

‘There are many streets... But I don’t go to them... Because they are very narrow’: Dynamics of Sex Work and Space in Delhi and Kolkata

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### **Abstract**

This paper takes a comparative look at the practice of sex work in a variety of spaces including homes, hotels, bushes, spas, and brothels in the two cities of Delhi and Kolkata. Its underlying objective is to understand the dynamic relationship between sex work and physical space. Based on qualitative in-depth interviews, it is an examination of how the materiality of different spaces shapes the everyday experiences of sex workers. I capture the different strategies employed to manage the performance of sex work in these spaces. Intricately tied to the spatiality of sex work is the fear of being seen and the way this fear controls how one goes to work every day and what kind of a space one chooses to work in. In this study, I also analyse the social relations between sex workers and different actors within the various spaces of sex work. These relations shape the way a particular space is perceived by the sex workers.

**Keywords:** Sex Work, Spatiality, Space

### **List of Abbreviations**

AIDS = acquired immunodeficiency syndrome

AC = Air Conditioner

CBOs = Community-based Organisations

NGO = Non-Governmental Organisation

RLA = Red-light area

## Glossary

1. *Āgrāwāli* = elite sex workers in Sonagachi, known to hail from the city of Agra
2. *bāri* = house & *bāriwāli* = the person renting out the house to the sex worker
4. *behen* = sister
5. *dadbe* = small, confining room
6. *dalāl* = pimp
7. *dalāli* = pimp's share of the money for bringing clients
8. *dālpotti* = the area where pulses are traded in wholesale
9. *jhamelā* = trouble
10. *jijā* = sister's husband
11. *kamre* = rooms
12. *jagah wāli/karwane wāli* = a madam who lets the sex workers use her room/house to transact with the clients in exchange for money, and *karnewāli* = sex worker
13. *khāt* = a bed made from jute, sometimes also used to refer to beds made from other materials
14. *kurtā/kameez* = a tunic worn over a *salwār*
15. *mālkin* = owner
16. *māmā* = mother's brother
17. *mausi* = mother's sister
18. *thiā* = a place where someone is generally found, sits or operates a business from or does any other work
19. *salāmi* = one-time payment to a landlord
20. *salwār* = lower piece of clothing, similar to a trouser, with a string to tie it around the waist

21. *sāsi* = home-based illegal liquor sellers

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**Introduction**

This paper delves into a categorical examination of the relationship between sex work and the physical spaces in which sex work operates in the two Indian cities of Delhi and Kolkata. The objective is to fill the gap highlighted in the undertheorised relationship between sex work and space in existing scholarship by revisiting sex work through the lens of physical space. The fieldwork has been conducted in the working-class localities of Delhi and in Sonagachi — the largest red-light area of Kolkata. The participants comprise of women sex workers aged between 20 and 60 selected using convenient and snowball sampling method. The reason why I chose these two cities is twofold: One, both the cities were the capitals of India during the British colonial era; both have their own history of colonial-era prostitution<sup>1</sup>. These histories were not peripheral to the Empire. In fact, the British empire played an active role in fostering those histories. Two, how sex work operates in both the cities is shaped to a great extent by the difference in attitudes of the respective administrations. The experiences of the sex workers in these cities also differ due to the different types of leadership of the sex workers’ collectives. During one of my initial field visits, at an event of the sex workers’ collectives a sex worker from another state voiced how they wished that the leadership in their state could be as strong as in West Bengal, hinting at *Durbār*<sup>2</sup>. Hence, the combination of colonial similarity and administrative differences makes Delhi and Kolkata the perfect locations for a comparative study. The fact of colonial similarity encompasses the colonisation of the institution of prostitution in these cities, leading to the development of Red-Light Areas in the colonial capitals. This does not imply that Red-Light Areas were not created in other

cities. However, specified earlier, both Delhi and Kolkata have been the capitals of the British empire, which makes them stand out from the other cities. The administrative difference stands for how the respective present-day state governments engage with the sex workers. While Delhi government is known to follow a more rescue and rehabilitation model<sup>1</sup> focusing on measures as skilling in tailoring and candle-making as forms of alternative livelihood, an idea that has not found much acceptance among sex workers due to difficulties like inability to thread the needle after reaching a certain age and low-pay in the candle-making business, the government of West Bengal has demonstrated a more inclusive attitude towards the sex workers<sup>2</sup>. As a researcher, Delhi is a much more familiar city to me given it is my hometown, while Kolkata being the comparative other brings with itself the language barrier and other cultural differences. The spatial context of research was also different in the two cities due to the different degree and nature of control exercised by the different organisations over the interactions between researchers and the researched. The sex workers in Delhi interacted with me much more freely. The reason was twofold. Firstly, the language and cultural barrier. Secondly, the fact that their time was not as tightly regimented by organisational roles in the sex workers' collective as was the case in Kolkata.

