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## Children of the Red Light

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The city of Kolkata is full of astonishing history and various ways of life. As the capital of India's West Bengal state, it attracts the public with its grand colonial architecture, art galleries, and cultural festivals. For those residing in this city, a different story can be seen. Despite all of Kolkata's exuberance, many of the residents of this city live in some of the worst conditions, drastically distanced from the cultural ambiance. In specific, the Sonagachi neighborhood is not a place one would travel to witness the cultural vitality of Kolkata. This red-light neighborhood is home to roughly 16,000 sex workers and their families (Chakraborty 2020). The children of this neighborhood have grown up surrounded by the influence of sex workers and child laborers. Being raised in these conditions has impacted the expectations placed on them around schooling and has highlighted two different types of expectations: one for boys, and one for girls. The difference in expectations is brought on by the culture of the city, the predominance of sex-work, and the influence of the parents.

First and foremost, the history and the culture of this neighborhood must be understood in order to grasp the circumstances these children face in their day-to-day lives. As a whole, the city of Kolkata has a large culture of servitude. Being the previous capital of British India, the city has since overcome its colonial legacy, yet there are still traces of its influence left behind. According to researcher Seemin Qayum and Professor Raka Ray from UC Berkeley, a particular culture of servitude exists due to its underlying expectations of a feudal past (Ray & Qayum, 2003 527). Kolkata has maintained a clear distinction of classes through the continuation of domestic servitude. Three clear premises continue to shape this culture of servitude. Ray and Qayum explain them as "first, that servants are essential to a well-run and well-kept household; second, that servants are 'part of the family' and bound to it by ties of affection, loyalty, and dependence; and third, that servants comprise a class with distinctive lifestyles, desires, and

habits” (Ray & Qayum 2003, 527). With the changes in the modernity of society, it is only logical for the social prestige of domestic servants to change as well; the most notable change being the transition from live-in to part-time paid domestic workers. The largest influencer of this is the expectancy to create and uphold a nuclear family. In addition to this, many families have transitioned to prefer part-time servants as a means of safety. An employer has no control over who a live-in would choose to bring in and out of the house while they are away. Furthermore, Ray and Qayum observed how this culture of servitude is no longer predominant. “The first premise sits uncomfortably with contemporary notions of privacy and ideologies of the nuclear family, especially in the more confined space of the apartment. The second is complicated by the entrance of capitalist and corporate discourses about employers and employees. The third is challenged daily in a political culture where democratizing discourses circulate in both state and civil society” (Ray & Qayum 2003, 527).

Continuing with this transition in the culture of servitude, the domestic servitude in contemporary Kolkata has begun to blur the divides between family and work, affection and duty, and the home and the world. More specifically, Ray and Qayum note in their book *Cultures of Servitude: Modernity, Domesticity, and Class in India*, “employers of servants deploy the “rhetoric of love”- an ideological strategy that allows structural inequalities and domination to be perceived on an entirely different register such that relationships of servitude are reinterpreted on terms of mutual trust, affection, obligation, and loyalty” (Ray & Qayum 2020, 92-93). When a domestic servant is brought into a family with multiple children, the employer typically desires an emotional bond between them and their children. This bond is extremely beneficial to the health and well-being of the child, it provides them with a sense of security and appreciation that can impact their general outlook on life. Nevertheless, the employers hope for this type of bond

without having to treat them as mutuals. Domestic servants are intended to treat these children as if they were their own and provide direct care to them. With how much time a domestic servant spends with the employer's family, it is only natural for them to develop a deep, emotional bond specifically with the children of the house. The "rhetoric of love" established the hierarchy in the house while still creating a friendly environment for all involved. While the employers trust the servant, they are clear to define the line between work and family. There is no confusion about the employee's relationship with the family. Likewise, an invisible chain of care can be seen through this interaction. Interesting to note that sex-workers are typically depicted to be at the bottom of this chain, yet some sex-workers hire their own domestic help to take care of their children while they are at work.

