



Street Corner Secrets. Sex, Work, and Migration in the City of Mumbai

written by Nirmala Jayaraman

August, 2015

Albertin Sarrazin once wrote, “whether you’re on the lam or whether you’re out hustling, gold is worth nothing compared to silence” (p.149). Those marginalised into prostitution are exploited for their sex and for their voiceless existence. Anthropologists and public health researchers are compelled to give their informants a voice as part of their overall goal to help the most vulnerable populations. Svati P. Shah’s ethnography, [*Street Corner Secrets: Sex, Work, and Migration in the City of Mumbai*](#), is an attempt to address this silence surrounding the subjugation of sex workers among civilians. Shah’s effort to construct a larger discourse for HIV/AIDS prevention relates to her concerns about representations of sex and gender. Her argument, that silence can prevent us from asking more questions about a disenfranchised people, is what makes her book worth reading.

Her findings contribute to a deeper understanding behind the complexity and structural violence of sex workers’ lives. By giving voice to the voiceless, her ethnography can inform us on how to refine a methodology for culturally sensitive research.

While Shah makes it clear that people across the gender spectrum are impacted by the sex-commerce industry, her particular ethnography focuses on the lives of women migrating for work in urban spaces (p.15). She interviews sex workers who find employment with construction companies, and sometimes use sex itself as a way of securing a job in sectors that are not directly linked to sexual commerce (p.26). These migrant workers seek out day wage labour for



employment at the “naka” or site for construction work (p.32).

Shah does not assert that she knows all of the answers to lessen the dangers faced by migrant workers. She is advocating for arguments that have more developed questions. The best parts of her book evoke our thinking. We are able to delve further into the economic vulnerability within the same demographic, “What could a critical examination of sexual commerce reveal about the politics of day wage labor?” (p.13). We can open up another dialogue by asking, “What does it mean to pursue multiple il/legitimate activities within a space that renders impoverished laborers visible en masse. . .?” (p.79). The different ways of accumulating income are part of a larger “complex matrix of negotiations for economic survival” (p.27).

Most of Shah’s informants will intimate where sex workers are located in the city without actually defining what their work entails (p.85). She writes, “...episodic sex work and sex trade – offers a clear explanation for how the income gap left by construction work was filled. Nonetheless, it would be misleading to claim that this was the primary means by which the gap was addressed.” (p.107). Shah does not suggest that we try to fill up the silences. Instead we can use silence as qualitative information to help us imagine what risks are taken by those turning to sex work to create a part of their income (p.110). She writes, “the silences surrounding sex work at the naka are necessarily rich, laden with innuendo, and coded for those who can hear.” (p.110). She further states, “If silences are speech acts. . . the questions of unspeakability and of secrets remain” (p.111). Shah espouses that it is possible to analyse these silences in the context of a legal framework (p.111). However, having a holistic approach that addresses the living conditions of her informants as members of their families and communities is just as important (p.111).

Many of her informants remain invisible, having lost support from community members to even help them leave dangerous situations in both street and brothel based sex work.



From their perspective, the pressures to still provide for their families outweigh the cost of engaging in unsafe practices (p.121). For example, sex workers are routinely coerced into having unsafe sex with clients who refuse to use condoms (p.125). Challenging our assumptions about what questions to ask, Shah reminds researchers not to ignore “questions about housing, migration, and livelihood” (p.163).



Photo by Daniel Littlewood (flickr, CC BY-NC 2.0)

One informant reveals that gender bias is still a problem faced by women seeking employment, stating, “What’s the point of trying to work like this and protect my honor, when no one thinks I have honor anyway?” (p.167). The question of honour, or “izzat” (p.84) harkens back to an earlier argument regarding gendered labour. Anthropologists, such as Sally Cole, would agree with Shah’s concerns about the gendered framework of “Honor and Shame” (Cole 1991, p.77). In the 1960’s, anthropologists used the “code of Honor and Shame” to study gender across cultures (Cole 1991, p.77). This analogy stipulates that women are associated with shame as men are associated with honour; labour is divided where women are delegated to practices that are not honorable (Cole 1991, p.79).

Cole writes that “Women were victims of their sexuality not only in the honor-and-shame conceptualization of local gender systems, but also in ethnographic writing that generally saw women through their reproductive roles as wives and mothers and neglected their roles in economic production” (Cole 1991, p.78). Like Cole, Shah urges her colleagues to revise how they interpret the way communities organise and control members within their culture. Shah’s observations present a dilemma of how the framing of Honour/Shame is both useful and not entirely accurate. Contemporary anthropology shows us that there is a spectrum of gender identity rather than a two-gendered dichotomy constructed across all cultures (p.156). Consider how men who identify as LGBTQ might find themselves with little representation on either side of the divide (p.156). Is it time to



reevaluate the dichotomy of Honour/Shame when writing about labour and gender? For now, Shah has committed to asking more nuanced questions.

References

Cole, Sally. 1991. *Women of the Praia: Work and Lives in a Portuguese Coastal Community*. Princeton University Press.

Sarrazin, Albertine. 2013. *Astragal*. New Directions Books.

Shah, Svati P. 2014. [Street Corner Secrets: Sex, Work, and Migration in the City of Mumbai](#). Durham: Duke University Press. 280 pp. Pb: \$24.95. ISBN: 9780822356981.