### **1. Materiality of Different Spaces**

To fulfil the objective of this study, I look at how sex work operates in a variety of spaces, such as homes, hotels, bushes, spas, and brothels. I explore how the materiality of these spaces shapes the reality of sex work for the sex workers. According to Stevi Jackson and Sue Scott, 'When we engage in sex with another person it is not about abstract bodies meeting in

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<sup>1</sup><https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/delhi/delhi-2-special-shelters-to-rehabilitate-sex-workers/articleshow/92323147.cms>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.theweek.in/wire-updates/national/2025/12/06/ces8-wb-sir-sex-workers-camp.html>

asocial space, but embodied social beings interacting in a social context, bringing with them a good deal of cultural and biographical baggage' (Jackson and Scott 2007). By implication, this can also be applied to sex-as-work. It is important to understand the sexual interaction that takes place between a sex worker and her client as not merely a mechanical monetary–sexual exchange between two people, one of whom is in the business of selling sex and the other in the pursuit of buying it, but also as an interaction that takes place within a socio-spatial context. The workplace of a sex worker, be it a brothel, a street corner and a lane, a hotel room, home or a park is not an asocial space. Each of these spaces creates the conditions for the interaction, the experience, between a sex worker and her client. According to Rohini Sahni and Kalyan Shankar, 'In an urban context, the physical structures could be differentiated as the overt and covert locations of sex work. A brothel in a RLA for instance, is a conspicuous location recognised as a venue for sex work. A lodge or a hotel, or public spaces such as gardens outside the RLA could also be venues; but these are mainstream structures that get tapped, rather than used exclusively for the purpose' (Sahni and Shankar 2008). The inconspicuous locations of sex work act not only as a safety measure against police raids, but also enable the sex workers to live a less stigmatised life, such as in the case of home-based sex work or a *thiā*.

Home-based sex work in Delhi is largely practiced in a space called a *thiā*. A *thiā*, as known in Hindi, is a place where someone is generally found, sits or operates a business from or does any other work. A madam, also known as a *jagah wāli* or a *karwane wāli*, makes a part of her own residence available for rent on a daily basis. Within the space of sex work, a *thiā* is one of the many nondescript housing structures in the narrow lanes of lower-middle class residential areas with two-three storeys of housing. What is referred to as a *thiā* by the women engaged in sex work is called a 'hotspot' by the CBOs, and the *jagah wāli* is known as a network operator among the CBOs. A hotspot is where two or more than two sex workers visit

daily, stay and work throughout the day, depending on the number of clients who visit. The domesticity and the associated sense of respectability with the physical spatiality of a home acts as a cover for sex work. However, the idea of practicing sex work within the spatiality of a home, also evokes feelings of disruption in the idea of domesticity. Witold Rybczynski argues that ‘To speak of domesticity is to describe a set of felt emotions, not a single attribute. Domesticity has to do with family, intimacy, and a devotion to the home, as well as with a sense of the house as embodying — not only harbouring — these sentiments’ (Rybczynski 2014). I will elaborate more on domesticity, intimacy in relation to sex workers in the following section. Before we do that, we need to understand how the spatial categorisation is done within the sex work community, followed by different features of home-based sex work.

It is the place of solicitation that determines the spatial categorisation of sex workers, regardless of whether the interactions between the sex workers and the clients take place at the site of solicitation or not.

Home-based sex work includes those who leave their own home in the morning, share a space for work with another colleague or a friend at the latter’s home and share half of their earnings with that friend. Now, let us say the client came home and expressed the desire to not have sex but to roam around the city or watch a movie together in a cinema hall. It will still be categorised as home-based because the client is picking me up from home, and not from street or elsewhere.

-J, Delhi, 2022

The facilities accessible to the sex workers or rather the lack of them, largely define the materiality of the inside of a *thiā*. A *thiā* is operated with the bare minimum resources, along with the indifferent attitude of the network operator. A sex worker narrates:

It was a small room. It had a mattress lying on the floor. And a small table fan was installed. That's it. There was no bathroom at aunty's place. Had to go to the open terrace. She had hung merely a curtain on the grill and nothing else. She did not let you go if you want to poop and asked us go to our home instead. And the other place I used to go to, did have a bathroom, a bed as well. A ceiling fan was installed. There was another place which had an AC, bed, bathroom, everything attached to the room.

