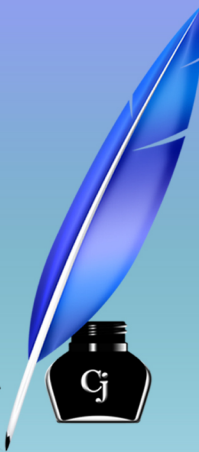


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The Unheard Scream or The Voice of the Missing Girls?

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Sochne wali baat hai na saab

Ek ladki gayab ho jaati hai aur koi puchne wala bhi nahi...

Hum jaise log to ginti mein hi nahi aate

Aur jo hain hi nahi

Wo gayab kaise ho sakte hain?

(It is a matter to think seriously sir

A girl disappears and no one is bothered...

We people do not exist in the society

And those who do not exist

How can they disappear?)

These lines from a recent Bollywood movie 'Talaash' indicate the plight of the 'missing girls' who are non-existent in the society only because instead of embracing death, they prefer to sell their body for survival. Also the above-quoted lines amplify the pain embedded in the following questions - why is the mainstream culture so adamant at excluding such women? Why cannot we accept their presence among us? Why cannot we erase the boundary line between them and us? When and how can the 'unheard screams' of these 'missing girls' be attended and understood?

Much has been said and written on the issue of subjugation of women and the lacunae of feminism in India. Many scholars have voiced their opinions against the suppression of women, however, despite all this, things remain unchanged for a major section of the Indian society. The lower class and lower caste women are doubly-exploited. They not only have to bear the pain of domestic violence but are also exploited at the work-place. Sexploitation comes easily in case of such women. Whether be their husbands or the male employers, all victimise the women sexually. For the former, it becomes a convenient mode to vent out their frustration (due to poverty and other factors), the latter use women to satisfy their lust. The male-gaze follows women like a shadow.

The topic chosen by me for the present paper is a bit different, I would not say unexplored but yes, less talked about. We hear several cases about the domestic violence and marital rape of the Indian women (although often hushed beneath the carpet) but it seems that time is indeed changing. And in this changing scenario, Nalini Jameela certainly deserves

applause. A middle class woman from Kerala, Nalini had to take up sex-work as her profession but she is not ashamed of her occupation. In her memoir, *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* she has not only narrated the circumstances which compelled her to sell off her body every day to earn money, the book also unveils the ugly face of hypocrite Indian society that does not accept such women. Nalini's work, no doubt is a significant platform to make the marginalised and the devoiced to speak and to be heard, it also compels the thinking minds to ponder over the futile hollow norms of our society.

To focus on the predicaments of the sex-workers, I have chosen another book, *Against All Odds*. It is an autobiography of a dalit man, Kishore Shantabai Kale and in his memoir, he touches upon the similar issue of flesh trade carried on by the women of his community, the Kolhati community of Maharashtra. They were coerced to seduce the rich upper caste men and become their 'mistresses'. Their 'screams' remained 'unheard'.

The bottom-line in both the autobiographies is the same –their women are the bread-winners of the family for which they trade with their bodies. In return they get disgust, disrespect and exclusion. The only difference being if Nalini is open about her profession, the Kolhati women had to bear everything with the facade of respectability. If Nalini could negotiate and lay down her terms to her clients, the Kolhati women had to mutely accept their lot. Nalini Jameela 'celebrates' her body whereas it is a 'sin' to be born a woman in the Kolhati community.

In my paper, I have attempted to explore a different segment of the Indian society that too suffers from marginalization but no one pays much heed to them. Women, upper, middle, lower class, high and low caste, all have found representations in social and literary movements but there remains a section among women that suffers neglect even from the women, leave aside patriarchy. The 'sex workers' are important constituent of our society but false hypocrisy restrains us to count them as existing amongst us. The 'shame' attached to their name becomes their only identity, their being human being becomes insignificant. It is to this particular section of women that I have attempted to draw the attention to.

