

The Stickiness of Sex Work: Pleasure, Habit, and Intersubstantiality in South India

Despite the diversity of modes and potential meanings of a woman's participation in paid sex, much of the literature on the topic continues to hinge on the question of how she initially entered the business: Was she physically forced, deceived, or blackmailed into prostitution? Was she economically coerced? Was she entirely free to choose other options? In the present global panic over sex trafficking (spurred particularly by writers like Kevin Bales and Nicholas Kristof), much of the discussion of prostitution has fetishized the moment of entrance into sex work. A woman's relationship to paid sex, however, may change dramatically over the course of her life. More to the point of what I wish to argue here, she herself may change dramatically through her participation in paid sex. Sex workers have been arguing this for some time. Veronica Monét (1997), for example, notes that for her, financial independence through sex work was only one transformation of many. She also learned to enjoy sex, became multiorgasmic, and developed bisexual inclinations. Contra the immense literature that understands Indian sex workers primarily through the lens of disease (e.g., Dandona et al. 2006; Blankenship et al. 2008; Devine et al. 2010) or the antitrafficking discourse of activists such as Sunitha Krishnan (2009), who claims that all sex workers in India are slaves, the approach offered here emphasizes women's transformative rather than static relationships to potential pleasures and dangers in sex work.¹

In this article, I argue that many Telugu-speaking sex workers in South India understand themselves to be transformed by intersubstantial contact with the world of commercial sex. They describe this transformation as the effect of their own slow bodily accumulation of the substances that pervade commercial sex in South India. As they accumulate these substances, women become ontologically enmeshed in the pleasurable world of commercial

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¹ For particularly trenchant critiques of the ways in which the policies rooted in discourse like Krishnan's have left migrant women more rather than less victimized, see Agustín (2007), Parreñas (2011), and Ahmed and Seshu (2012).

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sex. By this I mean that they understand their bodies to be increasingly constituted by the specific foods, alcohol, sexual fluids, and bawdy language that they exchange through the course of their work. Here I echo a long line of South Asianists who argue that by sharing substances with the things and bodies that surround them, Indians experience themselves as materially continuous with those things and bodies.² In one recent analysis of inter-substantiality, Adam Sargent (2014) indicates that construction workers in India understand themselves to be bodily transformed by the substances that characterize their work spaces, especially dust and dirty language (thought of in material terms). In a similar vein, I argue that sex workers feel that an accumulation of biryani, alcohol, sexual fluids, and dirty language manifests in their bodies through new affinities, new desires, and new modes of self-presentation. These substances simultaneously tie sex workers to the world of sex work while making other modes of work appear increasingly unappealing. Perhaps surprisingly, I heard this understanding of the transformative effects of paid sex expressed both by Telugu women who chose to begin selling sex for themselves and by women who were initially forced by others to begin participating in the trade but who over time took control of their own labor and opted to persist at selling sex. The transformation effected through habitual, intersubstantial exchange within sex work can take diverse histories and reconfigure them into remarkably similar presents.

Claiming that Telugu women understand themselves to be transformed by contact with the world of commercial sex in no way condones forced prostitution, nor does it diminish the need for political economic analyses of gendered markets for paid sexual services. Indeed, sex workers' rights organizations such as the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee (DMSC) have demonstrated that there is no contradiction between the demand that sex work be decriminalized and an active program against forced prostitution (Durbar Antitrafficking 2009). Rather, my purpose is to provide a culturally contextualized account of a changing sense of self among Telugu women through sex work. I also highlight the often ignored question of sexual subjectivity among poorer and less educated sex workers. Most feminist scholarship on pleasure in sex work tends to presume that pleasure and identity are best attributed to and analyzed among relatively privileged sex workers like the Smith graduates mentioned by Gayle Rubin (1984) or the white-collar sex workers described by Elizabeth Bernstein (1999, 2007). As Svati Shah notes, "the elision of political economy within discourses of

² See, e.g., Daniel (1984), Trawick (1990), Lamb (1997), and McGilvray (1998).

sexuality reproduced the idea that sexual freedom, autonomy, expression and even sexual subjectivity are all luxury goods, available only to those whose access to food and shelter is secure" (2014, xi). By analyzing the development of bodily habit, intersubstantiality, and pleasure among non-elite Telugu sex workers, I hope to contribute to the culturally nuanced analyses of paid sex that Holly Wardlow calls for when she writes, "in order to understand monetized sexual exchanges . . . one must also consider, first, local constructions of gender and sexuality" (2004, 1018). To this I would add that to understand paid sex in South India, one must also consider local constructions of intersubstantiality and habit.

Method and setting

I conducted the ethnographic research that forms the basis for this article among Telugu sex workers in Hyderabad, India, in 2012–13. The data presented here are largely drawn from my semistructured interviews in Telugu with 120 women at community-based organizations (CBOs). I also draw from my field notes as a participant-observer at nongovernmental organization (NGO) offices where sex workers congregated as well as at some sex workers' homes. Conducting interviews inside organizations meant that sex workers often felt obligated to reiterate the organization's ideological positions. This was especially true early in my research, because they initially categorized me (as a white foreigner) as a donor, despite my explanations to the contrary. A few, however, ignored organizational ideologies and spoke their minds with me from the outset. Still others became friendly with me after months of contact and eventually began to speak freely despite sitting inside the walls of an organization. I found that women were most at ease and spoke most freely when I sat with them in their or their friends' homes.

My interlocutors ranged widely in age from eighteen to over fifty. They came from highly diverse backgrounds, and fewer than half came from the stigmatized dalit castes or tribes. They also had a wide range of schooling, but the majority were illiterate or semiliterate.