- H, Delhi, 2022

Many hotspots have unhygienic working conditions. The bedding is not changed for months. A cloth piece used for cleaning oneself reportedly lays around the room and is recirculated among other workers or clients as it is. A sex worker complains about used condoms laying around. She once caught a severe skin infection from a bed at a *thiā* she used to frequent.

Bigger rooms can feel inconducive to carrying out the business of sex work in a discreet fashion. On the face of it, bigger rooms mean more space for more sex workers waiting to work and more clients awaiting their turn, but more sex workers and more clients at one place will attract greater attention from the residents in the neighbourhood, who might complain to the police. Smaller rooms thus help to keep a low profile, ensuring that limited clients can come at a time inside the *thiā*. Moreover, establishments such as illegal liquor stores that compete with the practice of sex work in notoriety unwittingly aid in the task of distracting one from the sex

work practiced at these sites. For example, the presence of a *sāsi* below one's building serves as a distraction, facilitating the practice of sex work.

There are floor-wise houses like ours all around. Below us are *sāsis*. So, because of the *sāsi*, neighbours in the street think of the client as the *sāsi*'s visitor. So, then sex work happens in the guise of that. You can't get it done properly in a society because then the public starts making an issue. So, this work happens discreetly. We can't do it openly. We have to live in the society. Otherwise, we have to otherwise listen to the what the society says. Mine is a single room with an attached kitchen of mine. So, if any client comes, I go inside the kitchen. I don't call many people. I call them one by one. So, they get adjusted in one room itself. The visiting sex worker also calls one by one only. There is only one sex worker who stays throughout the day. Because if a customer calls, a sex worker can't be called on the spot. The rest of them bring their clients with them. They do their work and then leave.

- R, Delhi, 2023

However, what is enabling for the network operator, is precluding for the sex worker. Knowing that there is another client waiting outside the room is discomforting. When neighbours sit at their entrances, it discourages clients from entering freely. These situations raise privacy concerns for the sex worker and the client and have to be managed by the network operator:

The second *thiā* has only one empty room and one kitchen. So, if two clients come simultaneously, then one of them stands in the kitchen. That makes us uncomfortable as we hesitate while working. What if the other person shoots a video or snaps a picture?

There is only a curtain. A lot is visible from half a curtain. There is no door. If the door is shut, the madam asks the client to deposit his phone with her. There was an incident once. It has a bit of troublesome environment. There are *sāsis* below the one room built upstairs. The neighbouring women keep sitting outside the house. One has to be careful there, wait for them to go away so that the client can be called in.

- S, Delhi, 2023

As a safeguard in case of a shift in the place of the interaction, some network operators keep clients' identification cards with them. Another salient feature of home-based sex work is the limited time given for the interaction between the sex worker and the client as is illustrated by the following narrative from an interview:

It will be my responsibility if it is my client. It so happens in many spaces that it is a very old-time client who is visiting, and I know that he won't cause any kind of a crisis situation. If the client is new, has visited only a few times, and if he wants to take a girl out, in that case, many madams keep the client's ID with them which the client can take back if the girl returns safely, or else... In case any crisis occurs, then we have proof to find him... The home-based one has very little time limit. You can stick around there only till the time the client is ejaculating. You go inside, you have sex, and come out. That's it.

- J, Delhi, 2022

Compared to a *thiā*, where the madam keeps track of time and interrupts the interaction by knocking on the door, a hotel provides uninterrupted and a more private space for the sex worker and the client. The secluded location of a hotel, away from densely populated areas

provides a more comfortable environment for the sex worker to operate freely. This includes better interiors and lack of disturbance. To increase her earnings, a *karwane wāli* is always more concerned with the time spent by a client with the sex worker.

I like hotels. Here, they start banging the door – ‘It’s been an hour! So much time has passed, come out! How much more time will it take?’. The thing with the hotels is, it is for 24 hours, whether you stay for an hour, whether for four hours, 10 hours or the whole day. The money is charged for the whole day - 1000, or 1200 rupees. Here, you pay 1000 rupees as well, still they would bang the door – ‘Open up!’. It gets very disturbing.

- C, Delhi, 2022

Let us now look at a drastically different kind of space — a park bush. Due to lack of storage facility in a park, condom supply is restricted compared to a hotspot or home, where there is always a stock of condoms available. When the sex worker runs out of condoms, she is compelled to engage in sex without any protection. This leads to a higher risk and increased occurrence of cases of sexually-transmitted diseases. Working behind the bushes also leads to severe injuries:

If you get the time to spread out a scarf there, you do it, else you have to lie down on the ground itself. You are so compelled. You get hurt as well. In the waist, in the back. What can we do? We are helpless, we need the money.

- O, Delhi, 2023

Irrespective of these concerns, for an experienced worker in that kind of a space, bushes were preferred over a hotel.