Moving to a different form of servitude, one striking characteristic of Sonagachi, a red-light neighborhood located in North Kolkata, is the abundance of prostitution that occurs. It is a common misconception that prostitution in India is illegal, but it is legal. However, pimping, owning, and managing a brothel are illegal. This became clear in 1956 under the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act. Durbar is a grassroots sex workers' organization based in Kolkata focusing on preventing HIV-AIDS, anti-trafficking of unwilling women and minors, and authorizing sex work as sensible work. "The [Self-Regulatory] Board is Durbar's effort, first, to express its anti-trafficking stance to the state of India, and second, to indicate the necessity of delinking trafficking from "prostitution", as they are now conflated under The Immoral Trafficking Prevention Act (ITPA)" (Dasgupta 2014, 109). Despite the protection of their work, many sex-workers remain silent in their affiliation. These women do not often join organizations such as Durbar even though they would allow them to defend their work and provide a personal experience with the public or government. Simanti Dasgupta notes that "such silences are not the

absence of language, but... on the one hand, signals the impossibility of speech given where one is located in the social hierarchy” (Dasgupta 2014, 122). While their work is legally recognized, there is a social stigmatism that follows the field of sex-work leaving these women’s voices often unheard when they choose to speak. Their effort to remain silent signals the awareness these women have: their words would be stripped of truth and meaning if they chose to speak.

These red-light districts of Kolkata have piqued the interest of many foreigners. Ross Kauffman and Zana Briski’s documentary *Born into Brothels* (2004) presents various photography workshops set up for the children of sex-workers. Briski initially traveled here with the intention to photograph the women of the red-light district of Sonagachi herself however when many of the women refused to be photographed, she turned to the children for help. By doing so she was able to capture the essence of the neighborhood through a new light; through the eyes of the children raised there. Professor Krista Lynes from Concordia University analyzed this film and noted “*Born into Brothels* often portrays the red-light district as a failure of Indian modernity, erasing the force of the transnational economy (in its material and semiotic dimensions) in producing the Sonagachi district in Kolkata” (Lynes 2011, 111). The downside of foreigners from Western countries documenting the situation in Sonagachi is their lack of unbiased. Many of these film producers begin by comparing the situation to their home lives such as in the U.S. where sex-work is a very taboo subject. By making this city out to be a failure of Indian modernity, the filmmakers obscure the sex worker’s experiences of larger relations both within transnational capitalism and without. Lynes also points out “it is not just the trafficking benefits from the trade routes opened up by global capitalism but that indeed it participates in those economies, creating distinctions between national and transnational scales of sexual exploitation that mask their deep imbrication” (Lynes 2011, 111).

Not only is this city abundant in prostitution, but it is also flooded with child laborers. “According to Indian Census data from 2001 (cited by the India’s Central Labor Ministry) more than 12.6 million children in India are working as child laborers” (Bagchi 2006, 131). With the increasing informalization of labor in Third World cities, the implication of child labor has thrived. Dr. Bagchi, the Ambedkar chair professor in anthropology at the University of Calcutta, notes, “these child laborers mostly come from marginalized populations, and often the dependence of their families on their incomes is very high” (Bagchi 2006, 142). In more than 65 percent of the cases Bagchi looked over, these child laborers were contributing over half of the total earnings to their families. However, despite the hazardous and strenuous tasks these children face, many have a more forward-looking reason: an apprenticeship into a specific field and potentially profitable work. In addition to providing for their families, another prominent characteristic of child laborers is their lack of education. Within a study of 897 children between ages 5-14, more than half of the boys had spent between one year and three years in school while nearly all of the girls had no schooling at all. The current education system in Kolkata creates an easier path for boys to take than for girls and, in a similar manner, an easier path for the upper and middle class than the lower class. This can be said for most educational systems around the world, but it is very prominent in Kolkata as the statistics of child laborers comes to the surface.