My interlocutors traversed different paths to enter the business of paid sex. Because sex work is much more lucrative than other forms of labor available to women in South India, most of them took it up as the best economic option from a limited set of choices, as do the vast majority of workers in any field around the globe. Entering prostitution by force or coercion was atypical, but it was by no means unheard of among my interlocutors. Some women were initially blackmailed by their husbands or lovers into selling sex. Some women were morally marked by their communities as ready sex-

ual targets for other men after losing their husbands (see also Walters et al. 2012). A small number of the women I interviewed were kidnapped or deceived by strangers and forced to provide sex without pay until they escaped or negotiated their release and then began to sell sex for their own benefit.

Despite my interlocutors' diverse paths to entering the business, I use the term "sex worker" to describe them because they themselves often used it. The term has been widely disseminated in India through the combined efforts of the sex workers' empowerment movement and HIV prevention initiatives in the region. In spite of its common currency among them, however, many of my interlocutors nevertheless claimed to be agnostic about the politics of decriminalization and expressed ambivalent views about the morality of sex work.³ They were not, however, agnostic about the transformative substances and potential pleasures of sex work.

Most sex workers in Hyderabad find selling sex a more flexible means of making a living than other work. Like Western sex workers, they note that it allows them to choose when, where, and how to seek clients. Sex work largely exists in Hyderabad as a mode of self-employment. In most cases, sex work in Hyderabad is free from the foremen, bosses, or madams who oversee, direct, criticize, and argue about one's labor in other occupations.⁴ Another person (particularly another sex worker) may take a fee for connecting a sex worker with a new customer or for renting out a room for sex, but she typically does not directly control the sex worker's labor. Relationships in which a woman must hand over all of her earnings to a pimp occur primarily at the city's train stations, but pimped prostitution is far from the dominant mode of structuring this trade in Hyderabad.

³ In part, their ambivalence was shaped by the shifting rhetoric of the largest sex worker organization in the city, Chaitanya Mahila Mandali (CMM), where I conducted the bulk of my research. At its inception in 2001, CMM had championed a transnationally inflected sex worker identity and the politics of destigmatization and decriminalization (Kotiswaran 2011). But as the funding for sex worker empowerment initiatives in India declined with the withdrawal of the Gates Foundation beginning in 2010, CMM eventually began to turn toward the antitrafficking movement to find new sources of funding. CMM's rhetoric shifted accordingly to highlight rescue and rehabilitation instead of decriminalization. This shift made for an odd depoliticization of the term in daily talk. Women who sold sex still used "sex work," but no longer in the politically charged and liberatory sense in which I had heard it used in 2009 when I first began research among them.

⁴ "Madam" is an Indian term for a woman of a higher class, particularly one who is in a position of authority over the speaker. It does not refer to a woman who brokers sexual services, as in the West.

The habit of business

Not long after Meena arrived with her three children in Hyderabad (a city of about 8 million people), leaving her drunkard husband in their hometown in West Godavari, Andhra Pradesh, India, she realized that working one full-time job would not suffice.⁵ The year was 2000, and Meena was then a thirty-year-old, illiterate woman from one of the many minor Telugu agricultural castes. At first she sought out construction work (*taapi pani*). The foreman offered to pay her 60 rupees for a full day of physical labor, which at the time was worth about 75 cents in US currency. This was then entirely typical pay for unskilled female labor in the booming city, but it was not enough for Meena and her children to subsist. After a few days of *taapi pani*, one of Meena's fellow workers said to her, "How long can we work like this? Let's go to Secunderabad. Let's see if any one falls." With this elliptical invitation, she took Meena to the bus depot near the city's main train station where men pick up women for paid sex, and she showed her how to find a customer and bargain for a rate.

That day, instead of spending hours carrying bricks on their heads, Meena and her new friend together provided the same customer with sex. He paid each of them 200 rupees for their services, and Meena went home with almost as much money as she would have made in four full days of *taapi pani*. The next day, skipping the detour to the construction site, she headed directly back to the same spot in the bus depot with her coworker. There, Meena got picked up by a man who asked her whether she wanted to go for a movie. They bargained out a rate of 200 rupees for the date and went off together to a dark theater. Afterward, they saw mangoes being sold by the basketful on the side of the road in the hot May sun. Meena's customer bought her two kilos of ripe mangoes to take home with her and then asked whether she had eaten her main meal of rice yet that day (*annam tinnaavaa*). When she said no, he took her to the Alpha Hotel near the train station and ordered a chicken biryani for the two of them to share. In addition to her 200 rupee fee, Meena went home with India's favorite fruit for her children and with her belly full of Hyderabad's most prized cuisine—a princely Mughlai dish of rice, chicken, and spices cooked so slowly that the essences of the cloves, cardamom, star anise, cinnamon sticks, bay leaves, saffron, and black pepper suffuse and transform what was plain rice into an aromatic delicacy.

Meena's recollection of her first foray into commercial sex provides a glimpse of the beginnings of her own transformation through regular interaction with the rich substances that pervade sex work, which is often

⁵ All personal names have been changed.

called *dhandha* in Hyderabad, meaning business. Sharing the biryani at the Alpha Hotel—a moment Meena could not have hoped to access by means of construction work—marked Meena’s first taste of what sex workers in Hyderabad described to me as their *alawaatu*, meaning their habit or practice.