It is suitable there because if we go to a hotel to see a customer, he drains your body completely for the two thousand rupees that he pays you. And we earn the same two thousand rupees in the bushes such that we don't even feel it in our body. Why? Because, the customers come, you remove half of your clothes, put on the condom quickly and they leave once the work is done. They are also scared for themselves. It rarely happens that there is an accident where you get caught. Otherwise, there is no such thing. It feels the best to work in the bushes. You have locked me in this room. After shutting the door, now that I am naked, I am helpless. I can't go anywhere. You would use me as you like. But you can't do that in the bushes. At most, someone can slap you.

- O, Delhi, 2022

Outstation spas are a preferred space of work compared to the local spas due to all the facilities including food and accommodation provided there. K was on her period and having a difficult time sitting. When I asked her if there was a hot water bottle available in the spa, she replied:

No, it is not available everywhere. When we go out of station, we get everything including the bottle. Because there is a kitchen there. Here, they have just made a pantry to show-off to people. But there is nothing in it. Only drinking water. What do they care for? They won't even have a paracetamol tablet here at the counter.

- K, Delhi, 2022

From the streets of Delhi, let me now take you to the lanes of Sonagachi in Kolkata. There is a term in Hindi language that describes the smallest rooms rented out in Sonagachi the best - *dadbe*, rather than *kamre*. *Dadbe* stands for compartmentalised blocks. Living inside such compartments is congested in nature such that there is not much room for movement.

The conversations around the materiality of space with the sex workers of Sonagachi centres majorly around the civic issue of water supply, dilapidated buildings, cleanliness, and the width of the streets. Brothels are considered a safer place to work compared to going out of Sonagachi to work on your own, whether you are a flying sex worker who visits the area during the day, rents a room for the duration of the transaction as and when a client is solicited, or someone renting a room on a more permanent basis under the *salāmi* system<sup>3</sup>.

The room was around eight by ten foot in size. A small almirah was there inside the wall covered by a glass shutter. And nothing else. There was a deck<sup>4</sup> to listen to the music. There was a verandah. I used to cook there. I would attend to a client whenever I did. I used to live upstairs. There were many friends upstairs. Water was downstairs<sup>5</sup>. Had to lift it... Water would come once in the morning, once in the evening for an hour each... We tell the city councillors to keep the streets clean, raise the issue of insufficient and dirty water supply. There are many streets. But I don't go to them. But I like this *dālpotti* very much. There are other streets... I don't like them. Because they are very narrow. It is very wide here. You can stand here or there... We ask the *bāri* owners to raise the platform of the entrance to prevent water from entering inside during heavy rains. In the summers, there is no AC. Those who have rooms on the terrace face trouble during the winters as well as during the rains. It is important for a sex worker to have a nice room.

- A, Kolkata, 2022

Smaller rooms would just have a *khāt*. Work is done on the *khāt*. You pee and wash up near the thin drainage outlet on the side. No separate washroom. A-category houses are big. They have a washroom. So, a flying sex worker would go and take a bath in the 'Pay and Use' facility. In the winters, *mālkin* gives a blanket but what kind of a blanket is it? If I took two customers in the night, I wrapped it and kept it aside. Next day, if I bring another customer, she would bring me the same blanket or to another sex worker and client. That's how you catch a disease... Corporation puts up boards outside broken buildings. I scan it first before entering. Once the roof fell in my *mālkin's* house in the night. There was a sound... They want her to die so that the house can be rebuilt. Her *bāriwāli* is an *Āgrāwāli*<sup>6</sup>. She is a scoundrel. She exploits the rentees.

- E, Kolkata, 2022

While the materiality shapes how a particular space is experienced by the sex worker and determines why one space is preferred over another, the very same materiality leads to the need to strategise the practice of sex work on an everyday basis, as shown in the following section.

## 2. Managing Sex Work in Different Spaces

Different spaces require the sex workers and the network operators to use a variety of ways to manage the practice of sex work. From the timing of the arrival of the clients, their demography, to the frequency of their visits, and ways of addressing them, everything is strategised in a home-based setting in a residential neighbourhood. Performing sex work in park bushes has its own set of challenges. What is common between a *thiā*, a park bush, a spa

and a hotel is the cut that has to be paid to the network operator, the security guard, the spa owner, and at the hotel reception, respectively. A portion of each cut in each of these spaces goes to the police personnel.

