The Contagion and the Condemned: HIV-AIDS, Anti-Trafficking and Sex Work in Sonagachhi

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One can trace the emergence of the prostitute as a medico-legal subject category since the mid- to late nineteenth century during the British colonial rule in India. The Contagious Diseases Acts medically isolated and legally marked women to particularly serve the British soldiers. In the postcolonial phase, with the advent of the HIV-AIDS epidemic, the state has renewed its medical surveillance in the red light districts through intervention programs to prevent the spread of the disease. The current anti-trafficking apparatus that operates at the global and national registers further enhances the surveillance. An uncanny continuity between the colonial and postcolonial periods is palpable in terms of violence and denial of human rights to the marginalized women.

Interestingly, in the midst of the postcolonial state recreating the prostitute as a new subject of rule through medico-legal supervision, what has emerged in response, is a sex workers’ movement in Sonagachhi. The movement, which is primarily led by Durbar Mahila Samanawaya Samiti, a grassroots collective, aims to separate “prostitution” from trafficking since they are historically collated under the Immoral Trafficking (Prevention) Act. The goal of the movement is to replace the stigmatized label of “prostitution” with the empowerment of “sex work” with a view to establish labor rights.

Drawing upon current ethnographic work in Sonagachhi, this paper highlights two issues: first, how the colonial and the postcolonial legal practices resonate in terms of creating and recreating the women’s bodily identity at the intersection of law and medicine. Second, how the current sex-work discourse lays claim to a new legal citizen-labor category. Together, these issues indicate how citizen/subject formation in the postcolonial phase occurs through claim making at the social margins.

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Simanti Dasgupta is an assistant professor in anthropology at the University of Dayton. Her current ethnographic research focuses on the sex workers’ movement in Songachhi, India, which is analytically located at the intersection of law and medicine.