Among Telugu speakers, the *alawaatu* of *dhandha* (the habit of sex work) alters differently motivated women through a process that resembles the production of biryani: women’s bodies are transformed as they stew together slowly in a pot of new luxuries, new registers of pleasure, and new freedoms. Selling sex also inflicts negative consequences in Hyderabad—some of them decidedly harsh, to be sure—but for most women who enter *dhandha*, the rich substances, pleasures, and freedoms that accompany the habit overshadow its risks and combine to reconfigure these women as more similar than dissimilar. Drawing on Sarah Lamb’s (1997) theorization of the “making and unmaking of persons,” I suggest that this transformation is not primarily a matter of the categorical press of a social label, as in Ian Hacking’s (1999) “making up people,” but rather a bodily transformation attributable to the substances associated with the work.

In Telugu, the concept of “falling into a habit” (*alawaatu lo padadam*) can be fruitfully contrasted with the concept of “adjusting oneself to one’s circumstances” (*sardukopovadam*, or in urban Telugu *adjust avadam*). New brides are said to need to adjust themselves to their husband’s families. To adjust oneself is to accommodate or to tolerate. It bears the sense of putting up with something unpleasant. But to “fall into a habit” is to have a behavior emerge so unremarkably and naturally that it becomes part and parcel with one’s way of being in the world. The behavioral disposition flows outward from inside the actor rather than being externally imposed and merely countenanced.⁶ One’s *alawaatu* indicates one’s inner dispositions, simultaneously substantial (the corporeal amassing of interactive substances) and neurobehavioral. According to my interlocutors, sex worker *alawaatu* is distinct from the *alawaatu* of the *pathivratha* (the chaste, loyal, and devoted wife) whom they describe as living *paddhatigaa* (according to the rules of propriety). As one sex worker explained it to me in a mix of Telugu and English, women who sell sex gradually “enjoy life *ka alawaatu lo padataaru*.” Her assessment is perhaps best translated as they “fall into the habit of the enjoy life.”

⁶ *Alawaatu* is more idiosyncratic than the habitus of French social classes outlined by Pierre Bourdieu (1984). Additionally, *alawaatu* necessitates theorizing an intersubstantiality not foregrounded by Bourdieu.

But once accustomed to “the enjoy life,” Telugu women also begin to experience this life as something akin to a need or even an ontological imperative. They stick to it, and it sticks to them. This is what I mean by the stickiness of sex work. In my time in the field, I never encountered a woman who had entirely left the sex industry once she first entered it, despite my best search efforts. Most of the sex workers I asked said they too had never heard of a woman exiting the industry entirely. As one woman told me, “Once we fall into the habit, it is very, very hard to stop sex work.” But while sex work in India has often been framed in terms of women’s limited professional choices (e.g., Nussbaum 1998; Agrawal 2007; Shah 2014), the Telugu imaginary of *alawaatu* that animated my interlocutors’ understanding of the stickiness of *dhandha* both encompasses and overflows the economics of sex work. It encompasses it in the sense that money can be thought of as one the pervasive substances that characterizes sex work and sex workers. But the Telugu habit of sex work exceeds the simple calculus of return on investment: x rupees for y hours worked. By itself, better remuneration through self-directed labor doesn’t suffice to articulate how Telugu women understand *dhandha*’s effects on them or why they continue in this line of work well past their prime years.

The heating pleasures of biryani and booze:

Substance and intersubstantiality

Telugu sex workers understand themselves to be bodily transformed by the substances associated with their work such that, by their account, the *alawaatu* of *dhandha* overtakes and remakes them. Women who sell sex become suffused by the substances with which they interact as part of their work. Those they mention most commonly are biryani and alcohol. They also mention sex but are delicate enough not to directly mention sex’s substantiality—its various fluids. As my interlocutors explain it, through *dhandha* it is not just their minds but their physical bodies that are altered in this mixing process. By implicating a corporeal transformation, *alawaatu* suggests that women do not simply choose to continue in sex work for lack of other economic choices but because the pleasures of sex work transform them both in mind and in form. While this may at first glance appear as a mere echo to the stories of liberatory transformation that North American sex workers have narrated (see, e.g., the writings of sex workers in Pheterson [1989] and Nagle [1997]), Telugu sex workers understand this transformation to occur largely through the bodily accumulation of heating substances that in turn produces a material affinity for sex.

Their understanding stems from Indian ayurvedic theories of the heating and cooling nature of all substances and their potential impacts on the health and behavior of people. Heating substances are known to produce desire, passion, power, and dynamism, and these are precisely the tendencies that many Hindus seek to overcome in order to extricate themselves from worldly attachments. For this reason, Hindus concerned with their karmic development often try to avoid heating substances including alcohol, meat, garlic, and onions, and eventually many of them aspire to abstain from sex. Sex workers, by contrast, revel in the substances that implicate them in the “enjoy life”: restaurant biryanis, *mandu* (alcohol), *paan*, *gutka*, cell phones, new clothes and shoes, sticker bindis, hair clips, makeup, and jewelry.⁷ In his exegesis of personhood in South India, E. Valentine Daniel writes that “one begins to know the person by knowing the ‘personality’ of the soil on which he lives” (1984, 9), and the personality of the soil of sex work is that of little luxuries. Daniel suggests that for Tamils, one of the properties of substance is its “ability to mix and separate, to transform and be transformed, to establish intersubstantial relationships of compatibility and incompatibility” (3). Daniel’s informants believed that the substances with which people come into contact flow into and through them, physically connecting them to the places, people, and things in their lives. My sex worker interlocutors associated several substances with their participation in *dhandha*, but they most regularly mentioned two above all: biryani and alcohol.