When the space of the family and the space of business, that too a stigmatised one, collide with each other, the 'homeliness' of the home needs to be managed. The frequency of visitors disrupts the domestic 'pattern of activity and the role people play in those activities' (Giesecking *et al* 2014). Due to the frequency of male visitors, the need to give a socially acceptable label of recognition to a client–sex worker relationship is paramount. The ambiguity or the socially undefined nature of the relationship could raise eyebrows in the neighbourhood. This socially questionable frequency of such visitors is thus justified by the use of the kinship term *māmā* for the clients. In the words of a participant:

I avoid the other residents in the street for them to not know much. For example, one [client] has come. So, the children, whenever someone comes, they say, "*Māmā aa gaye! Māmā aa gaye!*", so that the neighbours do not suspect. Like that men come inside. Say, I call one by one or in a pair of two. If one sits, the other leaves. If one is freed up then the other one leaves. The only thing is, I don't let it become crowded.

- M, Delhi, 2023

Sylvia Vatuk remarks in her paper on 'fictive kinship in urban North India' (Vatuk 1969), 'it is said that the fictive "brother-sister" tie is a good cover for an illicit sexual relationship, for the association of such a couple will not openly be questioned... [It prevents] the suspicion of an illicit relationship... between persons of opposite sex' (Vatuk 1969). As is

evident from the interview narrative above, the use of the kinship term helps in the management of social perception.

A religious image, control over the demography and frequency of clientele is vital for carrying out sex work discreetly in a home-based setting. It is also important for a home-based sex worker, if she is also a network operator, to not let her place become a hotspot, where sex workers can be found in large numbers in case of a raid. Crisis and reputation management comes in handy during the time of any such crisis.

The external environment of a *thiā* has to be managed as well to ensure that sex work can be practiced discreetly:

The second *thiā* has only one empty room and one kitchen. So, if two clients come simultaneously, then one of them stands in the kitchen. That makes us uncomfortable as we hesitate while working. What if the other person shoots a video or snaps a picture? There is a curtain. A lot is visible from half a curtain. There is no door. If the door is shut, the madam asks the client to deposit his phone with her. There was an incident once. It has a bit of troublesome environment. There are *sāsis* below the one room built upstairs. The neighbouring women keep sitting outside the house. One has to be careful there, wait for them to go away so that the client can be called in.

- S, Delhi, 2023

Phil Hubbard and Teela Sanders argue that ‘[c]ontrolling the environment is a tactic sex workers use to prevent attacks and to ensure that sexual negotiations and transactions go without incident’ (Hubbard and Sanders 2003).

For an open space like the bushes in parks, strategic clothing is crucial to practice sex work due to lack of privacy. The choice of flexible and loose clothing by the sex workers is a way to compensate for the lack of conducive space for doing the work.

Like we work in the bushes, so we would take the money first, and then remove one leg from our pants. If he asks to remove it completely for a hundred more, so then we will just be wearing the kurta. Our pants will be with elastic so that they can be worn quickly. Wearing a *salwār* can cause trouble. How many times will you first pull it up and then tie it? If he asks us to pull up our *kurtā* a bit to suck on our breasts, hold them, so then we unhook our bra and pull up and pull down the kurta quickly. If you want to wear a t-shirt, it should be a loose one. Don't choose tight-fitting clothes. Fitted ones will remain fitted. They won't be suitable for the work. Those who wear *salwar-kameez* change after coming to the park. Because if we waste so much of time in that, we don't know what may happen with us suddenly. It so happens sometimes that they even run away with the clothes. So that's why we stick it one leg so that our clothes remain with us. The one who pays more to remove both the legs, so even then we wrap it around our arms so that no one takes it away.

- O, Delhi, 2023

In the case of the *bāris* in Sonagachi, which are at the top of the hierarchy, any visit by a client is mediated and managed by a pimp. An experienced sex worker illustrates:

This is an A-category *bāri*. You must have heard of it. The *dalāl* brings you here. No one can come here directly. If the customer pays four hundred rupees, then twenty-five

rupees need to be paid as '*dalāli*' to the pimps. It is a rented house.

- D, Kolkata, 2022

Since sex work is a stigmatised form of work, this stigmatisation lies at the root of the fear of being seen working as a sex worker, or the fear of being known or identified as a sex worker. These fears make the issue of confidentiality paramount in the lives of sex workers and places the researcher in a position of responsibility while researching their lives.

### **3. The Fear of Being Seen**

For a sex worker, 'being seen' is a phenomenon holding multiple meanings depending on the context. Being seen can be important for business when you want to solicit the right type of clients. However, being seen can also be something you are trying to avoid as a sex worker if you fear the possibility of coming across a family member or an acquaintance who is unaware of your line of work. The fear of being seen within and around the premises was prevalent among sex workers even if they work in a hotel and not in a residential space as in the case of a *thiā*, even when a hotel was preferred over a *thiā*. The invisible societal gaze watching you feels omnipresent while entering the premises of a hotel. The constant watchfulness of the societal eye pervading the mind is unsettling.