Sex-trade and the existence of the public women is something not very new to our society. Since ages the traditions of *nagarvadhvas* (brides of the city), *devadasis*, *tawaiifs* (courtesans) etc were practiced in India. Such women enjoyed high status in the society and were considered the epitome of culture. They were respected and revered but the fact was that they were after all public women who danced and sang to entertain the people, charging high prices for the same. Amrapali, the royal courtesan of Vaishali around 500 BC and Vasantsena of Ujaini are the two popular *nagarvadhvas* of ancient India. In those times, these women were not looked down upon. Often they served as counsellors to the kings and were extremely knowledgeable.

Devadasis were the women 'married' to God and were taken into the service of the temples where they learnt and practiced religion. It was a common trend in the 6th century India. No stigma was attached to the *devadasi* or to her children. The *devadasis* were treated equally to other married women. Their presence graced the occasion at the weddings of upper caste people. However, during the colonial rule, the practice was abolished labelling it as illegal and equivalent to prostitution. The protest came primarily from the missionaries, doctors, journalists and social workers. In 1988, the *devadasi* system was completely outlawed in the entire country, however still some *devadasis* practice it illegally. On the other hand, the Theosophical movement propagated the revival of *devadasi* institutions. In their opinion, the temple dancers were sacred and chaste women.

Even literature stands witness to such traditions. Literary works like *Vaishali Ki Nagarpadhu* by Acharya Chatursen describes the life of Amrapali, the state courtesan who later became a Buddhist monk and the classic Sanskrit story, *Mricchakatika* by Sudrak about the famous courtesan Vasantsena are examples of prostitution being an old theme in Indian literature and arts. The aforementioned texts have also been made into popular Hindi movies, *Amrapali* and *Utsav* respectively.

With time, the meaning and work of these women altered somewhat and during the Mughal period we had the emergence of *tawaif* (courtesan). The famous Hindi movies, *Pakeezah*, *Umrao Jan*, *Bazaar* are few examples of the women who had to entertain the *nawabs* through their singing and dancing. These women were considered an authority on culture, etiquette and exhibited sophistication. Abdul Halim Sharar, a noted novelist and journalist, professes that the morals and manners of Lucknow were sustained by the courtesans. They excelled in music (*ghazals*), reciting poetry (*shairi*), dance (*mujra*) and the Urdu literary tradition. As per Veena Talwar's observations, the *tawaifs* were classed under the occupational category of "dancing and singing girls" and were found to be in the highest tax bracket. Some of the popular courtesans of the period are Moran Sarkar who became the wife of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, Wazeeran of Lucknow was in close relationship with Lucknow's last *nawab*, Wajid Ali Shah. Umrao Jan, the famous courtesan of Lucknow too exemplified wisdom and intelligence.

It is sheer pity that the word *tawaif* has been re-defined now and applies to a common prostitute whose chief aim is to trap the men with her lustful moves. The noted historian, Veena Talwar Oldenberg in her book, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow* rues: "To relate *tawaifs* to prostitution is an extremely corrupt portrayal of the institution." With the usurpation of Awadh by the Britishers in 1856, an abrupt end was put to the royal patronage for the courtesans and it signalled, in the words of Talwar, "the gradual debasement of an esteemed cultural institution into common prostitution". The alleys of the Chowk area of Lucknow, once thronged with the rich admirers of *tawaifs*, are now lost in the ruins.

The decline had already set in. Another trend, popular especially in North India was the emergence of the *nautch girls*. It was prominent mainly in the later period of Mughal Empire and the Company Rule. The main idea was to seduce the *nawabs*, *zamindars*, and other higher officials of the British Raj. Usually these women were clad in minimal clothes to tempt and entertain the male-folks. In no way should the *nautch girls* be confused with the *devadasis*. While the latter performed Indian classical dances within the precincts of the temples to please the deities, the former allured the males with their mesmerizing and entrancing dance steps. Thus the women, who were earlier responsible to preserve the heritage and cultures of a region, were now reduced to common tarts.