Equally important to note is that different environmental factors such as nutritional and socio-economic status can impact a child’s cognitive development. These factors can vary from the labor intensity they face to their family structure at home, and more. Cognitive development is a field of study focusing on a child’s development in terms of information processing, conceptual reasoning, perceptual skills, language learning, and other aspects of a developed adult brain. Trends in the U.S. allude to the connection between underdeveloped cognitive skills and

poor nutrition. Children raised in a low socioeconomic environment also tend to fall behind with their cognitive development. In Kolkata, these same trends have appeared. Five hundred and sixty-six school children between the ages of 5 and 12 years of age were selected from different schools of Kolkata for a study to determine the influence of grades of undernutrition and socioeconomic status on the cognitive development of children. The study reached the conclusion that “the cognitive development is decreasing with the grade of undernutrition and SES [socio-economic status] in the school children of Kolkata and it is strongly associated with the chronic undernutrition and SES. However, the nutritional deficiency and SES may not be the only cause of low cognitive development in school children as several other factors may affect the cognitive development in early childhood” (Gosh et al. 2014). When students do not receive the proper nutrition both in school and at home, their brain is not as susceptible to cognitive development as it has placed survival instincts as a priority for the hungry child. In a similar sense, children from low socio-economic backgrounds tend to be more distracted during lessons and in turn, slow their cognitive development. For many children living in Sonagachi, attending school can be challenging for several reasons. Being the victim of marginalization can impact a child’s cognitive development. This is because students are often bullied when marginalized and if it is on a wider scale, teachers may also neglect to show the students an equal amount of attention in comparison to their peers.

To reiterate, the nutritional levels of a child can impact their cognitive development as well as their education as a whole. Child under-nutrition is a large problem in West Bengal. “It has been estimated by World Health Organization (WHO) that 60.0% of 10.9 million deaths that occur annually among children of less than five years of age in the developing nations are associated with under-nutrition” (Basu et al. 2019, 316). Malnutrition makes a child susceptible

to disease and delays any recovery. In addition to this, a child struggling with under-nutrients will have a tougher time focusing on school. Their mind and body work slower which can impact their cognitive development. Many children from these red-light districts spend their lives in a battle with under-nutrition. A study was conducted on four hundred and thirty-one 6 to 9-years-old Bengalee school girls at Lake Town Government Sponsored Girls' School, Kolkata, India. This is an all-girls school located roughly 5 kilometers West of Sonagachi. The results of this study revealed that, in general, the yearly increments in various skinfold measurements were similar. Overall, the period of maximum growth was observed at 6 years of age (Bose et al. 2005, 444). It is important to note that in India, the starting age for primary school is 6 years old. Upon starting primary school, children receive school lunches which assist in the under-nutrition problem facing the city. While there is no guarantee that children get fed nutritional meals at home, the girls of Lake Town Government Sponsored Girls' School receive at least one balanced meal a day. This correlates to why the most growth was observed in the girls 6 years of age because it is their first year attending school.

Specifically, in the red-light districts, the children of sex-workers can be divided into two groups: those who were born before their mother became a sex-worker, and those who were born after. It is not ideal for a woman to be raising a child in the brother, not only with a lack of a father figure but the children running around are not good for business. Mothers with fairly high income tend to hire a second accommodation for their children that is located away from the brothel. When growing up in brothels, "the children start learning their environment very fast and they often manipulate the situation to their own benefit" (Mukhopadhyay 2012, 204). The children enjoy their freedom while the mothers work, use abusive language picked up from the streets, and sometimes hackle customers and blackmail them for more money. As the children



reach the age to attend schooling, the school is marked with a large number of dropouts for the children of the sex-workers of Kolkata. On the other hand, not all children are dropouts. Some continue their education despite their socio-economic background. The biggest cause of this disbalance in pursuing education has to do with the viewpoints of the parents. They are not equally convinced of the necessity of a formal education and do not care whether their child attends school or not. These mothers offered various explanations: “some of them said, after the exhausting night they couldn’t wake up early to serve food to the children and send them to school. The mother of one girl said, what would she learn at school when she has to spend her life in the kitchen? Another mother said that her religion of Islam does not permit sending the girl child to school” (Mukhopadhyay 2012, 206). For these children of sex-workers, the viewpoint of their parental unit has a drastic impact on their educational path. When these children are sent to other cities in order to receive an education, they feel a lack of support from their society. As the children grow up surrounded by sex-workers, alcoholics, and drug addicts, there is an abundance of bad influences waiting to pull them away from their education hence why some mothers choose to send their children to residential schools if they can afford to otherwise, they attempt to send them to school as far as money can take them. Despite that, children of the sex-workers are compelled to live inside brothels. Here, they are vulnerable to harassment or even assault. Many mothers send their children to study classes in the evening for the obvious reason that these classes keep them away during their working hours.