When we go inside a hotel room, so it seems like everyone outside is looking at me wondering why I am the only one to go there. That is the gate of a hotel. I have gone there today. But before that, several people must come and go. So, it seems all those around that place are looking at us. So, I enter inside keeping that environment outside

in my mind, which makes me feel strange that certain person was looking at me and might be thinking why I came here, with whom did I come.

- J, Delhi, 2023

Commuting to work and back home on foot was considered risky.

I make an excuse to the kids that I will return by this time. I tell the clients to come and pick me up. They offer to pay for the ride instead or offer to drop me. If I insist, they come. We go in the evening. I sit in the car and enter straight into the house. We don't go on foot for the risk of being seen while returning home.

- U, Delhi, 2023

When I shared my observation of some sex workers hiding their faces from the camera during a Human Rights Day rally, a community-based leader from Sonagachi explained how sex workers have to hide their stigmatised profession from family members, and compared this fact with the non-community members working in the organisation.

It means they are flying [sex workers]. They come in the morning [to Sonagachi] and leave in the evening. They come on the pretext of some other work. So, when she will be seen in the newspaper, in the media, she will be questioned [by her family]. But the thing is, when our non-community members come here to do service, it is known in their families that they have come here for work, to do service. But when a sex worker leaves for other kind of work, and she will go home, her photograph in Sonagachi will be clicked, they will say so you don't do domestic work, you work in Sonagachi.

- H, Kolkata, 2022

Assertion of one's identity as a sex worker was not something that is always considered a welcome proposition even in spaces of solidarity. There was a visible discomfort in asserting one is a sex worker<sup>7</sup> in meetings of the collectives that I had a chance to observe. The need for politico-legal visibility and recognition as a collective of sex workers did not coincide with the individual level. This meant that sex workers wanted visibility as a collective working for their rights, without standing out as individual sex workers. A participant questioned being asked to assert one's identity as a sex worker in organisation's meetings

Why should I say I am a sex worker? I am in the collective, that is my proof. I don't need to stand and utter in front of four other people. I have an identity. I have the courage to say it in front of other people that I am a sex worker, but the sisters standing behind me don't have it. But it is enough for me that you are standing with me. It is enough for showing the world that this is a sex workers' collective.

- J, Delhi, 2022

Lack of privacy, fear of violation of privacy, fear of being seen by people, lack of bodily safety was a major concern in the bushes.

We do get scared but what can we do. We get the courage. The police personnel came once while I was working. I was new back then. I was standing, entered the bushes without realising there was barbed wire. My back got scraped.

- O, Delhi, 2023

Working within the red-light district brought with itself a sense of safety from encountering an acquaintance from one's village who might have migrated to the city.

Sex workers don't go outside to work, for the fear of being seen by anyone from their village. I don't like it. It is not necessary. Even if one doesn't go outside, one can earn their livelihood here as well. One may meet some acquaintance if we step outside, someone may see us. It is not necessary for us to go out [of Sonagachi].

- A, Kolkata, 2022

Erving Goffman highlights through the classic example of the prostitute, as to how for us as individuals, it is of huge importance that the people with whom we do not live anymore, should remember us the way we were when we left our native places. Despite our accumulation into the city and its culture, there is a perpetual fear of encountering an acquaintance who would gauge us and report back to the people in the village (Goffman 1963). Even though we leave our native places, we want to be connected at least through our memories of others and others' memories of us, since they are a part of our social roots. Any socially unacceptable revelation could lead to cutting-off of social ties permanently.

In a nutshell, the safety of the space for sex work has to be socially manufactured and socially managed. Techniques like the use of fictive kinship terms to address the clients, or

referring to the NGO one is associated with for support as one's workplace in front of one's family members or referring to visits to clients as meetings at the NGO, religious association and being ritualistic — is used as a cover for practicing sex work and maintaining the image of being socially respectable. Mere materiality of a space does not automatically make it a safe space for sex work. This is to say that a mere brick and mortar structure does not automatically award safety to the transaction between a sex worker and a client, for example if one were to compare a bush to a *thiā*. Beyond 'safety,' as condoms are called in the sex work community in Delhi, the transaction also needs to be safe from the prying eyes of the police, the camera, the 'society', and one's family by extension. The support of the other sex workers in the community, including the presence of a madam or a co-worker who can refer you to trustworthy clients is paramount in the social management of these spaces. This brings me to elaborate upon the different social relations that are formed between the sex workers and the actors within and around these different spaces, whether at the individual level or at the level of community.

