

Kinship and Trafficking

The Case of the Bedia Community

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Il est question dans cet article du lien entre le travail du sexe et de la prostitution en India. Alors qu'on assure que les prostituées sont vendues sans le consentement de leur famille, le cas de la communauté Bedia montre comment l'économie de ces familles est liée au commerce du sexe. L'auteure souhaite que le trafic des femmes en vue de la prostitution soit réexaminé à la lumière du rôle que jouent les familles et la parenté.

How significant is the role of family and kinship ties to a woman's entry into the sex trade? Is trafficking of women to this end largely the handiwork of unscrupulous third parties unknown to the women and their families? Are the latter generally unwilling and unwitting victims? Or does the kinship network of women have a more prominent role in this respect than is generally acknowledged?

In the Indian context, if not the south and south-east Asian region as a whole, there is a need to examine critically the role relatives and families play in women's engagement in sex work. In this article, I will argue that policy makers, researchers and NGOs working in this area maintain a studied blindness towards the possibility that the family is often at the bottom of women's entry into sex work.¹ While the role of the family in women's well-being or otherwise is both culturally accepted and well documented by feminist scholars,² the idea that a large mass of women can enter the sex trade while their families remain innocent bystanders has not been seriously questioned.³

Some critics argue that a dysfunctional or pathological family back-

ground figures as the culprit behind women's entry in the trade. For instance, Chakraborty insists that in

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the second half of the nineteenth century, in Bengal, "women who could not be contained within the folds of social discipline" were attracted to prostitution (24); Tarachand (1991) believes that the broken homes and familial violence contribute to women's entry into prostitution as *devadasis*⁴ in rural south India; according to Shalini and Lalitha, 60 per cent of the women in the sex trade in Delhi's G. B. Road experience their families as disturbed as a direct consequence of their profession (29) and Chaukar suggests that women with troubled family backgrounds who are either in grave financial need or lack "parental supervision" enter the trade (20).

Marginalizing the role of the family, the prevalent views on the matter in India have categorized women in

prostitution into several categories of which two important ones are: (a) women and children who are tricked and lured into the trade forcefully and against their will and (b) women who belong to communities and groups whose practices predispose them to enter the trade (see, for example, Mukherjee; Shalini and Lalitha). Several "denotified communities"⁵ such as Bédias, Kanjars, Bancharas and Nats, who observe the *devadasi* custom, and some of the lower castes of the Himalayan region in northern India are prominent among the latter.

What is often ignored is that the family and kinship ties have a significant role to play in both of these contexts. While it is usual to blame the traditions of these particular groups (see, for instance, Banerjee), a closer look reveals the relationship between these practices and the familial economy. In the Himalayan region, the low-caste husband of the Kolta woman sends her into prostitution in order to pay off the debt he incurs in order to acquire her through the payment of a bride price. On some occasions he uses this means to pay off debts incurred on other accounts as well (Majumdar; Mukherjee and Mukherjee; Gupta, R.; Gupta J.). In southern India, those who are dedicated as *devadasis* are known to belong to poor lower-caste communities. The decision to dedicate a young woman or girl almost always rests with her family and her entry into prostitution is to some degree socially sanctioned (Joint Women's Program Study Team; Omvedt; UNICEF). The girls who are dedicated have often not even reached puberty (Joint Women's Program

Study Team; Omvedt; UNICEF). Women belonging to the so-called "denotified" communities of northern India also constitute a significant proportion of women engaged in the sex trade in several big cities of India⁶ and even outside India. Women of Bedia community, who are among the most prominent of the groups to traffic their women into prostitution, are believed to travel up to Gulf countries as sex workers often in the guise of "dancers" (see Ramsanehi).⁷ Not surprisingly, the families of these women are the main beneficiaries of these women's economic gains from such tours.