Lamb (1997) has analyzed intersubstantiality in “the making and un-making of persons” among Bengalis by focusing on widows’ efforts to detach themselves from their relationships in order to prepare for death. These women feared that the many pleasures, loves, and desires that they had experienced would keep them bound to the earth in the form of ghosts after they had died, since they would be unable to extricate themselves from this worldly web of attachments. Lamb writes, “The more things a person acquires and experiences as the years go by—such as good food, money, sexual pleasure, nice clothes—the stronger becomes his or her attachment to and desire for them all, like the process of adding fuel to a fire” (281).

Telugu sex workers in Hyderabad see their fire as burning brightly, and they enjoy the warmth. Bengali widows whom Lamb knew began to prepare

⁷ *Paan* is a stimulant of betel leaf combined with areca nut and occasionally tobacco; *gutka* is a powdered mixture that includes crushed areca nut, tobacco, catechu, paraffin, and slaked lime.

themselves for death by “excluding from their diets any ‘hot’ (*garam*) foods (such as meat, fish, onions, and garlic), which they thought would excite their worldly passions and attachments” (2000, 126). Their understanding is based on India’s ancient humoral sciences, which resemble both Greek and Chinese humoral medicine (McGilvray 1998). Some Brahmins, related castes, and Jains try to avoid these heating foods throughout life. Many other higher-caste Hindus try to give up at least meat if not onions, garlic, and chilies as well as they get older, in order to tame their passions and master their bodies and their desires. In contrast, sex workers I knew reveled in consuming Hyderabad’s quintessential party food, biryani, which includes a panoply of “hot” ingredients (meat, onions, garlic, chilies) that they believe both stoked their passions and kept them attached to sex work.

Customers regularly treat sex workers to biryani and alcohol—the ubiquitous double offering at even elite Hyderabadi parties—as a means of establishing a party atmosphere for their encounters. In fact, the English word “party” is a common slang term among Telugu sex workers for an encounter with a client. Sex workers frequently mentioned free biryani and alcohol as major perks of their work. Some even packed up food from their encounters and carried it back to their relatives at home, extending the “net” of attachment (as Lamb terms it) to their families. If their “parties” didn’t provide them with biryani, many of them bought it for themselves. Some of my interlocutors ate takeout biryani costing 130 rupees or more every day or every other day. They would regularly spend on one meal almost as much as other laborers earned for a full day of work. As one sex worker explained, biryani was thought to attach sex workers to sex work: “There are a number of women who eat biryani on a daily basis. So, those women cannot quit this profession.” The substance, she explains, ties them permanently to the world of *dhandha*.

Alcohol was another “hot” substance that suffused the lives of many sex workers I knew, and they believed that it attached them to sex work. In the Indian public imaginary, alcohol is strongly associated with drunkenness and indecency. The ancient Laws of Manu characterize alcohol as a defiling substance. Until recently in Hindi and Telugu films, only villains were pictured drinking alcohol, never heroes. Younger Telugu men tend to drink with the express purpose of getting drunk, using alcohol to demarcate bounded and temporary periods of bacchanal. For this reason, many Telugu people associate drinking alcohol with indecent behavior, and many middle- and upper-class Telugu women tend to avoid alcohol altogether for fear of being thought morally loose. Telugu people are usually careful to drink only in the company of their close peers who they are sure

will cooperate in coproducing a carnivalesque atmosphere.⁸ Male clients usually expect sex workers (in contrast to *pathivratha* women) to join them at the bottle as part of their work. With bacchanal as their bread and butter, sex workers' lives are steeped in alcohol. Accumulating these physical substances in their bodies transformed their behavior as well.

"I move like a man": The masculinizing transformations of *dhandha*

Ayurvedic principles teach that through the bodily accumulation of certain substances, bodily and behavioral tendencies begin to emerge. In most of Andhra Pradesh, the major registers of alcohol use are distinctly masculine. Female sex workers who take to drinking alcohol every evening at home separate from their parties with clients, a behavior developed due to their habituation to alcohol use within their work, come to be perceived by their families as increasingly masculine. Latha, a pretty and particularly vivacious sex worker in her late twenties with two young daughters, illustrated this gendered shift. As I sat one evening in Latha's home, her live-in boyfriend came home expecting to go out to a social engagement with her and her small daughters. He sat on the couch complaining that Latha was not ready to go, that one daughter was asleep on the couch in nothing but her underwear, and that her other daughter was out wandering in the streets with her friends. Latha told him that she was still expecting a client that evening, so she wouldn't be going anywhere. Besides, it was time for her to drink. She pulled out a 300-milliliter bottle of amber liquid labeled scotch. Latha laughingly reminded everyone in the room (her boyfriend, me, an outreach worker, and two other sex workers who were waiting for customers in Latha's house) that she drinks nothing but the good stuff: her bottle cost 275 rupees, she announced. Her boyfriend quietly got up and left the room, deferring to Latha's decision to stay home. This moment was a reversal of the gender performances I was used to witnessing between married couples in which no one was involved in sex work. Latha had inverted female deference to male status. She not only overrode her boyfriend's plan to go out, but she also drank in front of him, which a person of lower status should not do in front of person of higher status, such as a husband. Latha, in this instance, enacted many of the roles expected of a Telugu husband.

Like Latha, Lakshmi was also masculinized through her participation in sex work. With her earnings from *dhandha*, Lakshmi had bought a house

⁸ Codes for alcohol use are less rigid among people from Telangana than they are among people from Andhra and Rayalseema, among whom showing deference in hierarchical relationships (*mariyaada*) is somewhat stricter.