To further emphasize the difference of gender expectations between boys and girls involves the marginalization of children of sex-workers. There are times children don’t come to the realization of the marginalization they face from society until they have entered schooling. Once again, the outlook of the parents has a large impact on both the expectations of boys and

girls. As mentioned previously, many of the girls are expected to either live a domestic life or join the brothel. For boys, who cannot follow their mother's footsteps and join the brothel, many want to leave their locality. Chhanda Mukhopadhyay notes "the vices of the *para* [or locality consciousness] identified by such boys are high rates of addiction to alcohol and narcotics among the residents, habit of gambling, and quarreling" (Mukhopadhyay 2012, 209). When it comes to girls, there is a hesitation by some families to enter them into school. On the one hand, she would be protected and safe inside the school but on the other hand, she may become too independent and be deemed unmarriageable. The value of schooling is not unambiguous or universal. Even within the city of Kolkata, various families value schooling differently, those on the agricultural side believe that traditional schooling is not important for them but rather prefer apprenticeships to learn the trade skills. Families further in the city often send their children into schooling for them to secure a big job after they finish studying and provide for themselves. Professor Da Costa explains how "in West Bengal, where concerted efforts in economic redistribution and political decentralization have been made, the alienation, insecurity, and marginalization represented in words of parents and young men and women are haunting. [...] Lack of redistributive equality, the threat of violence, and marital desertion also mark the ways women construct the meaning and value of their schooling" (Da Costa 2008, 305).

Another key point regarding the schooling of children in Kolkata is the type of institute children attend to receive their schooling. The English language has been an important marker of status in post-colonial India. There has since been a large-scale shift away from government-run public schools towards private English-Medium schools. An English-medium school is an education system that uses English as the primary medium of instruction typically in places where English is not the native tongue of the students. A majority of students in Kolkata are

attending private, low-cost English medium schools. While some scholars praise these schools for equalizing access to English language skills, others argue that such schools are only English-medium in name. Sazana Jayadeva, a research fellow at the GIGA Institute of Asian Studies, makes note that “it has also been argued that low-cost English-medium schools in fact doubly disadvantage students because when instruction is offered in a language in which teachers are not proficient, students’ access not just to English, but education more generally, is compromised” (Jayadeva 2019). While many parents send their children to these schools with the intent of them learning English in order to achieve higher careers post-schooling, the city of Kolkata is abundant in low-cost schools. These schools continue to follow the trend of dropout rates of the public schools in this area likely due to the under qualification of these establishments.

All things considered, the difference in expectations surrounding schooling for boys and girls can be seen through the structure of the city, the type of labor that occurs, and the general education performance of children in Kolkata, India. The distinct districts of the city highlight the different classes and in turn where the good resources and high-quality educations are located. Upon this view, the children from low-class socioeconomic backgrounds are given a different set of expectations from the start. Many of these children become involved in child labor resulting in a preference of apprenticeship style education over the traditional schooling method. In addition to child labor, the abundance of prostitution has affected the expectations of girls differently than boys. Many mothers and fathers do not wish to send their daughters to school as it can affect their marriageability and would prefer them to focus on homemaker skills. Boys are almost always sent to school with the expectation of completion in order to achieve a well-rounded, high-paying job to provide for his family. For the children of sex-workers, it is a similar yet different story. Often, when girls reach the age of 16, they become pulled into the

brothels as employees whereas many of the boys are completely dejected due to the soft abandonment they face. With the mothers focused on their work, many of the boys take to the streets and fall under bad influence. As a whole, when the children begin school, there has been a continuation of high dropout rates because of these factors listed above. The biggest influence on these children and their schooling expectations comes from their parents. Deciding if to send them and where to send them allows the adults to lay out guidelines for their children and the education they are expected or not expected to get. In conclusion, the children of sex workers face a different set of assumptions about education than children not from red-light districts, and continuing on, girls both in and out of these districts have different expectations placed on them than what is placed on their male counterparts.

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