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# PRODUCING THE SPECTACLE OF KAMATHIPURA

## *The Politics of Red Light Visibility in Mumbai*

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### ABSTRACT

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In this article, I discuss the ways in which prostitution in Mumbai's main red light area is produced and functions as a spectacle. I examine several instantiations of discourses on prostitution in the city, including the press, and a 2003 HIV/AIDS prevention campaign which targeted female sex workers and their clients. I argue that the spectacle of prostitution in Mumbai is framed by international discourses of trafficking, as well as the local dialectics of stigma and honor. I conclude by discussing prostitution in other parts of India, where there is a greater degree of rights-based organizing.

*Key Words* ◇ HIV/AIDS ◇ Mumbai ◇ prostitution ◇ sex work ◇ spectacle

While the main point of contention in the international debate on prostitution pivots around the question of whether sexual commerce is more appropriately seen as a labor rights issue versus a problem of people (women and girls, in particular) being coerced into selling sexual services, the phenomenon of 'trafficking in women' has become a flashpoint in the global South. Because the polarities of this discourse are often manifested through contentions over terms (e.g. the political valences of 'prostitute' versus 'sex worker'), I would like to begin this article with a set of clarifications. Although there is significant disagreement about the definition of 'trafficking', the term has been applied in international legal discourses to describe the transport of contraband, especially arms and drugs, across international borders. 'Trafficking in people' is defined as the transportation of people across long distances, which may or may not include crossing an international border, including some form of deceit, coercion, or force.<sup>1</sup> Because the debate on trafficking in persons refers to regulating the movement of people, this conversation also necessarily intersects with questions about migration, the

political and economic reasons for people (largely from rural areas) leaving their places of origin, as well as the larger question of economic globalization as a phenomenon which increases the mobility of capital while limiting, controlling, and regulating the mobility of labor.

Although the discourse on 'trafficking in persons' broadly refers to any form of coercion, force, or deception for exploiting the labor of individuals in any sector, the international discourse on trafficking has become increasingly reduced to mean women who are 'trafficked for sex', also called 'sex trafficking'. This reduction has been achieved through the efforts of conservatives who have advocated the abolition of prostitution altogether, based on conservative feminist arguments that prostitution is equivalent to violence against women.

Through both institutional and legal measures, and through eliding the distinctions between trafficking and prostitution in the global South, 'trafficking' has effectively become a dominant way to speak of female migrant workers in Asia, Eastern Europe, Latin America, and Africa. Achieving this rhetorical turn has required at least two key reductionisms: 1) the conflation between 'women' and 'prostitution', to the exclusion of men or transgendered people selling sexual services as well, and 2) the notion of prostitution as an 'exceptional' economic activity, such that women engaging in prostitution are subject to the perception that they have never engaged in any other paid work, or that any other experiences of paid work are irrelevant. There have been several political consequences of this, particularly following the events of 11 September 2001, for prostitution regulations in general, and for India, in particular.

For example, 'trafficking' in India has increasingly come to mean the transportation of people across intra-national borders, for example, transporting children from rural areas in Maharashtra to networks that organize street-corner beggars in Mumbai, or taking girls and young women from their villages to be sold into urban brothels. As debates on prostitution continue in India, the trope of an abducted girl or young woman, drugged, or even bound and gagged, and taken far from her home village to the dangers of an urban red light area is central to the narrative of 'trafficking in women', or 'sex trafficking', in which 'anti-trafficking' advocates have sought to intervene.<sup>2</sup> In the international discourse, South Asia has figured prominently in writings and research about the phenomenon of 'trafficking in women' as a region in which a purportedly high number of women and girls are trafficked.<sup>3</sup> (I say 'purportedly' here not to imply that all accounts of trafficking in India, or anywhere else, are entirely false, or are the result of a conservative ruse to limit the mobility of poor migrants. Rather, because the discourse on trafficking has become so polarized and politicized, it has become difficult to discern accurate information about the incidence of trafficking in various regions.)

A result of these kinds of concerns about trafficking has been the increased regulation of migrants both within and across borders. Regarding increased international border controls, restrictions on the migration of labor have come in the form of curtailing migrancy across so-called 'porous borders', that is, borders with limited or loose controls, as these are seen to enhance the ability for traffickers to operate profitably. According to this logic, a readily available solution to trafficking is to increase border controls further, and to limit the level of cross-border migration available to people seeking work (Kapur, 2003). The classic example of the effects of this kind of strategy being operationalized in South Asia is that of Nepali women now being barred from crossing the Nepali border unless accompanied by a male relative (Center for Feminist Legal Research, 2004), or of migration laws in the US being modified in such a way as to allow for increased levels of interrogation at the border to ascertain the legitimacy of the familial relationships being claimed by people attempting to enter the country. In the post-9/11 era, decreased access to legal means of migration across international borders has meant that border controls have been severely enhanced. Given this context, anti-trafficking measures also serve to enhance border controls and border enforcement.

### *The Trafficking in Persons Report*

Each year, the US State Department's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons publishes its *Trafficking in Persons Report*, also known as the *TIP Report*. The *TIP Report* is mandated by the Trafficking Victims Protection Act, which was passed by Congress in 2000, and re-authorized in 2005. The report rates countries according to a three-tier system. The tiers represent the level at which countries are pursuing prosecutions to stop 'trafficking'. The *TIP Report* tier system is linked with non-humanitarian aid. Countries rated on Tier 3 by report no longer have access to non-humanitarian aid from the US until they satisfy the requirements of the report, and demonstrate that they are pursuing legislation and legal prosecutions to end trafficking in their region. In 2004, India was on the 'Tier 2 Watch List' of the report. The entry for India that year read:

#### India (Tier 2 – Watch List)

India is a source, transit, and destination country for women, children, and men trafficked for the purposes of sexual and labor exploitation. Indian men and women are placed into situations of coerced labor and sometimes slave-like conditions in countries in the Middle East and children may be forced to beg or work as camel jockeys. Bangladeshi women and children are trafficked to India or transit through India en route to Pakistan and the Middle East for purposes of sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, and forced labor. Nepalese women and girls are trafficked to India

for sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, and forced labor. India is also a growing destination for sex tourists from Europe, the United States, and other Western countries. Internal trafficking of women, men, and children for purposes of sexual exploitation, domestic servitude, bonded labor, and indentured servitude is widespread . . . India is placed on Tier 2 Watch List this year as the result of its failure to demonstrate increased central government law enforcement response to India's huge trafficking problem and inadequate local prosecutions in Mumbai and Calcutta. Sustained and improved law enforcement efforts at the state level were again not matched by central government efforts to investigate and prosecute the most significant criminal forces behind India's trafficking industry. The vast majority of trafficking in India occurs across state lines, making these crimes inherently difficult for state police agencies to investigate and prosecute without central coordination. Trafficking across India's international borders remains significant. The central government in New Delhi has not made sufficient efforts to use its national law enforcement agencies to investigate and prosecute interstate and international trafficking. There remain no prosecutions of trafficking offenses by the federal government. The Indian Government should recognize trafficking as a federal offense and prosecute it accordingly, bringing its considerable resources to bear against the problem. Whereas the Government of India's efforts to combat trafficking in persons is [sic] uneven, Indian NGOs are world leaders in their activities to fight trafficking. (US State Department, 2004)

There are several points to note in this entry. One is the claim to numbers—that India has a 'huge' problem with respect to trafficking, while data on the level to which people are being moved from one location to another against their will for the purposes of exploitative labor vary widely in any given location. This is not to say that the 'actual' numbers of persons trafficked vary, but that estimates of trafficked persons are different based on the position a given survey or NGO takes on prostitution, and which definitions of trafficking and prostitution are being used. The other notable aspect of this excerpt is the emphasis that is being placed on the powers of the police to surveil migrants, to coordinate the anti-trafficking efforts of law enforcement, and to increase their arrest records. While this emphasis demonstrates a priority being placed on the enhancement and uses of state-sponsored violence to control and regulate the movement of people, the passage also demonstrates a rare instance of discursive complexity in a government document by acknowledging, through the injunction to do 'sensitization' and 'anti-corruption trainings', that police are responsible for regulating, limiting, and actively criminalizing prostitution, while they may simultaneously be profiting from it.

### *What is India's Legislative Response to 'Trafficking'?*

Because the tier system is relatively new, the effects of the system among targeted governments remain to be fully assessed. Thus far, there has been at least one significant instance in which the *TIP Report* ranking directly led to government action against sex workers. In South Korea in 2004,

for example, there was a brutal government crackdown on sex workers throughout the country following the publication of the *TIP Report*, in which South Korea was ranked as a Tier 3 country (Cheng, 2004). In India, soliciting clients for sex in urban areas has been criminalized through anti-nuisance and anti-solicitation laws that target street-based solicitation of sexual services. These laws serve a broader purpose of policing public urban spaces in general. In Mumbai, some of this policing takes place through the enforcement of formal 'Police Acts', which include different types of localized public nuisance laws designed to control access to public spaces used by the legions of workers from rural areas who have migrated and live in slums throughout the city.

Although anti-solicitation and anti-nuisance laws, as well as the urban Police Acts, already bestow relatively broad powers on the police, these are supplemented by informal policing practices, such as the enforcement of unwritten curfews in and near slum areas. The Police Acts are also supplemented by the formal component of India's anti-trafficking law, the Immoral Traffic Prevention Act, which concerns the solicitation of clients for 'the purposes of prostitution'. The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act (ITPA)<sup>4</sup> was passed into law as the Indian government's fulfilment of its obligations as a signatory to the 1949 UN anti-trafficking convention, formally known as the '1949 Convention of the Suppression of the Traffic in Persons and of the Exploitation of the Prostitution of Others'. Some scholars have argued that ITPA is legally redundant, given other measures in Indian law which govern trafficking and sexual exploitation more directly (Kotiswaran, 2001). However, it bears mentioning as one of the few places in which the Indian state articulates its own description of the kind of prostitution it seeks to prevent, and as a law which, until now, has essentially policed poor women 'in public'. Examining the ITPA helps to situate the state's idealized vision of the ways in which urban public spaces in India may be used and inhabited. For example, the language of the ITPA expresses a subtext of anxiety regarding interactions between men and women in public that may be unmediated by kinship or other regulatory social networks.

With its references to 'loitering' and 'molestation', as well as balconies and windows from which women may 'expose themselves' to men walking by on the street, the text of ITPA's anti-solicitation clause actually provides a fascinating insight into the reproduction of dichotomies between 'good' (honorable, respectable) and 'fallen' (dishonorable) women. A 'good' woman is someone who, for example, does not '*wilfully* expose her person'; a 'fallen' woman, by contrast, is one who actively seeks out the attention of 'any person' at all. The male glance is conflated with a hydraulic sexual desire in the text of the law, first by assigning maleness to the category of 'any person', and then extending this gender assignment even further, such that 'public' exposure and the male glance that resides in 'any person' telescope to the filmic image

of a woman sitting in her casement window. By virtue of her visibility, she is subject to unending, 'essentially demystifying', acts of looking deployed by strangers on the street. The implication that the very act of a woman being seen by a stranger should be subject to criticism and legal censure relies on a set of shared, publicly disseminated beliefs about the inevitabilities of urban seduction and social degeneration.