In this paper, I explore some more facts the intimate relationship between the Bedia practice of prostitution and their familial economy based on my intensive study of one hamlet of the community in Rajasthan. The fieldwork for this doctoral study was conducted during the years 1998-2002. I spent six months doing intensive research in one hamlet of the Bedias and in addition made a number of trips during this period to many villages and settlements in which the Bedia community resides in several regions encompassing the states of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan in northern India. The primary method of data collection was observation and prolonged unstructured interviews. My findings are based on my interviews with 19 family units of the Bedia community residing in the hamlet which I have termed Nagla for the sake of anonymity.

Apart from some surveys conducted by NGOs and government departments, there are few detailed studies of communities such as the Bedias and their practices are therefore treated as ossified social customs. Yet, the practice of prostitution among the Bedias continues and is constrained by customs and traditions that reinforce the conformity of the community to a particular set of rules. For example, only unmarried Bedia women are trafficked by the community into the sex trade while

women married to the Bedia men are not. This includes unmarried daughters of women married to Bedia men⁸ The Bedia women engaged in prostitution are expected not to infringe upon each other's "permanent" relations with well-off patrons and they are also barred from forming such liaisons with men of their own community.

A close study reveals the intimate relationship between the Bedia practices with their familial economy.

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The immediate earnings of the Bedia women engaged in the sex trade accrue to their natal families. The family considers itself the rightful recipient of these women's gains and any woman who attempts to keep her earnings is considered disloyal to the family and a traitor to the community. I found, for example, that some of the Bedia women who sought to establish long-term liaisons with particular men of their own choosing were consistently harassed by their families and taunted in a derogatory manner for wanting a *yaar* (lover). The members of the community looked down upon women who had given priority to their relations with their patrons/lovers over their obligations towards their natal family. Indeed, the community strictly guards the economic interest of the

family by way of providing support in the form of an institutionalized regulatory mechanism. The Bedia families can rightfully demand compensation from each other if they are able to establish that the acts of the other party infringed upon the family's right to the earnings of its unmarried daughters and sisters.

Since such a familial economy is incumbent upon the continuous presence of unmarried young women within the domestic economic unit, the Bedia families in my sample were predominantly large and complex. Maintaining a large familial unit made up of a number of elementary families of Bedia men and/or unmarried women, along with their children, increases the possibility that the family, as an economic unit, is assured of adequate supply of women's sexual labour (deployed for prostitution) *at all times*. I also found that the only Bedia families in my sample who were not dependent upon the prostitution were those that had no young women available within the immediate family. Some of these families resorted to getting other young women for the purpose of prostitution through dubious means. But as one Bedia young woman said to me, "getting other women also requires effort." Not all families could muster the resources to gain access to such women. There were several non-kin women in these families whose background was shrouded in great secrecy and who were ambiguously portrayed as kin of one kind or another to outsiders. This confirms the assertion that the members of Bedia community also engage in trafficking women from other communities (see Ramsanehi)⁹ for the purpose of sustaining their family. Such means are also adopted by those Bedias who, in the absence of such shortage of women, seek to enhance their earnings and/or to relieve the women within the family from an intense engagement in the trade. The young women in these families retire from business early. Thus, while it is usual for Bedia women to gradually retire

from the sex trade between the ages of 35 and 40, women in such families were found to withdraw even before reaching the age of 30. The women in families who did not have any young women, whether kin or non-kin, in their families continued to entertain clients even beyond the age of 40.

The community members also showed a pronounced preference for the female children, otherwise foreign to the northern Indian familial ethos. The high birth rate among the Bedia wives is also closely connected with their dependence upon female sexual labour (Agrawal 2002). As has been mentioned, women who marry Bedia men do not engage in prostitution. Thus, Bedia men remain dependent upon their sisters as long as their daughters are not old enough (i.e., in their early teens) to engage in the sex trade. There is a consequent pressure on married Bedia women to produce a large number of female children who are seen as the future security of a couple with no other means of income.