And in the present age, we have a further newer version of the 'public' women – the 'call girls' and the 'sex workers'. Many films like *Mausam*, *Chandni Bar*, *Dev D*, *Talaash* etc have explored the theme of women being used as sexual objects. Sudrak's Charudatt and Vasantsena were in love with each other but Girish Karnad seems to be only interested in the lustful scenes. His *Utsav*, the biopic version of *Mricchakatika* emphasises only the physicality between Vasantsena (Rekha) and Charudatt (Shekhar Suman) and also has several sexual connotations. Even the renowned sage Vatsyayana (Amjad Khan) has been reduced to be a mere soft porn-film maker. These recent movies project how now such women are compared with street women/whores/demimondaine.

A glimpse on the previous lines focuses the deterioration of the meaning attached to these women. Once they were looked up with admiration, now only disgust and disrespect falls into their lap. Without any knowledge of their background, society categorizes them as loose, immoral women. They are considered a stain on the fabric of society and are thus preferred to be banished from the so-called 'respectable' community. It is these marginal voices that I have attempted to raise in my paper through two autobiographies – one by the son of a dancer who was forced into sex-work and the other by the sex-worker herself. If *Against All Odds* is a sad tale of the women of Kishore Shantabai Kale's community, *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* represents the voice of the sex-workers across India who proudly demand their rights to be accepted in the society.

...before a tamasha dancer knows why her chest must be covered by the pallu, somebody has filled her breasts with milk under the guise of chira...For two rupees we are expected to sit on a man's lap...the few rupees we get for allowing a man to hold and press our hand is what pays for the food in our house (*Against All Odds*, 152)

The lines quoted above talk at length about the kind of life the Kolhati women were compelled to lead. They were the sole bread-winners of their family and they earned their living by selling their bodies to rich upper caste men. Kishore Shantabai Kale's autobiography *Against All Odds* was originally written in Marathi as *Kolhatyache Por* (*A Kolhati's Child*) and its publication in 1994 created great furore in Maharashtra. He was much worried for the women of his tribe where women are treated as property to be sold to the highest bidder. The pain accentuated all the more because it were the fathers and brothers who played pimp for their daughters and sisters. Kale throws light on a section of our society of which we are quite oblivious and reveals the blurring of the fine line between art and prostitution. People of his community were nomadic who earned their living by performing *tamashas* before public. Men played *dholaks* and women danced on the rhythm but gradually this degraded from an art into business, eventually leaving no distinction between a dancer and a prostitute. The latter at least has the satisfaction of carrying out her trade overtly but these Kolhati 'dancers' had to put on the façade of respectability by cladding in "the elaborate saris, which covered them completely and were pinned securely in place so that the pallu never slid off the shoulder on stage" (11). They danced to attract men but were fully dressed, although physically only. It was only a pretension as any spectator could hold and squeeze their hands, pass lewd remarks and even take them as his mistress. There was no one to sympathize with them for 'who will mourn him who dies every day' (94). Unlike the orthodox families of India, the Kolhati people celebrated the birth of daughters because more daughters meant more money as "a Kolhati family survives on the money earned by the women of the family. The men considered any labour below their dignity" (5). Veena Talwar echoes a similar point in her "Lifestyle as Resistance". Chhote Miyan is the son of a courtesan who never revealed him his father's identity. He laments his condition:

While I love and respect my mother and all my "aunts" (other courtesans) and my grandmother, my misfortune is that I was born a son and not a daughter in their house. When a boy is born in the *kotha* (salon), the day is without moment, even one of quiet sadness. When my sister was born, there was a joyous celebration that was unforgettable. Everyone received new clothes, there was singing, dancing, and feasting. My aunts went from door to door distributing sweets.