(a difficult feat for a woman with a tenth-standard education), furnished it well, enrolled her son in an expensive school, and amassed a large amount of gold jewelry (an important marker of wealth in South India) as well as other investments. Her father and mother had come to live with her in her house, despite the fact that they have a married son who by Telugu custom is expected to house them with him. It is unusual for a man to live in the home of his adult daughter. Lakshmi now performs the role of her older brother by housing her parents. More to the point, Lakshmi often brings men home to her house to drink, and her father joins them, collapsing the deferential distance of the gender, age, and kinship hierarchy that would normally exist between father and daughter. Lakshmi explained to me, “Both of us move like friends. I call him ‘*naannagaru*’ (respected father), ‘*ore lanja koduka!*’ (son of a whore) and ‘*ore picchayya!*’ (madman). But he does not say anything like that to me, because I move like a man. I am capable of returning even at midnight. Now he is confident of me wherever I go.” By this Lakshmi meant that she mixes the expected, respectful registers of speaking to her father with playful, crude registers of speaking that are usually reserved only for intimate male peers. She “moves like a man,” meaning that she is able to come and go to and from her own house, even late at night, without interference from her parents. Most Telugu parents would require their daughter to arrive home before dark to deflect neighborly gossip. Through *dhandha*, Lakshmi acquired masculine prerogatives because of, rather than in spite of, her capitalization of her feminine sexual services: drinking, amassing her own wealth, housing her parents, speaking to her father in the “dirty” register of male peers, and moving through time and space with the boldness and sense of security usually reserved for men (see Ramberg [2014] for a related analysis of gender inversions among religious prostitutes).

Other inversions: Claiming recognition, deflecting class patronization

The feeling of controlling not only one’s time but also one’s choices is particularly acute for women in *dhandha* who are in greater demand and who can more readily turn down a client. I once accompanied an NGO employee on a visit to Latha’s tiny apartment when she was in the midst of conducting business from home. One customer left, and another came upstairs from where he had been waiting on the street. The newly arrived customer was about twenty-five years old, and he brought a bottle of ThumbsUp with him, the popular Indian cola that customers often mix with alcohol to carry around unnoticed. As he entered the tiny second-floor apartment, Latha asked for his money, but he said that his friend who was waiting downstairs had their money and would pay her after his own

turn. Latha snapped at him angrily that he wasn't allowed inside the bedroom until he paid up. No cash, no bed. The man left without saying a word, and the NGO employee, who had become a close friend of Latha's, scolded her for being so rude to her customer. But Latha cheekily grinned at the NGO employee saying, "No problem. If not him, I'll get other clients. But I won't accept anyone without advance payment."

Latha made us some sweet, milky chai while we sat on her couch. As we sipped on it, the same rejected customer returned and handed Latha his payment, and they both proceeded to the bedroom. In all of my interactions with her, Latha always exuded this same confidence and sense of authority—a sense of self that would have been limited by work as a laborer and certainly not a subjectivity that she had experienced when her parents had arranged her marriage without her input about her future husband. Another sex worker who was new to the trade told me that she relished charging far more than the going rate for sex in order to be able to refuse the men of her own class. One sex worker pointed to the stark contrast between a "stylish" sex worker's ability to pick and choose her romantic partners versus the respectful submission expected of a daughter slated for an arranged marriage. She said, "We can be stylish. We can love this and that man and can marry another man all while we are young. We can marry even three times and leave all the three." Thus, the *alawaatu* of sex work brings with it not just the control over one's own time and labor but also the ability to choose among men.

Some sex workers are able to do remarkably well and to use their success to push back against class discrimination. Sita was a case in point. She had started *dhandha* in a town in southern Andhra Pradesh out of necessity at age fifteen. Her new husband had just learned that she had had a lover before meeting him, and in his anger at having been tricked into thinking she was a "good girl" (*manchi ammayi*), he kicked her out of his house not knowing that she was four months pregnant with his son. Sita slept outside for days. She had nothing to eat and owned only the single sari that she was wearing. She could not return to her natal family, since she had run away from them two years before in order to be with her first lover, whose family was from a different caste. Another woman told Sita that she would show her the ropes of *dhandha*. Sita demurred for some time, saying that she didn't want to stoop to that level. But sharp hunger as well as the degradation of having to wash her sari while she was still wearing it (since she had nothing to change into) eventually wore her down. When I met Sita, she had been doing *dhandha* for fifteen years in her town despite reuniting with her husband (from whom she kept her work an open secret). She was by then solidly round like the middle- and upper-class women depicted in

Telugu soap opera serials. She had a collection of five hundred saris, almost all of them given to her as presents from her clients. Sita told me that she never accepts a sari worth less than 1,000 rupees from a client and that most of the pieces in her collection cost 2,000 or 3,000 each. Most working-class women wear saris that cost far less than this. She had many rich and even some powerful clients; a few were members of the Legislative Assembly, the governing body of the state.

I spent three days with Sita while she was visiting a newly formed CBO of sex workers in the Old City of Hyderabad as a paid consultant on behalf of a large transnational NGO. The NGO had paid for Sita's round-trip train ticket to Hyderabad and was providing her with a per diem for expenses and salary for her work consulting with sex workers. But her work to organize other sex workers was closely overseen by educated, upper-middle-class NGO employees who were not sex workers. Sita and the other sex workers call these non-sex-worker supervisors "madam" and "sir" in English out of deference to their positions of authority as well as to their education and class status. On our last afternoon together, Sita and I sat on floor mats with another sex-worker consultant and the educated madam who supervised them both. The four of us sat cross-legged in a large gathering room waiting for enough sex workers from the neighborhood to arrive so that a meeting could be organized. As we waited, Sita and I talked about her finances. She said that after fifteen years of *dhandha*, she was now financially comfortable enough that she only had sex with clients about twice a week. Nevertheless, her phone rang constantly in the days that we were together, and from the tone of her conversations, it was clear that her job entailed more witty, flirty phone banter and dangling the playful possibility of sex than actual sexual contact. It was also clear how much she enjoyed her playful phone performances.