The ITPA has been slated for reform for several years. Organizations of sex workers throughout the country have criticized the ITPA, and especially Section 8, for its vagueness, and its facilitation of human rights abuses against sex workers by police. ITPA is currently undergoing a reform process led by the Ministry for Women and Child Development, in which the elimination of Section 8 has been proposed. While this move is welcomed by sex workers and advocates, two measures that may be added to ITPA are throwing up cause for concern from the national sex workers' rights movement. The first revises the definition of 'trafficking in persons' to include the 'exploitation of the prostitution of others', and makes consent 'irrelevant' in cases where any deceit, fraud, etc. was used (Tandon and Grover, 2006). The use of language which renders consent irrelevant, and which conflates trafficking and prostitution more closely, has caused concern for critics of the criminalization of prostitution. The other measure which has caused equal concern is the proposed criminalization of clients, according to the so-called 'Swedish Model', which implemented this measure in 1999 (Kulick, 2005). If these, and all the other proposed reforms, are implemented in the ITPA, clients will become subject to readings of solicitation for sexual commerce by local police, but within the auspices of a law that will also continue to criminalize sex workers. The trend toward greater legislation against any aspect of sexual commerce in Indian jurisprudence is evidenced in the State Government of Maharashtra's recent attempt to ban women from dancing in beer bars throughout the state. Claiming that dancing for tips is immoral and injurious to women and girls, and that dancing in bars for money facilitated trafficking, the state government banned most beer bars where dancing takes place (SNDT and FAOW, 2005). The ban was overturned at the state level by a legal challenge led by a coalition of dancers, feminist organizations, and sex workers' rights advocates (FAOW, 2006).

### *Post-9/11 Migrations*

Much of the daily life of sexual commerce is connected to the politics of global migration and trafficking because economic survival in the global South is increasingly mediated through some element of movement between villages and cities to search for any viable work, for example, between rural

Maharashtra and Mumbai. The growing links between migration and economic sustainability for poor communities in India is occurring against the rural context of depleted water tables, more arable land becoming drought-prone, and areas that have experienced massive rural displacement after receiving few of the benefits of industrial growth and economic prosperity. Instead, these areas have been subject to large-scale infrastructural development projects, like dams and highways, in which the benefits of access to electricity or roads, for example, accrue to nearby towns and cities instead (see Bhansal, 2003; Deb, 2000; D'Souza, 2002; Patkar, 2004). Agricultural work has been the main mode of survival in these areas, but, as food security decreases with the increased consolidation of corporatized food production, seed patenting, and greater areas of cultivated land being devoted to the production of cash crops (e.g. sugar cane), seasonal farm work has become less and less sustainable. Such regions now supply the lion's share of migrant laborers to the world's urban economies.

Decreasing economic sustainability for poor communities living in rural areas (Shiva, 2003) has especially impacted women and children, who have been largely kept outside of the sphere of economic self-determination. The so-called 'feminization' of migration and poverty, and of unorganized labor, in urban areas in the global South is an indicator of the effects of this agglomeration of macro-economic policies (United Nations, 1993).

### *A Red Light District in Mumbai*

... [I]maging (and *imagining*) of specific spaces associated with sex work is a crucial means by which the (contested) identity of the female street prostitute as Other is produced and maintained. (Hubbard, 1998: 56)

In a later portion of this article, I examine the ways in which the iconicity of prostitution in the city of Mumbai is inflected by narratives of danger and moral decline through public health and journalistic representations of one of the city's longest-standing red light areas, Kamathipura. In pulling apart this iconicity, I interrogate the idea that the experience of doing sex work here eclipses the importance of any other work or personal migration histories for understanding the texture of how, why, and in which context women sell sex in this district. In exploring Kamathipura's role in the image of sexual commerce, I examine the role of the district in shaping the iconicity of Mumbai itself.

Located a short distance from the Mumbai Central commuter railway station, Kamathipura is Mumbai's oldest red light district, and is integral to the image of prostitution in Mumbai and in India. An estimated 5000–10,000 sex workers and their families live in the district itself.<sup>5</sup> The vast majority are migrants from rural areas all over India and, to a smaller degree, from

Nepal and Bangladesh as well. Kamathipura's role as the iconic Indian red light district is unrivaled. This iconicity is part of a public discourse of prostitution, produced through media representations, public health and anti-trafficking interventions, through gossip and rumor, and through film. Stories about prostitution in the district primarily circulate through social networks, and form a cascading, generalized awareness about the existence of this underground economy, an awareness informed by histories of the area that blur into stories, myths, and even fantastical narratives of coercion and desire. Using examples from ethnographic fieldwork, I discuss the ways in which these discourses are engaged, in turn, by sex workers living and working in Kamathipura. I conclude by addressing the question of whether public discourses and regulation of visible sexual commerce in the city, such as those which swirl around Kamathipura, may inform the degree to which sexual commerce, rather than being a primary income-generating activity, may increasingly be practiced in less visible and more episodic modes. The regulation and attempted erasure of sex work in districts like Kamathipura are framed by contemporary discourses and debates on trafficking and migration.

### *Kamathipura in Public: Producing the Image of Mumbai Prostitution*

The image of prostitution in Mumbai relies heavily on images produced through a wide range of public discourses about Kamathipura. Bollywood films, for example, regularly refer to Kamathipura by name, or allude to sex work and the district in dialogues which euphemistically conflate women and girls 'standing by the roadside' with the inherent 'dangers' of the city.<sup>6</sup> During fieldwork in Kamathipura, injunctions against my visiting the district abounded, and included the belief that the area as a whole was immoral and dangerous, and that I would be subjected to immorality and/or danger by setting foot there. Although everyone living in Kamathipura does not sell sex, almost anyone who lives, works or passes through Kamathipura is subject to the stigmas associated with prostitution. Broadly speaking, these stigmas confer the monikers of a questionable morality, danger, and/or social degeneration on any person or place associated with sexual commerce; these are reinscribed by the state through the criminalization of the most publicly visible aspects of sexual commerce by the ITPA which, in addition to criminalizing solicitation, criminalizes anyone surviving off of the earnings of a sex worker, thereby criminalizing any adult or child living in a brothel as a presumed sex worker, or as someone cohabiting with a presumed sex worker (Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1990; Sukhtankar, 2002). This dialectic between stigma and criminalization produces Kamathipura as a unique space within the life of the city.

The criminalization of prostitution through the ITPA and the local Police Acts is experienced by residents of Kamathipura as routine raids, police sweeps, and extortion by representatives of the state for personal gain. Residents of Kamathipura are targeted because the sexual commerce there has been produced as a visible, factual, and therefore 'known' activity. Due to the visibility of soliciting clients for sex in Kamathipura, and the generalized sense throughout Mumbai that the district exists for the sole purpose of prostitution, residents have alternately experienced severe state-sponsored regulation, multiple levels of extortion, generalized indifference, and exoticized consumer interest. Public health interventions have become an integral part of this system of representation and regulation. Because of Kamathipura's visibility, and its long history as a red light district, the sexual commerce which takes place there has become virtually emblematic within HIV/AIDS discourses as a 'high-risk' zone.