#### **4. Social Relations in Different Spaces**

The relations between sex workers and network operators are marked by a lack of trust. This is manifest in the phenomenon of client poaching. However, there are other instances where the families of the sex workers and the families of the network operators intermingle. A common observation across sex work that is home-based, in hotels or parks is the expectation by non-clients like the husband of the madam, the caretaker of the hotel, the security guard of the park for sexual favours. New clients cannot be trusted easily due to the fear and actual instances of videos being recorded by the clients.

The phenomena of client poaching within the space of home-based sex work is quite prevalent. After a client gets comfortable with a sex worker, contact numbers are exchanged.

This enables the sex worker to slowly build a network of a few clients from different *thiās*. A participant shares how she took only a few months to start working independently after poaching clients from a madam. This requires overcoming the fear instilled by the madam about meeting the wrong kind of clients.

I hardly worked at a couple of *thiās* for three to four months. That's all. I had formed a regular client base by then. They ask for our numbers at the *thiās*. Initially, we would refuse for the fear of infuriating the madam. The madams used to scare us for the fear of losing their clients, saying, 'Don't give your number, they will call you, they will harm you and then I won't be responsible if you go with them. If I take the cut, then the risk is entirely borne by me. If anything happens with you, I am responsible'.

- T, Delhi, 2023

After poaching clients, a sex worker often becomes a *karwane wāli* and attends to the clients sometimes. After a while, she again becomes a *karne wāli* when some of her existing clients are poached by those sex workers who visit her *thiā*. In the need of newer clients, she resumes visiting other *thiās* as a sex worker. She takes the phone numbers of the clients she meets and forms a new client base. The cycle thus continues.

The phenomenon of poaching also results from one's frustration with being made to work as an unpaid domestic worker by the madam at the *thia*. Amid several stories of sheer indifference, I have also come across stories of assimilation of the sex worker into the family residing in the *thiā*, which sometimes extends to the intermingling of the families of both the sex worker and the madam. However, close relations between a sex worker and the children of the madam's family sometimes come in the way of working freely at the same place. In the

absence of any place to go to for work, the Drop-In Centre of the CBO serves as the space to fill the hiatus.

I have family-like relations with that place. I call them *jijā*, her wife calls me *behen* and their kids call me *mausi*. They come to my house to my daughter's birthdays as well. No one suspects anything in my family. I have very good relations with that place. They call clients who maintain good hygiene, because those who have a family will conduct business accordingly. No one has anything to do with each other. People stay inside. Their doors always remain shut. But now I hesitate a bit to go there since their daughter has matured.

- S, Delhi, 2023

The various local sports clubs in Sonagachi help to negotiate any *jhamelā* that erupts between the sex workers' community and the clients or within the community. They are also invited to participate in the programmes like World AIDS Day. The involvement of these clubs acts as a support system for the sex workers in addition to the collectives.

The juxtaposition of not interacting with the people in one's neighbourhood and the relative safety of the Drop-In Centre speaks of the alienation of a sex worker from the society she lives in because of stigmatisation. The need for collectivisation arises from this stigmatisation, which creates conditions of deprivation from one's rights.

We don't speak to anyone in the neighbourhood. We talk only when someone greets us, else we don't. I don't like to sit near anyone. As you are sitting with me, so I am liking you. This staff here too knows that I am a sex worker, so I am liking sitting with them. But I don't like to sit with the domestic householders. Why? Because I don't

know what they might say. I don't know what I might end up blurting. Because I am upfront. I don't keep anything inside me.

- O, Delhi, 2023

### **Conclusion: Comparative Insights from Delhi and Kolkata**

The above discussion focused on ways in which sex work operates in various kinds of spaces. The materiality of these spaces shaped the spatial experiences of the sex workers, determining their preference of one space over the other. The same materiality led these sex workers to strategise the practice of sex work on an everyday basis, with the intention of the least amount of visibility, to avoid the public gaze. What we saw in the operation of sex work in Delhi is that home-based sex work came into conflict with the idea of what marks a home, its homeliness. Compared to a domestic space that brought with itself the challenge of keeping suspicion in the neighbourhood at bay, or warding off potential doubts that may arise within one's own children, hotels became a safer space. Ironically, the privacy of a hotel room was not devoid of its drawbacks. One could feel cornered or be drained as a sex worker by a client in the hotel room when one compared the space with the safety of the presence of other sex workers in the vicinity of a park bush. This meant lesser control over one's own body as a sex worker who was engaged in the transaction in a hotel room as against in a park where the fear of being seen was shared by the client. The factor of the presence of other sex workers acting as an instrument of safety was also seen in the case of Kolkata, where the companionship of other women and the collective force of *Durbār* made the brothels in Sonagachi a preferred space over going elsewhere outside the district. For those who work in spas, going out of station was always preferred due to better working conditions in terms of the facilities offered to them as well as in terms of avoiding the risk of coming across a familiar face. Other than the social manufacturing and social management of the safety of the spaces of sex work, the social

relations in these spaces also shaped their spatiality. Be it lack of trust, a sense of indifference, or the practices of intermingling, between the sex workers and the madams and their respective families, or between the sex workers and the clients and the respective families, they all governed the control sex workers had or needed to exercise in their day-to-day functioning in these spaces.