This brief summary of some of my findings reveals that apart from any pressure traditions may exert over the choices of women who belong to a group such as the Bedias, the dynamic of their domestic economy must also be considered in understanding these choices. A crucial issue in this regard is the income generated from women's entry into prostitution. It has argued that poverty is a major impetus for women to enter prostitution (see, for example, Mukherjee and Das; Sleightholme and Sinha). Prostitution is, for many, a way out of this poverty. Of course the conditions under which women work vary significantly in this respect (Sleightholme and Sinha). Those who work in slave-like conditions in urban brothels are barely able to benefit from this earning potential as, typically, all their earnings may be usurped by the brothel owner. Those who work in brothels on the condition that they share a part (usually half) of their income with the brothel owner

are slightly better off. Those, however, who are able to strike out on their own without having to pay off huge debts or having to share a major portion of their income, can earn high figures. Interestingly, most Bedia women work under the latter two conditions and most prefer not having to share their income with anyone other than their immediate family members. This is only possible when the women own or control the premises in which they work. Earn-

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ings can also vary depending on the location of the work. Thus, the women of Nagla earn less in Nagla, located at the periphery of a small town, than when they travel to Mumbai and work in hotels and bars (although in this case they would have to share their earnings with the hotel proprietors). Despite these differences, even within Nagla, I found that a Bedia woman earns almost ten times what a man or woman of comparable skills and education can earn through any legitimate means. Most women admitted earnings to the tune of Rupees 500-1000 (approximately US\$10-20) per day, unimaginable for most workers in the unskilled informal sector. This is an added attraction for the men of Bedia families who can never match the earnings of their sisters and daughters.

And, this is one of the many reasons that keep Bedia women from deviating from the path of "tradition." While the dependent members of the Bedia family often resort to invoking tradition as the reason for trafficking their women into prostitution, there are some young women who readily acknowledge the economic motivation behind their family's interest in encouraging their entry into the sex trade. This was obvious to me in the many conversations held with Bedia women including those initiated into the trade during my fieldwork (Agrawal 2002). It can thus be argued that the increasing economic worth of such traditions is what keeps them alive.

I have sought to argue that Bedia families have often very little to lose economically if their daughters enter prostitution with their consent and continue to owe allegiance to them economically. What such a family does lose, however, is its claims to honour and social prestige on grounds that it protects the virtue of women. This is why, as soon as the opportunity for doing so arises, the Bedias will deny that their women engage in the sex trade. The families of Bedia women who are migrant sex workers never openly admit that these women are the source of their income. The families will often claim that these absent women are married, dead, non-existent, or as having run away. Nor do these migrant sex workers readily admit that they support their families. They often take great pains to insist to outsiders that their entry into prostitution is by their own volition even when in other contexts they are clear that their families left them with little choice. In this respect, encouraging their women to migrate is a useful way of masking this familial source of income altogether.

It must be remembered that even more than the honour of their families, it is the obligations of kinship ties that keep women from revealing the role of their families in their activities. This was strikingly revealed

in some of the attempts to “rescue” and rehabilitate child sex workers from the red-light area of Delhi in the recent past.¹⁰ In June 2001, some 260 children engaged in prostitution were taken into custody by Delhi police. While the thrust of the entire operation was to restore the children to their families, when the police “rescued” several young Bedia women from the brothels, the authorities were not sure how to handle the situation as they recognized that these particular women had been trafficked into the sex trade by their own families. Remarkably, despite being kept in remand homes for considerable lengths of time, these young women refused to blame their families.¹¹ They took responsibility for their actions and repeatedly denied any role which their family members might have played in their entry into the trade. In fact, the court used the strategy of rewarding women who were willing to implicate the brothel “madam,” be a close kin of the young women, by ordering their early release.¹² Some of these young women were minors.