### *Media and Programmatic Interventions in Kamathipura*

The presence of international and local HIV/AIDS related organizations working in Kamathipura reflects the reality of HIV as a significant health issue, as well as the expansion of funded health and AIDS programming targeting sex workers. This expansion has occurred to the degree that we may use the term 'AIDS industry' to describe their magnitude and reach. The sense of urgency to intervene in the AIDS epidemic among sex workers was fueled by several epidemiological studies conducted in the early and mid-1990s which demonstrated that female sex workers in some Indian cities, including Mumbai, were at relatively high risk for contracting HIV (see Bhawe et al., 1995; Jain et al., 1994; Pais, 1996). However, no national level, comprehensive epidemiological study has been undertaken among sex workers. Instead, smaller scale studies, combined with anecdotal information about individual sex workers' sexual histories, continue to show the increased risk of HIV among female sex workers; this heightened risk is primarily linked to women's inability to negotiate condom use with clients and partners. Programs have had varied success in addressing these issues directly, including collaborating with print and television media to disseminate information.

The media has had a long and productive relationship with the practice of prostitution as a sensational topic. Heightened awareness and fears about HIV/AIDS have produced yet another axis of interest for print and television journalists about sexual commerce. In many instances, the process of reporting about sexual commerce means the reiteration of a generalized set of elisions between prostitution, risk, and disease. An article in a national Indian daily, *The Hindu*, entitled 'The ironies of Kamathipura', is

an example of journalistic reporting on Kamathipura since the early 1990s, and gives a personal account of the area, as well as the journalist's attempt to produce visual documentation of Kamathipura's sex workers.

Of all the places in the world for a television shoot, Kamathipura, Mumbai's infamous red-light area, is probably the most explosive. Mumbai is a big city with many red-light areas. It is very easy for women from neighboring States and districts to slip into prostitution here. Brothels mushroom all the time and have spread out to the most distant suburbs which betray even the slightest signs of human habitation. As there is a steady influx of migrant labor, the sex worker is assured of the basics for survival.

But nothing can beat Kamathipura in the heart of Mumbai. Set up long ago by the British for their troops, it was their official 'comfort zone'. Legend has it that the tiny area boasted the most exotic consorts. Today, Kamathipura is bursting at the seams with women and garbage. Every inch of space has been occupied. New brothels have come up in nooks and crannies and there are so many sex workers without institutional support that they have no option but to freelance. Since there is no space in the brothels for them to sit in, they hang around outside in the lanes, solicit customers and then rent vacant beds, if any. The tiny lanes which slice the area into ribbons are packed with people and their belongings. While food is being prepared on a stove, a child defecates next to it. Somebody is having a bath a few feet away and yet somebody else is fornicating close by. In the midst of all this are hawkers, card sessions, goats on a tether, pimps on the prowl, customers looking for a bargain, tourists and countless sex workers. The air is thick with pollutants and decibel levels can rupture an uninitiated ear drum with ease. (Menan, 2001)

The scene described in the article is one of overwhelming scarcity in a densely populated urban area on the verge of infrastructural collapse. Rather than the people, the most vivid images are those of sprawl, filth, and chaos. The existence of Kamathipura itself is a kind of 'taking over', a disturbing eyesore in the middle of the city and a visible example of extreme urban poverty. The 'taking over' extends to the women working as sex workers there; with the description of women 'easily slipping' into prostitution, the area seems to exert a kind of gravitational pull for poor female migrants. The reporter goes on to describe the experience of filming in Kamathipura since the early 1990s.

I have been involved in at least 50 television shoots in the area ever since HIV/AIDS and prostitution became the big media story of the decade . . . Most television shoots in Kamathipura are the 'wham bang' variety. The cameraman holds the camera in one hand at about knee level and walks about as nonchalantly as he can pretending he is carrying a piece of luggage. Colleagues walk on either side ostensibly to protect him. Or the camera is wrapped in a piece of cloth and carried on the shoulder with a tiny opening for the 'third eye'. The walk through the area, in such cases, is like a military march past. One has to be quick and fast. If anyone catches on, there will be mayhem. Another method is to get into a vehicle and shoot through the windows. This is comparatively luxurious and the cameraman can shoot the ambience at will. If the vehicle is moving, well and good. The chances of being attacked are remote. The vehicle can go up and down the tiny streets and adjoining roads until satisfactory shots are taken. Of course, if there is any suspicion, all hell will break loose. Then the vehicle will be stopped and broken into. The crowds will love it and every little urchin and his cousin will join in the fun. But sex workers in the cages have now grown wise to all this. If they see a slow moving vehicle

they instinctively start pelting it with stones . . . But times have changed and equipment has got very sophisticated. In a recent shoot for French television, we shot the Devadasis in Kamathipura with a camera the size of a fountain pen. There was no violence or fear. Just friendship, smiles, backslapping and a great shoot. (Menan, 2001)

The violence of both the filming and the reaction it provoked is striking in this telling of events. In this passage, while the actions of the film crew are related sympathetically, the response of local residents is seen as irrational, even animalistic. Over the course of field research and interviews with NGO workers and sex workers working in the area, stories of journalists being attacked by unwilling objects of these shoots had taken on the quality of local legends. The telling and retelling of these events functioned as parables of relations with outsiders looking for a story, of strangers 'necessarily' filming without permission. The anecdote about stones being pelted at slow-moving cars points to the long history of uninvited cameras in the area, as well as a local desire to reduce and control this kind of visibility. Sex workers in Kamathipura regularly accused photographers of giving them 'a bad name'. Their marginally successful non-compliance with, and resistance to, attempts to re/produce abject images of prostitution serve to criticize the carefully edited visual documentation about their lives disseminated through print and television media. The potential stakes in delivering high-quality footage of sex workers in the area to media outlets have grown dramatically in the era of HIV/AIDS, with stories on Kamathipura being produced for a decidedly global media market. This global market has been modified with the spread of fears about HIV, and the spread of the HIV pandemic itself, such that the newer story of HIV and sex work has become both an adaptation and extension of historical, orientalist fascinations with prostitution, economic and social abjection,<sup>7</sup> and poverty in the global South.