My sister is, today, a beautiful, educated, propertied woman. She will also inherit what my mother and grandmother own. She will have a large income from rents; she doesn't even have to work as a courtesan, if she so chooses. I am educated, but I have no

money or property. Jobs are very hard to come by, so I live in a room and subsist on a small allowance that my mother gives in exchange for running errands for her and helping her deal with her lawyers. (She was trying to evict a tenant from a house she owned.) She paid for my education, but a degree is pretty worthless these days. My only hope is that I may marry a good woman who has money and who gives me sons so they can look after me in my old age, or find a way of getting a job in Dubai, as my cousin did. Otherwise my chances in life are pretty dim. Funny isn't it, how these women have made life so topsy-turvy?

This indeed is a case of inversion in a society where males have always been preferred to females. Kale also exposes hollowness the tradition of giving the mother's name to her children. It was a trend that 'proclaims their illegitimacy' all the more.

Kale further mentions a ritual of '*chira-utarna*', a ceremony where young teenage virgins were given to men "with all the trappings of a wedding, but none of its sanctity" (5). He highlights the travesty of father-daughter relationship when he elaborates how his own mother, Shanta was pulled out of school by his grandfather and was forced into the flesh-business. For men, their women were merely "moneymaking machines. That they had feelings, desires, dreams was something he (they) would never acknowledge" (14). To add to the bitterness, Kale tells that the women were sold for virginity at puberty but were abandoned soon once they get pregnant and "like a worn-out piece of clothing she would be discarded...like a flower that has lost its fragrance, we (they) are thrown out" (29-30). They are devoid of all the rights and 'tears are all that tamasha dancers have in their lives anyway' (161). The dancers put on make-ups and wear masks to hide their helplessness; their 'sadness and despair' lie concealed 'behind their laughing facades' (114). Ironically, these women 'belonged to everybody' (57) but actually belonged to none.

While talking about his mother, Kale does not refer to Shantabai being a woman only, that she was a mother too is also very poignantly delineated by the author. Such women had to either kill the child within the womb or if they do give birth, ultimately they had to leave their child and move ahead to earn money from some other 'benefactor'. Who notices the tears of a mother? Who understands the pain of being severed from the new born child? Kale yearned for the love of his mother and also blames her for his miseries. But he accepts this failing in him – "Little did they, or I, know the state of Bai's heart and the constraints which bound her life" (86). Shantabai stood at the crossroads, in a dilemma to choose between the child with a miserable life and the husband/ *kaja/ yejman* for support. And her decision to go with the latter was unforgivable, both by her son who lost his mother and also by her family who lost the breadwinner. Shantabai 'pined for her sons, but remained duty bound to her husband' (43); she was a 'woman', a label that allowed her 'no right to her own life' (43) because 'it was a sin to be born a beautiful woman in a Kolhati family' (44). The women have to wipe of the tears and wear a fake smile to seduce men, however the wounds remain afresh within forever. They are 'silenced' by circumstances and become the 'missing girls' of the society.

Nalini Jameela's memoir, *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* is an initiative taken in this direction. Her book received a mixed response from the readers across the country – some criticised her for being bold, others applauded her attempts to speak for the 'unheard' women. Undeterred by the scathing attacks, she continues to work for the rights of the commercially sexually exploited women (CSEW). In her memoir, she transcends the boundary of 'I' and talks for the collective 'We' – how the women get trapped in the vicious circle of flesh trade from where escape is impossible. Nalini Jameela has tried to bring such

marginalised women to the centre and has dared to ask the hypocrite society the reason of casting out these women. In her autobiography she 'celebrates' her being a sex-worker. Despite the stigma which is attached to them, she is not ashamed and embarrassed to accept the reality. Instead, she treats her work as any other profession that brings in money. *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* traces the journey of Nalini's life from a nine-year old child working in a factory to an established sex-worker to a bold activist and filmmaker. Without giving any steamy details to titillate, Nalini has honestly outpoured her experiences. The translator of her book, J Devika writes about the book in the following words:

Fiery, outspoken and often wickedly funny, this candid account of one woman's life as a sex worker in Kerala became a bestseller when it was first published in Malayalam...She has been a wife, mother, successful business woman and social activist – as well as a sex worker – at different stages of her life. This is Nalini Jameela's story, told in her inimitably honest and down-to-earth style, of her search for dignity, empowerment and freedom on her own terms.

