyday survival. Finally, the essay provides a critical assessment of the book's limitations, particularly in relation to intersectionality, household relations, and changing forms of sex work within neoliberal political economy, while reaffirming its ongoing relevance to contemporary debates on informal labour and urban precarity.

Feminist Debates on Sex Work: Framing the Field

Women across societies have historically been subject to structural forms of marginalisation. This is more so with stigmatised populations like female sex workers. The theoretical understanding of prostitution and sex workers is much debated among feminists. Feminist position on sex work ranges from exploitation to occupational freedom. While radical feminists (see Mackinnon 1982; Pateman 1988, 1989) see sex work as the commodification of a woman's sexuality, a way to subvert a woman under patriarchy's annals, sex radicals, on the other hand, recognise sex work as a form of labour. According to this view, women aren't mere objects, but subjects too. Both the state and society should recognise the rights of sex workers as labourers. They must ensure their human rights, such as decent working conditions and freedom of movement (Sutherland, 2004). The contradictory positions can be summarised as the structuralist/abolitionist approach and the individualist/sex work approach, respectively (Kotiswaran, 2008, p. 581). Understanding these two paradigms is significant as they influence not only scholarship but also NGO interventions and state responses to prostitution in India.

Geetanjali Gangoli (2008) traces the trends in feminism on the issue of prostitution and sex work in India. She recognises three predominant positions - silence, hurt and violence, and potential choice and liberation. She says that these perspectives are limited and "may well feed

into mainstream patriarchal views on prostitution." The feminist movement in India began in the 1970s. Amongst the several issues highlighted, the feminists were ambivalent and silent towards issues of sexuality outside heterosexual monogamous marriages. The radical feminists' position that followed regards prostitution as a form of violence and a result of patriarchy without considering the nuances of a woman's choice. Prostitution and trafficking are conflated. The women are infantilised and "seen as undifferentiated and permanent victims." The choice is constructed as a form of false consciousness (Gangoli, 2008, pp. 21-39). This conflation is visible in campaigns that treat all sex workers as “rescued” or “trafficked” women, regardless of their stated preferences.

Further, these perspectives are bereft of the lived experience of prostitutes. Sex workers organisations such as Darbar Mahila Samanvay Committee (DMSC) emphasise that sex work can be a socio-economic choice, a survival strategy like any other profession available in the constrained political economy of the third world. Thus, prostitution, according to the third perspective, is an occupation and not a moral category. Therefore, the use of the term "sex work". However, the suggestion by some advocates that sex workers meet the social need of taking care of the uncontrollable sexuality of men, who would otherwise unleash violence in public and rape women around, feeds into patriarchy by seeing sex work as a "necessary evil” (ibid.).

Rethinking Sex Work through Everyday Labour

In the context of this debate between two extreme views, Svati P. Shah’s book offers a fresh understanding of the phenomenon of sex work. Shah distances herself from such justificatory or moralising narratives, instead emphasising women’s strategies and negotiations for survival. Though published in 2014, the book still remains relevant for understanding the everydayness and lived realities of people associated with sex work. “*Street Corner Secrets* interrogates the ways in which sexual commerce and day wage labor are produced as mutually exclusive, and even incommensurate, categories of analysis in scholarship on prostitution, and in scholarship on informal economies” (Shah, 2014, p. 3). The analytical division, as discussed before, often obscures how sexual commerce itself is embedded within informal labour regimes, which in this case recentres an overlooked grounding.

Shah employs a Marxian framework where sex work is seen as a survival strategy to negotiate the everyday challenges of precarious living. She offers a thick ethnographic account

through an immersive experience of the field. The work is situated in the city of Mumbai. Shah explores the narratives of female sex workers across three sites, namely, *nakas*, streets and brothels. Rather than imposing an outside view on a population grappling with daily issues, the author puts forward the "complexities of life-as-lived" (Shah, 2014, p. 37). This has been made possible through a participant observation method based on critical ethnography, archival research and discourse analysis as major modes of inquiry. It gives the reader a sense of the whole through the description of individual narratives, thereby introducing us into the cosmology of female sex workers. Specifying that Shah's fieldwork spanned several years in Mumbai's informal labour hubs adds temporal depth to this methodological description.