What this instance revealed to me was not so much the autonomy of these young women but, rather, their deep ties with their family which kept them from implicating them in what they knew could be a potentially criminal charge.¹³ It is interesting that the only workable solution found by the local authorities at that time was to send these young women back to their families. The fathers were asked to provide a written oath to the effect that they would not engage their women in this trade again. As this allowed the young women who had spent many months in Delhi’s Nari Niketan, a home meant for destitute and “deviant” women, to go back to their families, the oaths were extracted without too many difficulties. But it remains an uphill task for the local administration to continuously police the women’s families. The long-term viability and effectiveness of such measures in the absence of any economic alterna-

tives for the families of these women is questionable.

Undoubtedly, the Bedia example is an extreme one. But it is also an instructive one as it displays with such vividness one possible outcome of familial acceptance of prostitution. Clearly, under the existing social and economic conditions, the family does not lose financially if its women engage in the sex trade and whatever prestige may be lost is seen as compensated through other means.

Not surprisingly for me, though very much so for the reporter, a recent item in a leading daily newspaper (see Mohan) reported that when five women were arrested by the police for prostitution, their husbands and family members promptly turned up to bail them out. The husbands were even found to have contracts with brothel owners. Most interestingly, they belonged to “lower middle-class families” with tailoring shops and other small businesses. This speaks to the continuing need to critically re-examine the role that families play in trafficking women in India.

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¹The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, 1986, does not take any special notice of the role women’s family may play in trafficking them although it does provide for a scrutiny of the families before any rescued women are handed over to them. ‘Swadhar,’ a scheme devised by the Ministry of Human Resource Development, Government of India for the women in difficult circumstances, starts off by defining trafficked women as homeless as a result of being disowned by their families or choosing not to be part of them. See Agrawal (1998) for a discussion of how the popular culture in India imagines a prostitute as outside the bonds of the

family. Most writers only make a passing, if any, reference to the role of the family in trafficking of women.

²The literature on this aspect is very vast. See the report *No Safe Spaces* (Karlekar) for instance.

³Unfortunately, there are no statistics available on women trafficked by their own families, and as such, this statement is based on my own field research (Agarwal 2002).

⁴This is a form of prostitution with religious sanction practised in certain parts of India (see Joint Women’s Programme Study Team; Omvedt).

⁵These are communities which were “notified” under the *Criminal Tribes Act* (enacted by the British rulers in India in 1871 and modified several times subsequently). They were “denotified” subsequent to India’s independence from the colonial regime in 1947.

⁶For instance, the bulk of the women in the sample studied by Mukherjee belonged to these communities. See chapter 3 of her book, *Flesh Trade: A Report*.

⁷Also, see quote by a Bedia woman’s mother in UNESCO (51). For a report of a Bedia girl returning from Bahrain after being infected with HIV/AIDS, see also UNESCO (53).

⁸My sample indicated that the daughters of such married women constitute a large bulk of the Bedia women engaged in the sex trade rather than the daughters of the Bedia women in prostitution..

⁹Many personal conversations with Ramsanehi who is a veteran social reformer belonging to the Bedia community also reinforced this view. Some of the women in Nagla also admitted that members of their community “bought” women from “dalals” as well as from some of the kindred communities. More detailed information was however not forthcoming on this highly sensitive issue.

¹⁰This operation commenced in June 2001 and was carried out by Delhi police along with the NGO “STOP” (Stop Trafficking, Oppression and Prostitution of Women and Chil-

dren). The information included in this article has been derived from my indirect involvement in the efforts made towards the rehabilitation of the Bedia women taken into custody who belonged to the district where I carried out my fieldwork.

¹¹When I along with representatives of the NGO Sahyog interviewed these women, they had been in custody for almost ten months.

¹²I was present at one these hearings held in May 2002.

¹³In other contexts where there is no danger of such an implication, the Bedia women readily see their family as responsible for their being in the trade.

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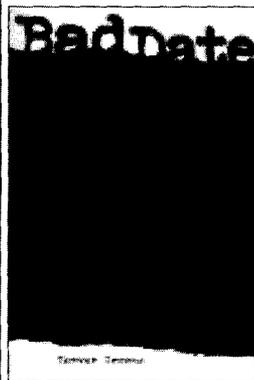
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