Through her autobiography, Nalini has reiterated that as she has performed various roles at different times in her life, other sex workers too don similar roles but unfortunately the tag of being a sex worker overshadows her all other responsibilities. In contrast to Kishore Shantabai Kale's book, Nalini and other women like her are shining examples of women empowerment. In the later phase of her life, Nalini got associated with an organization 'Jwalamukhi' which was established as a centre for sex workers run by an HIV prevention project. It was introduced by the State AIDS Control Society and was the first of its kind in Kerala then. Now Nalini is actively involved with this group creating awareness among the sex workers regarding their rights as human beings. In 2000, Nalini participated in a workshop on camera training for sex workers in Thailand, and then started making documentaries on the lives of her people. The first of these, *Jwalamukhikal* was produced in 2002, and a second in 2004. She, at present has completed her second book, *In the Company of Men: the Romantic Encounters of a Sex Worker*, soon to be published by Penguin. It is not merely an extension of her autobiography. In the book, she presents insights into the behaviour of men and facets of their personality—tenderness, romance, arrogance and power.

As J Devika observes, no doubt it is a very frank narration of Nalini's life but one should not misinterpret it – although the book is titled 'The Autobiography of a Sex Worker', it is not merely the sex work that occupies the centre space – we should also look into the 'woman' and 'human being' aspect in Nalini. She also had a normal childhood, spending days in school and doing household chores. It is only when her mother lost her job that Nalini realized that 'pride and dignity come only out of having money' (6). Due to financial crisis at home, she had to take up some menial job in the clay mine. Later she was turned out of her house by her father over some disagreements with him and it is then that she hurriedly married Subrahmanyam, a man much older to her. Further her fate betrayed her when after a married life of three and a half years, her husband committed suicide, leaving behind him a wife and two children. It was for their upbringing that Nalini first took the plunge into sex work. The children were left in the care of her mother-in-law. Like Kale's community, here too the children were separated from their mother but the worst part is, her son passed away at the age of seventeen and the younger daughter, although is doing well but 'does not find me (her) acceptable' (18). Nalini had the right only to peep at her from a distance, despite bearing the financial responsibilities. Her daughter knows her as a mother who abandoned her at the age of two. So it was for her children that she became 'needing woman'. Thereafter she never looked back. But she could not kill the mother in her:

I was sending money home, even though I never saw the kids or my husband's mother. Once, the sum I had sent came back unclaimed. I made enquiries through a friend. Apparently, my husband's younger brother had gone off to work in the Gulf and was sending plenty of money back home. So they had decided not to accept my money. The fear was that if they accepted my money, I might claim my children later. It was painful to cut my ties with them for good; but they were living well, and I found some happiness in that. I had got into this trade to support my kids. Like any other job, this one too had been tiring at times (37)

Once this responsibility ended, Nalini re-married a Muslim man Koyakka and became the mother to a daughter Zeenat. However she ended this marriage after twenty months, only to be taken up by Shahulkka. Living with Shahulkka, Nalini took a hiatus from her 'work' for about twelve years but destiny had some other plan. When she was again thrown out of her home, with a young daughter to take care of, she was again compelled to resume her trade.

