CROSSING BOUNDARIES

Bangladeshi sex workers in Calcutta

It is not strange that Munni and Panna seek solace and legitimacy in an identity which is neither here nor there. Nor is it irrational for them to belong here while retaining ties of belonging there. This dualism stretches across borders between Bangladesh and India, embedded in a world of concealment and exposure where the legal brushes the illegal.

Munni and Panna are not uncommon names in Sonagachi and Kalighat – Calcutta’s brothel areas. Sometimes Munni and Panna take on different, Hindu names. Either way, it’s difficult to ascertain whether Munni and Panna are internal migrants from West Bengal or cross-border Bangladeshi migrants. If the latter, they remain unidentified by the Indian state by assimilating within the larger population of sex workers in Calcutta. They presently live in ghettos – a marked departure from their previous mobility. Their entry across an international border into from their previous mobility. Their first years are spent in bondage with brothel keepers who take the lion’s share of their earnings; later they work independently. They negotiate daily with pimps and police and in more recent years with HIV/AIDS interventionists – mainly public health officials and social workers. Pimps, police, social workers and politicians seek them out as stakeholders and trump cards to generate revenue, claim health targets and distribute voter cards.

The demand for the legal recognition of sex work has since 1995 been spearheaded by the Durbar Mahila Samanwya Committee, a platform for sex workers who want prostitution recognised as an occupation, to free it from its undependable, highly exploitative status. The Durbar and other NGOs’ attempts to unionise and confederate the women who have improved Munni and Panna’s position. 1 The geographic, cultural and linguistic proximity between Bangladeshi and West Bengali helps Munni and Panna to pass as natives of either. They can thus conceal their cross-border identities and march ahead undaunted by their status as illegal migrants. With a banner in one hand and a charter of demands in the other, they do not shun public scrutiny but join the voices demanding workers’ rights, addressing media and political forums and seeking a better world for their children, most of whom are enrolled in government and NGO-run city schools. They revel in an almost festival-like celebration of their new identity: erecting stalls at public exhibitions, selling placards on safe sex and displaying their culinary skills.

Like others in the brothel areas of Calcutta, they no longer inhabit the world of the forbidden, hidden from public consciousness. By claiming a larger space through much publicised events in and around the city, Munni and Panna cling to the affirmation of NGO support that accords them entitlement to certain rights. NGO interventions have transformed the ‘victim’ of human trafficking from a disempowered woman shrouded from public view into a ‘sex worker’ who transgresses social boundaries in order to attain a legitimate place in society.

To home and back

Munni and Panna are not just subjects of intervention within brothels. While their physical presence might be used to demand progressive workers’ rights legislation, their migration to these ghettos is also a target of NGO intervention to prevent sexual bondage. While some NGOs advocate forming alliances with trade unions, such as the Benodi Trade Union, others (such as Sanlaap) shun forums that demand workers’ rights, arguing that it is more crucial to prevent sexual trafficking, especially child prostitution. The public representation of these women reflect NGO ideologies that steer advocacy and interventions.

Typically, when women are identified as Bangladeshi victims of sexual trafficking, they are placed within safe shelters and subsequently sent back to Bangladeshi. This transfer back ‘home’ is seen as the best possible solution to end their trauma, aided by legal guidance, NGO vigilance and diplomatic good will. However, not all of them want to return, and even if they do, they might not find their way ‘home’, some spend months or years in similar safe shelters in Bangladeshi. Rashida (not her real name), whom I met in Khilini, Bangladesh, in May 2004, was sheltered by a rural NGO. The custodian of a small savings group scheme in her village, she was seduced by her lover to hand over collective funds and travel with him to India. Upon her repatriation to Bangladesh after months of sexual assault and torture, she still waits for her family, her lover and now hostile villagers to accept her.

Munni and Panna are not resigned to a life in Calcutta. Only in moments of trust do they reveal their national identity. Occasionally, they divulge that they travel to Rajshahi in Bangladesh, and not to Bengal in West Bengal, for Eid, sexually bribing the border patrol to claim a ‘home’ left behind. Their life experiences are not rooted but rather in constant movement back and forth – a state of being that is not always understood by their world of familiar faces in Calcutta.

Notes


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