In between phone calls, Sita told me that she had managed to save one lakh rupees (about \$2,000) in an interest-bearing fixed deposit but that otherwise she hadn't saved much. Instead, she loaned most of her money to her relatives. She had gotten into *dhandha*, she said, when she had no one and nothing and was on the brink of starvation. But since then she had not only managed to reunite with her husband but also to reingratiate herself with her natal family, whom she had once feared would kill her if she had returned to them at fifteen, alone and pregnant. Now, she regularly gave small amounts of money to her mother and sisters. She had even recently underwritten the purchase of an auto-rickshaw costing 50,000 rupees to jump-start her nephew in his business. Her control of money had brought her *gurtimpu* (recognition and respect; see also Cole [2010] for an analysis of the search for recognition through sex work). Hearing that

Sita had saved no more than 100,000 rupees for herself, the NGO madam waiting with us began to scold her for letting her relatives siphon off her earnings rather than amassing a larger nest egg with which to start a business or at least to support herself when she was old and could no longer do this work. The madam meant this as caring advice despite its neoliberal tinge. She understood herself to be taking an opportunity to help educate Sita in the financial literacy that her NGO had identified as so lacking among sex workers.

But Sita had just narrated a story of transformation in which she had gone from having only one sari and being utterly alone to now having a collection of five hundred expensive saris, friendships with politicians, a unified family for her son, and the cooperation and respect of her once-estranged extended relatives. Sita chose in this moment not to defer to this NGO madam's performance of class-inflected care as we all expected her to do. Instead, she whipped back at the madam in concrete terms: the NGO was mistaken, she said, if they thought she worked for them because of the salary of 2,000 rupees a day that they paid her. This amount was nothing to her. It simply didn't amount to anything in the larger scheme of her finances. She did this mentoring work in order to help other women like her by connecting them with each other and strengthening their sense of connectedness. This flash of pride communicated her independence from both the NGO and this particular instantiation of the larger attempt to hail her as an object of intervention. The madam made no reply to Sita and sat silently going through her books until the meeting began.

The dangers of money

Like Sita, many other sex workers were able to pay for expensive educations for their children, rent lovely middle-class apartments for their families, buy gold jewelry as both a marker of status and a means of investing money, dress their daughters in fashionable clothes, and eat rich foods like meat. In part, it is the decency of the life that they can purchase and the social regard that it allows them to leverage that keep them stuck to what they and others consider the indecency of *dhandha*. For many sex workers, though, the rush of cash that accompanied their entrance to *dhandha* overwhelmed them. Many of them had no means to readily turn their high daily earnings into more permanent wealth. Sex workers I knew (especially the newest) were largely unfamiliar with the ins and outs of post office savings schemes and fixed deposits. More to the point, they lacked bank accounts and PAN cards (the Indian equivalent of a Social Security card), which required permanent addresses and government identification that they didn't have and couldn't readily obtain. Without bank accounts and the financial access

that depends on this form of reputational legibility, they had difficulty consolidating their earnings. Almost all of them had had the experience of being cheated out of large sums of money that they had invested in questionable chit funds or that they had entrusted to others to invest on their behalf.

This gap between earning money and amassing wealth became particularly evident in early 2013 when I received terrible news: Hema had been murdered. Hema was the short and bubbly newly elected president of a brand new sex workers' CBO that I had been observing as it emerged over the course of the preceding six months. She had traveled for Sankranti, the Andhra harvest festival, from Hyderabad to her home village near Rajahmundry where her parents were raising her two children on her remittances from the city. A policeman in the village to whom she owed money asked her to meet some of his men to hand over a payment of 100,000 rupees. She waited at a specified location, and the men arrived together on a motorcycle. Hema told them that she didn't have the money at the moment. They struck her so hard on the head that she fell to the ground and later died, while they sped away untraced. A few months later, I sat with a group of four sex workers discussing Hema's death. The violence of the incident scared them, but what they found far more horrifying and the topic that consumed most of their attention was that Hema died almost penniless. They told me that Hema had seen lots of money—*lots*, they stressed—during her years as a sex worker, but she had not managed to hold on to any of it. She left nothing for her parents to raise her sons. The sex workers with whom I was discussing Hema's sudden disappearance quickly turned her story into a cautionary tale for their own lives. As they talked about her, they called up a broker one of them knew in order to try to start up the process of getting their own paperwork together to open bank accounts. Getting accustomed to the freedom of making and spending large sums of money made the possibility of others snatching it away and the possibility of a sudden reversal of fortunes that much more terrifyingly real.

"By the evening they are keen to go out": The stickiness of the "enjoy life *ka alawaatu*"

It is not simply the heating pleasures of alcohol and biryani that transform a woman who enters *dhandha*; sex itself is central to the formation of this *alawaatu*. As one woman put it to me, "Sex is fun; sex gives satisfaction. We have that *alawaatu*. We look for happiness and pleasure in it. We seek it among clients. We will miss the fun of sex if we join a regular job. We

have the *alawaatu* of pleasure, so we stick to sex work.” Her assertion was daringly honest. Most sex workers that I knew were not so bold in their formulations. Since Telugu people generally consider it unseemly and deeply shameful for a woman to express sexual desire, most sex workers projected this feeling onto their fellow sex workers rather than voicing desire in the first person.⁹ The passage that follows, taken from my field notes, captures both the experience of and the general disavowal of female sexual desire among sex workers. It recounts an afternoon at Latha’s house with Kondamma, her NGO outreach worker, and two of the women who come to Latha’s house to do sex work. Kondamma had a man with her that afternoon whom she had asked to sit in the carport. She had not introduced him to us, nor had she properly explained his presence. Yet Latha, the hostess, made sure to include the man in her hospitality. As I wrote in my field notes:

Later, Latha makes us all chai, but Kondamma insists that she not give any to the man seated in the carport, again making it clear that he shouldn’t be given the status of a guest. Latha, however, manages to flout Kondamma. After she spends some time outside flirting with the man that Kondamma has brought along with her, Latha comes back in and declares loudly that she wants him. “He’s so handsome!” she tells us all lustily with her enormous grin, “I’ll definitely do him for free!” In an aside to me, Kondamma makes out that she’s repulsed by how cheap Latha is. It’s disgusting, Kondamma says, that she wants to have sex for the sake of sex. Not to mention, it’s bad for business. Kondamma reminds me with a disapprovingly cocked eyebrow that Latha has taken up with her most recent live-in boyfriend because he fucks well and for no other reason.

At the time, I laughed at Kondamma’s unseemly use of a swear word, but when I came back to these notes months later, I recognized that through this usage she was indexing her own bawdy sensibilities in the face of Latha’s day-to-day work. Despite Kondamma’s display of disgust over Latha’s interest in having sex with the strange man in the carport, sex workers widely acknowledged to me that sex plays a key role in their transformation as sex workers.

One sex worker suggested to me that sex with a boyfriend (notably not sex with a husband) could lead a girl to enter sex work. She explained:

⁹ Men can and do express sexual desire when among their male peers; however, as with drinking, Telugu propriety requires that they avoid sexual commentary in mixed company, including with male relatives who are senior to them.

“The girls, if they continue having sex with lovers, they will gradually get the *alawaatu* of sex. When [a girl] cannot find her lover, she will seek out others for her satisfaction (*trupthi kosam*). Many such [girls] start doing it [sex work] for money, you know?” Telugu sex workers do not, of course, always enjoy each of their paid encounters. Far from it. *Alawaatu* indexes an affinity for the occupation more generally rather than for any single sex act. But the habit of sex work altered women’s sexuality. Some of them began to explore sexual pleasure with each other. Some experienced sex positively for the first time in their lives. Sivamma, for example, spoke with me at length about her initial fear and reluctance to begin sex work. She had experienced two disappointing marriages and had no taste for sex. This changed, however, after her friends slowly managed to cajole her into trying sex work. After a few months, Sivamma said that her sense of her own sexuality had changed. She explained to me why women stay in sex work once they begin it:

If we want to eat curries, we fry different food items. That is a *ruchi* (taste/pleasure). We wear different colors of saris. That is a *ruchi*. To my knowledge, sex is also a *ruchi*. [Sex work] is not an offence. Though I am not well educated, I am explaining how I understand things: my life would be a waste without a taste for sex. I believe it one hundred percent. I have nothing bad to say about this work now. . . . [Sex workers] need *ruchi*. . . . Today, if anyone were to scold me [for selling sex], I would say, “Yes, I do it for my needs. I need that pleasure. I need sex.”

Hyderabadi sex workers understand the shift in their sexual subjectivity as binding them to their work. One woman told me, “I don’t want to stop sex work. How will I live if I stop sex work? I’ve got the habit (*naaku alawaatu undi*), and I can’t stop it. My body got used to it. How will I stop it?” This formulation indicates a specifically bodily habituation to *dhandha*. Other women pointed to a similar understanding of being bodily altered. One sex worker, Nagamani, tried to explain to me why other sex workers cannot easily fit themselves into the diurnal requirements of other jobs like she did. She worked a full-time day job as an outreach worker at a CBO and then worked as a sex worker at night. She told me:

But what systems do they follow? They do business throughout the nights and sleep until 12 o’clock in the afternoon. Their body would not be under their control. It is called something: their bodies have the *alawaatu* of that sort of life. . . . Some women do not have husbands and children and they would get the *alawaatu* of the high

life. They are the women who ran away from home as children and got the habit of movies and biryanis regularly. They buy clothes for one or two thousand rupees and throw them away, because it is the money they are earning through *dhandha*. The women who are habituated to this kind of life cannot do a job, hire a room, cook and attend [office] duty on time. Their body would not cooperate with them. Though they want to work, their body would not cooperate. . . . Getting up early in the morning, cooking, getting ready with the lunch box, coming to the office, quitting *paan* and *gutka* to do a job is very difficult for the women who are in [full-time] sex work. Their body would not cooperate to do all these things.

Amala, another sex worker who also worked as an outreach worker, indicated that the transformation was not just corporeal but also psychological. Women's bodies would not cooperate with them doing other work, but their minds, too, were so focused on juggling their many lovers that they could not be occupied with other things.¹⁰ She explained to me: "In fact, after entering this profession, we cannot do other work. We cannot work as a cook or domestic help after [fully] entering this profession, because our state of mind would be different. Since we do sex work, our body and mind would not cooperate with other work. We have the *alawaatu* of alcohol. Each woman would have two or three lovers. So her mind would be occupied with many things. Hence, after entering the profession of sex work, women refuse to quit it for other work." Nagamani and Amala's fellow sex and outreach worker, Pournima, argued that the relationship between women like her who practice *dhandha* and their work exceeds the agentive categories of "choice" and "refusal" that Amala used. She formulated the relationship as being "stuck to sex work." Although she was herself a sex worker, she spoke here partially from the perspective of the NGO reformer who wished to intervene in the life of sex workers, a role she was sometimes asked to perform in her position as an outreach worker for an HIV prevention initiative. Pournima voiced both the would-be reformer and the rebuttal of the sex worker with equal familiarity:

The people who are accustomed to sex work will continue it until death. They have the *alawaatu* of alcohol, sex; they will get biryani from the clients; they can eat *gutka*; they can sleep with the client; they can drink alcohol. The people that have the *alawaatu* of all these things cannot quit sex work. . . . They enjoy that sort of life.