The researcher explores the sites where sex work is offered. She shows how space is not devoid of meanings. Rather it is produced through a variety of interactions. Silence as much as speech plays an equally important role in this constitution of space. Silence in this way becomes a part of speech, which the researcher interprets in the field. Each site picked up by the researcher has varying degrees of visibility. *Naka*, where labourers sell their day labour becomes a space to negotiate the illicit and the illegible through hidden meanings. Street, on the other hand, is more visible. Brothels exist as geographical outliers in the city, offering a spectacle. The narratives in these three sites are knit through the conceptual frame of migration occurring in an informal space.

Migration in this case is fuelled by marginality. Women residing in rural areas are burdened with poverty and landlessness. Many of them come from the hinterlands of Maharashtra, Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, facing mundane problems like shortage of water and droughts. They have mostly worked as agricultural labourers with meagre wages. Most of them either belong to the Scheduled Caste or the Scheduled Tribe category. The movement towards the city is led by a desire for better means of livelihood. Many of them have had prior experience of work. For instance, *naka*-based sex workers also work as construction labourers. Even street and brothel-based sex workers have worked at *nakas* at some point in time. Their incomes act as remittances for running households back in villages, where these working women signify an aspirational lifestyle among others in the village. Therefore, we can see that "sexual commerce is at the end of a linear trajectory of livelihood strategies for workers" (Shah, 2014, p. 192).

Overemphasis on a sex worker's identity as somebody promiscuous, who sells her body for money on her own or as somebody who has been sold into the sex trade forcibly, has led to

the marginalisation of her identity as a survivor of domestic abuse, divorcee, migrant, parent, breadwinner, and labourer, and somebody more. The negotiating space created to survive is lost in the clamour of helplessness, thereby silencing voices and denying rights. Shah breaks these usual idiosyncrasies associated with sex work by looking into the everydayness of sex work. In her narratives, the mundane takes over the exceptional, thereby adding depth to our understanding of the lives of sex workers, where choosing sex work is not an extraordinary event, but a strategy to negotiate the ordinary. In the researcher's words,

> *"Taken together, the discourse of sexual commerce in all of these spaces suggest that sexual commerce exists on a continuum of income-generating options for low-income urban migrants and that, rather than delineating the parameters of "choice" and "force", these options are part of a broader set of negotiations that people living in poverty engage and manage in everyday life"* (Shah, 2014, p. 112).

This argument aligns with scholarship on informal labour, suggesting that sexual commerce is structurally similar to other precarious forms of gendered labour.

Limitations and Possibilities: A Critical Appraisal

However, though Shah offers a vivid account of a female sex worker's life operating in a constrained political economy, it in some ways falls short of looking into how social institutions, structures and processes exclude women through "subordinate inclusion". Then negotiating survival does not remain a question of earning a livelihood alone. It produces marginality across domains of life, which in turn constrains life choices and capabilities. The question of identity is as much integral to the production of marginalisation. Sex workers lie at the intersection of class, caste and gender, which produces an accumulative burden. At the same time, sex work falls in the arena of constrained choices that women have to live a better life. Therefore, sex work is part of the production of marginalisation, and also an attempt to address that marginalisation. While Shah does hint at intersectional marginalities, an explicit engagement with intersectionality theory could have strengthened this analysis.

Also, though the book talks about the social gaze towards sex workers, their location is not clear with respect to other actors immediately associated with them like their family members. Such an understanding is essential to understand the power relations within the household that produce marginalities leading to sex work. The work is limited to the lowest rung of sex workers. Therefore, the question of the transformation of sex work with the

changing political economy and the corresponding status of sex workers as in the case of escorts remains unanswered. Nonetheless, Shah's ideas make a significant contribution to the understanding of sex work, as they challenge the polarised understanding that marks the field by describing how "migration and sex work are options for survival in a highly constrained field of possibilities" (Shah, 2014, p. 31). Therefore, their relevance remains strong in contemporary debates on informal labour and urban precarity.

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