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Solidarity among the “social outcasts”: Kolkata Sex-workers during the three phases of pandemic

Abstract

On 22 April 2020, almost a month after the sudden announcement of lockdown, *Ananda Bazar Patrika* (henceforth *ABP*) published news about the precarious conditions of the sex workers. The news clip described the sufferings of sex workers during the sudden announcement of the lockdown. Most of them would not be able to move except the rented house (or room) in Sonagachi or Kalighat (two well known red-light areas). The rooms were too crowded. As Bishakha Laskar, president of the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (henceforth DMSC), the organization of the sex workers, told me in one of her recent interviews that at least 4-5 women were locked in a small room. They did not have money to return to their villages. Some of them did not want to return. They feared that the pandemic made their life hell as they had nothing to earn. “No customer (people come to get sexual pleasure) would come due to the lockdown. How do we survive.” Kohinoor Begum, a sex worker in Sonagachi and member of DMSC said.

There was another fear. “Social Distancing” was next to impossible in the infrastructure that the sex workers were bound to stay. Therefore, the chances of infections became much higher. On the other hand, the health-clinics run by the government stopped treating sexually transmitted diseases (henceforth STDs) due to the fear of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the sex workers who got their regular medicines for free were suffering. This lockdown, as Benjamin Bratton in his recent book interpreted, had brought new cultural and interpersonal realities which made many people unfamiliar and uncomfortable in the form of “touchlessness”. Bratton argued that there should be positive biopolitics to prevent the dichotomization between intimacy and remoteness. Quoting Jean Luc Nancy’s work on touch and touchlessness, Bratton strongly argued in favour of video-conferencing and other modes of using technological devices (phones etc.) created another form of “sensing layer” which produced another form of “intimacy. The increasing use of mobile phones for giving pleasure to the customer by the sex workers of Sonagacchi and Kalighat could be a classic example of the new form of intimacy that the sex workers are bound to learn to survive.

This short essay would analyze the effort of the sex workers to survive and transform their profession during the three phases of the pandemic. The essay will show the differences between the solidarity initiatives taken by the sex workers with other solidarity initiatives and how they bring a new idea to urban anthropology.

Methodology

The research will be based on intense ethnography of the red-light areas, studying the new techniques invented by the sex workers and talking with the relief agencies that helped them during the crisis. A short analysis of newspaper articles, surveys done by the agencies, photographs of different relief camps, pamphlets, posters released during the pandemic will also be a part of this article.