Nalini's life took another turn when she began to interact with the people at 'Jwalamukhi'. It was here that she came to know that sex workers too have certain rights. The centre made her vocal and bold. She admits that 'it became a symbol of our self-confidence' (83). The organization imbued in her a sense of pride for her work and also as an individual. She became the voice of the marginalised sex workers who were looked down upon by the so-called cultured people. She questions the society on behalf of her women: "How are we offenders? In what sense? If sex is the offence then there's one more person who must be punished. How come that fellow is never punished? Isn't he an offender too?" (68). The centre changed her life for the better. It gave her the opportunity to speak on 'The Social Position of the Devadasis' in a symposium on the topic 'HIV and the Role of Men' (1999). She is also a part of an organisation called the Indian Sex Workers' Forum in Chennai, was also appointed president of the Kerala Sex Workers' Forum and is these days associated with FIRM. She attended the Kolkata Sex Workers' Forum when March 3 was celebrated as Indian Sex Workers' Day and confidently tells about 'The Festival of No Pleasure' celebrated in 2003 where sex workers and non-sex workers came together and shared a common platform which in itself was a significant achievement as the sex workers not only got an opportunity to speak their minds, but also had a sincere and receptive audience.

Nalini, as mentioned above, is actively working in the direction to bring a change in the attitude of the people so that these women are not marginalized. As a fiery activist, she says "What we need is not sympathy or compassion but acceptance" (111). Talking about rehabilitation of the sex workers, Nalini asks a question in return: "Is it possible to build afresh their domestic ties and social ties through rehabilitation?" (110). Her stand is very true – when the feminists themselves do not support the sex workers, when the society treats them as untouchables, when their own relations are severed, how can the rehabilitation process help in improving their condition? No one cares for them as I have quoted in the beginning of the paper, no one is bothered for their existence. Hence when asked as to what step she is taking to end sex work, Nalini boldly replies: "my desire was to maintain it" (109). She candidly remarks that the society is adamant at marginalizing them, the law is resolute to punish them, the sex workers continue to complain about their exploitation but what is missing is the courage to voice their concerns, demand their rights and make their existence felt. The society takes no time in labelling these women and their work 'morally wrong' but no one suggests measures to sort out the matters. As per Nalini, putting an end to sex work is not the wise decision, what she suggests is sex work should be 'decriminalised'. The point

Nalini presses is that the sex workers should not be treated as victims to be rescued, rather human beings to be respected and accepted.

However nowhere does she glorifies and propagates sex work as is believed by her critics, her only objection is to the kind of attitude society has for such women. Her point is “people do all kinds of work in order to survive...if your life is a struggle to survive and to support others, then you won’t be concerned with whether the work you can get is dignified or not” (139) then why such brouhaha over the profession taken up by these women? Despite the stigma attached to their occupation, Nalini speaks with pride: “I am a sex worker among the intellectuals” and not “the intellectual among sex workers”. When asked if she is planning to leave her profession, she blatantly denies saying “This profession has given me everything, fame, money and a name. I will never disown it. I am proud to be a sex worker”. This courage comes to the sex workers due to the efforts that are being made by several organizations such as Vamp, Prerna, Oasis India, Stop Sex Slavery etc. Such projects have created an increasing awareness not only among the sex workers, but the rational citizens of the country too. These organizations are working with a mission to mobilize them – their sole mission being to change the society, improve the working conditions of sex workers and claim their rights and recognition.

The choice of these two texts was deliberate on my part. While it was courageous enough of Kishore Shantabai Kale to talk about his mother and other such women in general, Nalini Jameela’s candid description too made the feminists and conservatives frown. The confidence and inner strength that exudes from Nalini’s book is in sharp contrast with the meek, timid and helpless Kolhati women. The sex workers carry out their profession openly, without any facade of respectability and this courage is what is required to remove the stigma attached to this profession. My aim behind this bold attempt was to project some light on the very existing but boycotted section of the Indian society. It is high time that we start some serious pondering as to how and in what conditions does a woman become a sex worker before raising questions at her character. The society should accept that these women too are individuals with aspirations. Their desire is not to be ‘saved’ by any organization, rather to be accepted as respected human beings.

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