¹⁰ In McKim Marriott's (1976) terms, theirs is a maximal transactional strategy.

They get biryani, alcohol, *gutka* on a daily basis. They return home in the morning. By the evening, they are keen to go out, get a client, get alcohol and food. That's it. . . . Their lives have been stuck to sex work. They will not change no matter how much you counsel them. They will never change. . . . If we tell them to change, they will say, "If you want, you can also do it. Are we objecting?"

Pournima here reversed the invitation to reform into an invitation to join sex work.

The many become one

What is particularly illuminating about Pournima's reversal is that it is, in fact, what often happens to would-be interventionists among sex workers in Hyderabad. One day, Latha, the scotch drinker, accidentally let slip to me that she sometimes furnished clients for Gowri, one of the NGO employees who visited her home to do HIV prevention outreach. This arrangement was new. Gowri had never considered doing sex work before she had taken the job in HIV prevention at this NGO, but she had become fascinated with the idea of trying *dhandha* after she had begun associating so closely with so many sex workers. Kondamma, Gowri's NGO coworker and close friend, was part of the conversation in which Latha let this information drop. Kondamma explained to me that mixing with the world of *dhandha* had transformed Gowri. Kondamma tried to reiterate her own distance from the tainted world of *dhandha* by criticizing Gowri. She said that contact with this world had corrupted Gowri since she started working at the NGO and that she had become "very bad"—swearing, drinking alcohol, and trying out sex work. But not long after this disavowal of her coworker's overmixing and moral decline, Kondamma confided in me that she herself had also begun trying out sex work, both finding high-end clients for the sex workers associated with her NGO and taking money from clients for her own sexual services. It was only "light-light," she told me, but her NGO didn't think so. She had kept her involvement as a dangerous secret, knowing that her employers would not approve, and they fired her upon hearing the news. Afterward, Kondamma entered the business of *dhandha* full time, mostly as a broker.

Kondamma's NGO's response to her active participation in the business of sex was provoked largely by fear of legal implications, since brokering is punishable by a minimum of seven years imprisonment in India. But in larger and older NGOs than Kondamma's, many male employees became clients of the sex workers they were attempting to help. Affairs between employees in these HIV prevention NGOs also seemed more common-

place or at least more open than in other offices. My sense of this different openness to and about extramarital sex is that it arose from these NGO workers being submersed in the world of commercial sex, even if only as would-be interventionists. This submersion changed many employees' sense of what might be possible and probable in their own sexual lives.¹¹ One male employee I knew, for instance, began to espouse open marriage and polyamory after a few years of doing HIV research with sex workers, much to the chagrin of his stay-at-home wife. Similarly, at least three of seven middle-class and upper-middle-class housewives and teachers who had been hired by an HIV research project and trained as survey investigators began to sexually entertain male friends in exchange for money and gifts after their project interviewing hundreds of female sex workers ended. Other NGO workers felt it necessary to go out of their way to indicate to me that they "weren't that type" in order to distinguish themselves from the more permissive atmosphere in which they worked.

Bodily becoming

This understanding of the habit of *dhandha* in Hyderabad provides fodder for the growing scholarly dissatisfaction with the limits of the existing distinction between choice and force that plagues legal and humanitarian approaches to sex work. The transformations of Telugu women who sell sex, and those of NGO workers who think of themselves as intervening in sex workers' lives, operate at various levels, but bodily becoming is primary to all other transformations. Lamb writes that "by sharing and exchanging bodily and other substances through acts such as sex, touching, living together, sharing food, owning things, and eating the fruits of village soil, [Bengali] people saw themselves as forming substantial emotional bonds with their kin, homes, possessions, and land—all of which together make up a 'person' (or *lok*). In this way, persons constructed themselves as parts of the other people, places, and things with which they lived and interacted" (1997, 283). Made up of bits of people, places, and things around them, Lamb's informants understood themselves to be quite literally bound to their "body, habitat, and relationships, caught as in a 'net'"

¹¹ An alternative explanation is that people in Hyderabad with permissive sexual morals were more attracted to work in HIV prevention than those with more conventional morals. I doubt this explanation, because skilled jobs are scarce enough in this densely populated area that people are usually willing to take whatever jobs they find. Several of my interlocutors involved in research or prevention work with sex workers said that they took the jobs despite their misgivings and fears about being tainted by the same negative brush. Thus, I doubt that they were predisposed to think differently about sexuality before entering this world.

(285). Similarly, Hyderabad women, by their own analysis, are bodily becoming sex workers. The *alawaatu* of *dhandha* is intersubstantial—that is, acquired through mixing with substances and people (alcohol, biryani, client bodies, and money). This alters their sensibilities and their taste for sex itself. Additionally, they grow accustomed to the prerogatives of “moving like a man” that this life affords them: amassing wealth, supporting relatives, coming home after dark, drinking in front of men, talking dirty, and even, for some, voicing their desire for sex. They become stuck to “the enjoy life.” As they take part in it, it takes part in them, and they are loath to leave it. What they mix with they become. What they become impels their further actions. Thus, characterizing sex workers as forever fixed in a particular subjectivity based on their initial entrance into commercial sex (e.g., “coerced” or “trafficked”) obscures Telugu women’s own understanding of their transformations through the slow accumulation of the *alawaatu* of *dhandha*.

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