One would have noticed that I have not named the areas I visited in Delhi as against in Kolkata. The reason for this is that while my participants from Kolkata have the strong backing of an age-old organisation behind them and a higher degree of solidarity among themselves, some of my participants from Delhi do not have a strong association with any sex workers' collective. In fact, the collectives in Delhi suffer from severe internal divisions. There have been multiple incidents of violations of privacy and confidentiality by the members of the community as well as non-community members, which directly impacted the lives of some of the participants.

The closest equivalent to the *thiās* of Delhi are the *bāris* of Sonagachi, which I prefer to describe as *dadbe* due to their small size, as elaborated earlier. The lack of facilities to maintain hygiene, such as a clean bedsheet or a blanket that are not reused by multiple clients and multiple sex workers, is a common issue across the *thiās* and the *bāris*. The bare minimum resources and the indifferent attitude of the madams and the *bāriwālis* contribute to the shared experiences of the sex workers in both Delhi and Kolkata. While the seclusion of a hotel away from a densely populated area is preferred for meeting clients among the sex workers in Delhi to avoid being interrupted by the madams, the participants from Kolkata prefer to work within the safety of the *bāri* and the brothels due to the physical presence and support of the *mālkin* and the community members of the RLA. Working in a space shared with many sex workers,

such as a park in Delhi or a brothel in Sonagachi, helps with safety as well as to tackle boredom. The constant presence of community-based workers like the peer educators, other staff members of the collective, the active support of the local sports clubs in case of any trouble, are key to managing safe sex work in Sonagachi, and this also shapes the social fabric of the area. As previously stated, how conducive a space is for sex work is manufactured socially. When it comes to the fear of not being seen, the situation is identical in both the cities. To not be identified as a sex worker either among one's acquaintances, in one's neighbourhood, in media, or even in a safe space as the meeting room of the organisation remains a shared sentiment and is a part of managing safety in and around the place of work. The only exceptions are some of the internationally renowned leaders from Sonagachi. The unwillingness to be known as a sex worker or to be spotted among sex workers stands in sharp contrast with the sense of acceptance enjoyed by non-community members. Those who work with sex workers as a part of the collectives are accepted by the society but not the sex workers who continue to face social stigma. The materiality of the different spaces of sex work, the variety of ways in which the practice of sex work is managed in these spaces, the sex workers' fear of being seen, and the social relations forged between them and different actors — all come together to provide a categorical understanding of the existing relationship between sex work and physical space. These categories are interconnected and operate simultaneously to govern the spatiality of sex work in the metropolitan cities of Delhi and Kolkata. The spatiality of sex work thus examined helps to revisit the existing understanding of sex work in urban spaces.

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<sup>1</sup> I intend to use the words 'sex work' and 'prostitution', and 'sex worker' and 'prostitute' interchangeably to signify the person who earns through sexual activity, and earning money in exchange for sexual activity, respectively. However, the readers would observe that the words 'prostitute' and 'prostitution' have been used in the context of the specific time period.

<sup>2</sup> Durbār (where 'u' is pronounced as 'oo' in Noor and ā is pronounced as 'a' in bar). Durbār is a word in Bengali, which 'means unstoppable or indomitable'. It 'is a collective of sex workers...based in West Bengal, India. Durbār has been active since inception (in 1995) addressing the social, cultural and structural barriers that frame the lives and occupation of sex workers' (Jana 2015).

<sup>3</sup> For detailed account of the different types of tenancy in Sonagachi refer to Prabha Kotiswaran's work *Dangerous Sex, Invisible Labor* (2012).

<sup>4</sup> This term was very popular in the late 1990s and early 2000s and was used for a music system through which you could play a cassette or a compact disc and tune in to the radio.

<sup>5</sup> She described it as '*Upar saheli, niche pāni*', where *upar* means above, *saheli* means female friend, *niche* means below, and *pāni* means water.

<sup>6</sup> The *Āgrawālis* are known to approach *Durbār* only when they are in need for rent-related troubles.

<sup>7</sup> This discomfort increased after the multiple incidents of violation of privacy and confidentiality by some community and non-community members in Delhi, which directly affected the lives of some of the participants.