### *The Spectacle of Prostitution*

In addition to providing the frames of reference which inform many of the policy, health, and legal initiatives that target sites of where sex work is visibly, 'publicly' practiced in the city, the newspaper article also represents a genre of what I will provisionally call 'prostitution reporting'. This genre includes documentary films, such as *The Selling of Innocents* (Gupta, 1997), and newspaper and television news reporting which, taken together, move beyond describing the relationship between HIV and sex work and produce a spectacle of daily life in Kamathipura. I use 'spectacle' here to mean

... that aspect of situationist theory that describes precisely how the social order imposed by the contemporary global economy maintains, perpetuates, and expands its influence through the manipulation of representations. No longer relying on force or scientific economics, the status quo of social relations is 'mediated by images.' (Boy, 1994: 4)

This dynamic is unique to Mumbai itself because of its own particular geography, in which Kamathipura is at the heart of the city's main southern districts, rather than being at the edge of the city, and because representations about red light areas in different parts of India vary so widely. Unlike *The Selling of Innocents*, for example, which tells a story of trafficking, abjection, and rescue which centers on local politicians and law enforcement, several films have aimed to discuss sex worker-centered organizing in the more rural areas of southern Maharashtra (Dutta, 2002) and in Calcutta (Ghosh, 2002). Visual and textual representations of Kamathipura, however, rarely function to mobilize actions or interventions directed among or toward people living and working in the district. If disseminating these kinds of images did inspire their viewers to action, one might imagine the scene in Kamathipura to be somehow productively changed following the release of a film or media story which depicts sex workers in the district as impoverished and abused. Rather, any pre-existing negative conditions in the red light area seem to be maintained or intensified as a result of these representations. In other words, the effect of these representations is to maintain Kamathipura as an exceptional space as compared to the normative social spaces at which images and stories about prostitution in Mumbai are targeted. In other words, Kellner writes, 'the spectacle is a tool of pacification and depoliticization; it is a "permanent opium war"' (Kellner, 2003: 44).

The 'popularity' of these images among the viewing public, evidenced by the high demand for stories on Kamathipura in Europe as reported by Rajendra Menan, and by the routine nature of outsiders entering the district and wishing to interview, speak with, film, or photograph female and *hijra* sex workers there, begs the broader question about the 'public' itself. Whom does this image-making target, and with what effect? What is the effective subject of these representations?

To be sure, women soliciting clients for sexual services are at the heart of any visual or textual descriptions of the area. Images of women soliciting clients for sexual services, encoded as impure, immoral, and diseased within the matrices of honor, purity, and morality, have a potent discursive power. This discursive power is conceptually linked with Phil Hubbard's articulation of the uses of 'otherness' in his work on urban geographies as marked by prostitution. Regarding the question of imaging/imagining women in prostitution themselves, he writes:

That the figure of the female prostitute has always constituted a central figure in the social imagination, and has played an important symbolic role in the definition of moral and sexual standards, is unequivocal. . . . In particular, the construction of prostitutes as Other to dominant heteropatriarchal norms is considered with reference to the imaginative and discursive identification of red-light districts as spaces of Other (or alternate) morality. (Hubbard, 1998: 55-6)

If sex workers in Kamathipura represent an 'alternate' morality, that is, the lack of morality, the spectacle of Kamathipura helps to constitute a

viewing public which is moral, pure, and, recalling the histories of venereal disease and prostitution in India, without disease. In light of this reading, the sense of desperation in Menan's article as he recounts the lengths to which journalists have gone to retrieve images of Kamathipura at work takes on a different meaning. The stakes in producing these images do not simply include the job at hand; rather, these representations serve to maintain the status quo within wider discourses of purity, morality, and bodily integrity.

### *An HIV/AIDS Prevention Campaign in Kamathipura*

Population Services International (PSI) is a US-based NGO which conducts condom distribution and HIV prevention and awareness programs throughout the global South. PSI has been based for more than ten years in Kamathipura. In this section, I offer an analysis of PSI's national HIV/AIDS public awareness campaign, conducted from November 2002 through February 2003, called 'Balbir Pasha'. In offering an analysis of the campaign, and how images used in the campaign became part of the narrative of Kamathipura during this time, I do not intend it to be a critique of PSI's programs in general. PSI's work is both significant and geographically diverse. The Balbir Pasha campaign is of interest here because it was able to generate a rich set of discourses about the city, prostitution, and the district.

The campaign was conducted in the high-HIV prevalence states of Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka, Andhra Pradesh, Manipur, and Nagaland. The campaign was extremely visible in Mumbai, with billboards concentrated in or near red light districts. The campaign was funded through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), with funds earmarked specifically for combating HIV/AIDS, and used television commercials, print advertisements, and billboards. It was successful in several respects, especially in sparking public discussion about HIV and sex work. The campaign's content relied on a storyline whose main character was a man called 'Balbir Pasha'. The campaign's slogan, 'Will Balbir Pasha Get AIDS?', was accompanied by scenarios in which Balbir Pasha's sexual behavior was assessed for his risk of contracting HIV.

Figure 1 shows one of the first images from the campaign. The cartoon bubble reads 'Will Balbir Pasha Get AIDS?' Photographic images in the campaign almost always depicted lower middle class or working class male laborers, like this one, which shows men at work delivering food *tiffins* to offices throughout the city. These cryptic images were run initially in order to spark interest, and were followed up by pictorial billboards which depicted three scenarios about Balbir Pasha's sexual behavior with women who were never directly identified as sex workers. However, the iconographic



*Figure 1: Initial 'feeder' image from the Balbir Pasha campaign (Population Services International, 2003)*

images of women in the billboards were designed to be understood as sex workers, who were included by PSI in the campaign as 'potential bridging populations' that can facilitate the spread of HIV 'into the general population' (Population Services International, 2003).

**Theme 1**

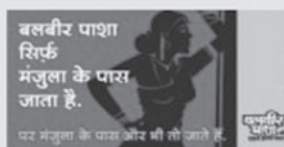
The indoor and outdoor media produced contained dialogue and/or text that communicated the following line, pictured on the billboard to the right:

*"Balbir Pasha sometimes forgets to use condoms when he is drunk. But by not wearing a condom just one time, it is possible to get AIDS. Will Balbir Pasha get AIDS?"*

**Theme 2**

This message, as with the others, appeared in newspapers as shown to the left, on billboards, on train posters, bus shelters, and via television and radio programming.

*"Balbir Pasha only goes to (has sex with) Manjula. But others go to Manjula too. Will Balbir Pasha get AIDS?"*

**Theme 3**

The execution of this last 'main message' was the first time the Saadhan helpline number was mentioned, almost as a precursor to the final "Connect to Help Line" phase that immediately followed the rollout of this message.

*Balbir Pasha only has "relationships" with healthy-looking people. But you can't tell by looking who has AIDS. Will Balbir Pasha get AIDS?"*

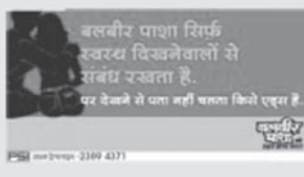


Figure 2: The three billboards that were placed all over Mumbai, especially in or near red light districts (Population Services International, 2003)

The iconography used to depict women doing sex work in these images, such as that in 'Theme 2', used the sexualized silhouette of a woman leaning against a doorway. PSI received criticism for the campaign from 'Mumbaikars' and from government agencies. In Maharashtra, the Maharashtra State Commission of Women, the state Ministry of Health, and the Advertising Standards Council of India either demanded the campaign's withdrawal, or asked PSI to 'defend' the campaign's content. The campaign continued despite these criticisms. According to PSI's report on the campaign, many of the criticisms were aimed at its depiction of sex workers.

[A] criticism was that the campaign was perceived to be 'anti-women' as it depicted that the male character (Balbir Pasha) could be at risk for AIDS since he is having unprotected sex with a woman (Manjula), thereby implying that HIV is passed on from the woman to the man. This concern was particularly voiced after the second theme of the campaign, in which it is suggested that Balbir's 'regular' partner Manjula has several 'regulars' of her own. In addition to women named Manjula that took personal offense (and called the Saadhan [PSI] helpline to express their outrage), some women's groups made a point to argue that as the name Manjula is a Hindu name, the campaign targeted this specific religious group. PSI staff responded by explaining that rather than trying to stigmatize women working in the commercial sex industry, the

campaign aimed to protect them, by motivating their male clients to adopt safer sex practices. This principle follows the UNAIDS approach of 'men make a difference', which places greater responsibility on men to change attitudes and behavior, which in turn would enable the empowerment of women necessary for protection from HIV infection. (Population Services International, 2003)

Although the PSI report does not discuss sex workers' responses to the campaign, this argument suggests that women's empowerment is its ultimate goal. If women's empowerment itself is reliant on men's behavior change, we may ask what definition of 'empowerment' is being used here? Does 'empowerment' mean male clients using condoms more regularly with female sex workers, or is there another meaning of 'empowerment' embedded in the campaign, one which includes women desisting from sexual commerce altogether? Despite the campaign's focus on male clients of sex workers, critics of the campaign stressed that it hurt the image of 'Indian women' as a group. Strong public reactions against the usage of the name 'Manjula' for the character of the female sex worker in the campaign, for example, indicate that some women with this name, and some Hindu middle class women, felt implicated, by association, with prostitution. PSI also received criticism about the use of the name Balbir Pasha on the grounds that the name would be offensive to Punjabi and Pashto communities. PSI received enough criticism about this aspect of the campaign to warrant a response to this issue in a *Times of India* interview published near the end of the campaign. In the article, PSI stated that the name Balbir Pasha was fabricated, and was not meant to indicate a particular region or community, so that no one would be offended (Times News Network, 2003). As it happened, much of the public discourse on sex work, and Kamathipura, inspired by the campaign was expressed as a debate about names.

The following narrative from my fieldwork during this period illustrates some of the public reactions and criticisms of the campaign.

I bought a 7 rupee tabloid newspaper today called 'JAM' ('Just Another Magazine') with a spoof on the Balbir Pasha campaign. The front page read 'Will Balbir Pasha Get Laid?' with a caricatured 'Mrs Pasha' in the same black-on-blue motif as the campaign itself. The 'Mrs Pasha' figure is wielding a rolling pin and looking angry because she's just 'found out' that her 'husband', Balbir Pasha, is also a client for paid sex. The newspaper was sponsored by Pepsi and, written mostly in English, targets English-speaking urban teenagers; this issue also included a Shakira pin-up, and a pull-out poster of the band Santana. Having bought it on the train platform in the morning, and having forgotten it my bag, I wound up carrying it around all day in plain view, unaware of the interest it would attract. On the commuter train during rush hour, I managed to find a seat in a very crowded car in the all-gender general compartment. I sat down and tried to bury my head in the paper, which was by now tattered from all the passing around it had already been through.

On the journey to Mumbai Central, I eventually noticed that the man sitting opposite me was staring at my copy of 'JAM'. He finally caught my eye and said in English, 'Can I just see it, please?' while reaching for the paper in my lap. 'Look,' he said, pointing to the image on the front and smiling with bemusement to a younger

man sitting two people down, 'Balbir Pasha.' The man holding the tabloid looked to be in his forties, with salt and pepper hair and moustache. Wearing a pressed white short-sleeved shirt and carrying a burlap sari bag, he fully looked the part of a respectable, middle-class businessman or merchant on his way to work.

'Do you know this campaign?' I asked. 'Balbir Pasha?' He nodded. 'What do you think?'

'See,' he said authoritatively, 'this gives a wrong impression. The way they have put this up everywhere, in bus stops and all, it isn't nice. The children can see, they will ask their parents. It doesn't look nice. See, with one thing they have been very good. Balbir is a Punjabi name, and Pasha, it is a common name in Afghanistan. But Manjula, a lot of women from the Gujarati Kuchhi community are called Manjula. And think how they feel seeing this.'

'So, "Balbir Pasha" is good because it's not an Indian name?'

'Pasha is not Indian, yes. But *Manjula* . . . think how they must feel.'

Reactions against the use of the name 'Manjula' in this ad campaign revealed the contours, or lack thereof, in public perception and stigmatization about sex work. Even the association of a name, and therefore of a religion, with a cartoonish, iconographic sex worker was deemed unacceptable by some. For many, this merited an attempt to have the campaign stopped altogether or, at least, required a phone call to PSI to register one's complaint. Despite this attempt to launch an awareness campaign aimed at male clients of female sex workers, public perceptions and discourses about the campaign remained focused on the women. The meanings of this focus can be understood in the broader context of perceptions of women doing sex work, of red light areas, and of Kamathipura, such as those represented in *The Hindu* article on filming in the district.

### *Fields of Inquiry*

The argument I offer here is an aspect of 18 months of field research conducted almost entirely in the city of Mumbai. As a feminist ethnographer from an American academic institution, I was aiming to prioritize participatory research models for exploring questions of prostitution, trafficking, and agency in the city, and how these are linked with national and international discourses of prostitution. However, it became clear in the early months of this research that substantively 'participatory' research for these areas of enquiry would require other conditions to be in place than those at hand. For example, without a sex worker-led union or some other kind of organizing framework which could amplify efforts to mobilize around the concerns of women selling sexual services, it was extremely difficult to develop completely unmediated or unregulated relationships with women living and working in brothels; the source of this regulation often came from brothel owners and sex workers themselves. My own somewhat confusing sets of ethnic and sexual subjectivities, as well as my arrival from some 'other'

place, and my positioning in this space as an educated and privileged non-sex worker, raised many questions about negotiating this kind of access.

While it was possible to conduct interviews and converse at length with women selling sexual services in Kamathipura, it was not possible to visit as regularly, or to spend as much time, as it was in other parts of the city, where sex work was more episodic or underground. Given the structuring frameworks for Kamathipura, this dynamic had less to do with the lack of agency of sex workers per se, and more with the politics of visibility of the red light area. If visibility forms the basis for all harassment and legal marginality, then that visibility is highly regulated as an instantiation of subjectivity, and even resistance. My presence as a researcher represented a wholly unknown and potential visibility, one that may or, more likely, may not have led to immediately improved circumstances for sex workers living in Kamathipura. Understanding the problems of visibility, which began as a set of questions about establishing unmediated relationships with residents of the district within the context of research, has necessitated a broader, discursive framing of how public, urban visibility and the law frames the narrative of daily life in the district.

### Conclusion

In her article 'The Discourse of Global Compassion and the Media', scholar Birgitta Höijer recounts Natan Sznajder's thesis on the concept of visually mediated public compassion.

According to Sznajder public compassion originates in an abstract, theoretical and rational idea of humanity, not in religious charity. It is closely connected with the ideas of the Enlightenment and *the humanitarian movements that arose in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries, such as movements to abolish slavery, child labour, and so on*. Sznajder defines two perspectives on public compassion: one related to democratisation processes in which equality is central, and the other related to the market society, in which an extending exchange of goods and services unintentionally also extends the moral concern for strangers. He also discusses the Marxist critique according to which compassion is 'nothing other than the narcissistic desires of an exploitative bourgeoisie to feel good about itself' (Sznajder, 1998: 121). (Höijer, 2003: 20, emphasis added)

Sznajder's genealogical argument regarding compassion intersects with Debord's theory of the spectacle (1994) in the reading of Kamathipura in this article. In the 18th and 19th centuries religious and humanitarian movements famously included the campaign against white slavery in Britain, which became emblematic in Josephine Butler's, and the Ladies National Association's, eventually successful efforts to repeal the Contagious Disease Acts there. The Contagious Disease Acts in India, which were suspended five years after they were repealed in Britain, helped give rise to

abolitionist discourses of prostitution, discourses which contributed to a host of attempts to regulate and eliminate sexual commerce, including the ITPA. Criminalization of sex workers and/or clients focuses on visibility, on prostitution that is 'seen' by 'the public', and on the existence of urban red light zones like Kamathipura.

Kamathipura's existence, and the existence of the women, children, men, and *hijras* who live and/or work there, is mediated through its existence as an object that can and must be seen. One aspect of this mediation is the way in which the criminalization of prostitution is expressed as a criminal sense of literally *being seen* as a red light zone. The other aspect of this mediation is the proliferation of visual representations of the district and, by extension, of 'prostitution' itself. These representations are being produced by media, state and non-state actors, and by local social networks.

If stated, the driving force behind these representations is said to be that of producing awareness, concern, and even action on behalf of sex workers in India. Sznajder's latter definition of public compassion as 'related to the market society, in which an extending exchange of goods and services unintentionally also extends the moral concern for strangers' reflects this intention, though the result of these representations is more often 'spectacular' in the Debordian sense. A key element of the definition of a 'spectacle' in this sense is that, rather than being mobilized to action or concern, the audience—in this case, 'the public'—participates in acts of shared voyeurism. These acts are criticized unequivocally by Sznajder in his use of Marx's argument that compassion is 'nothing other than the narcissistic desires of an exploitative bourgeoisie to feel good about itself' (Höjjer, 2003: 20). I do not mean to suggest that the notion of 'public' in this context is restricted to the middle and upper classes. Given the range of representational modes I have discussed in this article—television and print media, billboards, NGO and governmental reports and presentations, as well as gossip, opinions and rumors disseminated through fluid social networks—it would be impossible to limit the notion of audience to some generalized notion of the bourgeoisie. However, using the notion of spectacle as that which 'maintains the status quo', it is plausible to think of these representations as sets of practices which reiterate and maintain norms vis-à-vis gender and sexuality. In other words, whereas 'the public' is not a euphemism for 'the bourgeoisie', the 'public' does become a way of naming non-sex workers. Rather than maintain class divisions per se, participating in the discourse of material abjection in Mumbai's red light areas serves to maintain distinctions between sex workers and non-sex workers, because members of 'the public' are able to participate in the *spectacle* of prostitution by specifically *not* visibly participating in prostitution itself. The spectacle is constituted through the construction of otherness, in which the spectacle represents the sex-worker-ness against which the audience understands its own non-sex-worker-ness, and the normative moralities from which it derives.

The power of how prostitution in Kamathipura is represented is evident in the daily life in the district through repeated references among sex workers to raids and remand homes, the police, and the assertion of having arrived there by one's own choice. Spectacular representations of Kamathipura as abject create a more normative image than would representations of sexual commerce as being, for example, one strategy among many for attaining a sustainable livelihood. While Kamathipura has offered a rare opportunity for attaining slightly more stable housing and work than other options would for some, the serious consequences of social stigma and illegality deriving from sexual commerce for sex workers are apparent. In this regard, one Mumbai sex worker asserted that 'Sex workers have a bad destiny. Domestic workers have a good one.' Despite sex workers' ability to support entire families in the city, and to send much needed remittances to their villages as well, the stigma of prostitution as a threat to individual and family honor precludes its open acknowledgement. Instead, narratives about daughters working as day-wage workers are woven throughout the story of what the family 'knows' about how these remittances are being earned and sent back home. The epistemology of work between the city and the village, and in the city itself, is layered. Women in Kamathipura often spoke of the complex relationship between 'knowing' and 'believing' in terms of what could be spoken about without suffering social and economic consequences. Ultimately, the ground used for navigating the distance between what is seen, spoken, and known about sexual commerce in the city is constituted by shared engagements with stigma, honor, and law.

Kamathipura stands as one example of how the politics of prostitution and visibility produce one another in Mumbai. Extending this argument beyond Kamathipura, there are myriad spaces throughout the city where sexual commerce occurs, including streets, minor red light districts, and spaces for soliciting other kinds of manual labor (Shah, 2005). These spaces being less visibly used for sex work, and more liminal as zones for soliciting labor, contribute to a less regulated degree of stigma, police raids, and the like there. In a sense, the visibility of prostitution in Kamathipura produces the invisibility of sexual commerce throughout the city by essentially driving it underground. This is unlike Calcutta, where the most visible spaces for sexual commerce are also the most visible spaces for sex worker-led organizing. The Sonagachi Project in Calcutta's main red light area has been in existence since the early 1990s, and has pioneered a model of peer-led regulation of red light areas to enforce nearly universal condom use, to monitor, address, and prevent trafficking into red light areas, and to advocate against and prevent police harassment. Both the Sonagachi Project and groups like VAMP, a collective of sex workers associated with an HIV/AIDS-related NGO in Sangli, southern Maharashtra, call into question the lack of a speaking subject in discourses on prostitution in Mumbai. This is not to imply that sex workers

in Kamathipura do not engage with questions of law, visibility, etc. However, unlike Calcutta and Sangli, which are respectively urban and rural, Mumbai has not been able to maintain sex worker-led collectives or organizations. Rather than producing an organized response from sex workers in Mumbai, the legal structures in place have tended to produce more *invisible* sex work, in the form of sexual commerce conducted in greater secrecy, or conducted more episodically. At the same time, Kamathipura proliferates with a range of service-oriented and abolitionist NGOs.

Kamathipura's iconicity as a red light district in India is unique, partly due to the Hindi film industry and other venues for its amplification. In the post-9/11 era, as governmental concerns about trafficking and cross-border migrations have intensified, Kamathipura will most likely face greater degrees of changing legal regulations, and will continue to be the subject of debate. What will ultimately develop in this space will be both more visible in law and in 'public' view, while considerably less visible in practice.

## NOTES

1. The question of definitions in the discourse on 'trafficking in women' is itself a complex one; each 'official' document produced by a governmental body or the United Nations reflects much debate between various factions about terms. The crux of these debates revolves around questions of whether 'prostitution', 'trafficking', and 'violence' are equivalent terms, and whether the concepts of 'choice' and 'consent' are at all relevant in developing legal interventions and policies regarding sexual commerce. The sense of the term 'trafficking in persons' that I use in this article is gleaned from a general reading of the contemporary feminist debate on prostitution, beginning with the International Conference on Population and Development (ICPD), held in Cairo in 1994.
2. I use the term 'anti-trafficking' loosely here, given that there is no converse category of 'pro-trafficking advocate'. Rather, 'anti-trafficking' here signifies the ways in which this moniker operates in human rights discourses, to identify organizations and individuals who advocate the abolition of prostitution itself, and who argue that 'prostitution', 'violence', and 'trafficking' are equivalent terms.
3. I refer in part to the *Trafficking in Persons Report*, produced yearly by the US State Department, in which India has been ranked as a 'Tier 2' country (US State Department, 2004). I discuss the report in more detail in the following section.
4. 'Whoever, in any public place or within sight of, and in such manner as to be seen or heard from, any public place, whether from within any building or house or not by words, gestures, wilful exposure of her person (whether by sitting by a window or on the balcony of a building or house or in any other way), or otherwise tempts or endeavours to tempt, or attracts or endeavours to attract the attention of, any person for the purpose of prostitution; or solicits or molests

- any person, or loiters or acts in such manner as to cause obstruction or annoyance to persons residing nearby or passing by such public place or to offend against public decency, for the purpose of prostitution . . .’ (Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act, 1990: 9)
5. Kamathipura is a slum area, which means, among other things, that there is a great deal of irregular and transitory housing. Even with a systematic survey, it would be difficult to have an exact count of how many sex workers live and work in the district. This estimate is based on reports from local NGOs who provide services to sex workers in the district.
  6. For example, in *Saathiya* (2002).
  7. Bobby Jordan, a reporter for a South African newspaper, is more explicit about this in his characterization of Kamathipura as ‘the fleshy centre of India’s HIV time-bomb’ (Jordan, 2002).

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

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