

## **The spatial-cultural configuration of sex work in Goa India**

### **Background**

*Go Goa- a perfect holiday destination*, the slogan of the Department of Tourism, Goa seduces people to a land of *Sun, Sand and Rhythm of Soul*. Goa is now on the global map of tourist destinations on par with other seaside destinations of the Global South such as Bangkok and Pattaya. To support the infrastructure development and the 'needs' of tourists, a different Goa has emerged, i.e. that of migrated labourers and sex workers: the Goa of migrants which is very different and would not be considered a luxury tourist destination. Migrants from Karnataka are clustered in slums and shanty towns, often making their own places. For sex workers who practice an 'illegal occupation', the wrath of geo-politics is even harsher. Until recently, sex work in Goa was primarily concentrated in the red light area in Baina. Sex workers were migrants from neighbouring states. In 2004, at time of this study, the red light area was demolished and the cubicles for sex work were razed to the ground. Leading to further marginalization of sex workers and destructing HIV prevention efforts in Baina. Following the eviction, sex workers now use different places for transacting sex.

### **Objective**

The aim of this paper is to describe the spatial-cultural configuration of sex work as constituted by the *places* where sex is negotiated and transacted. The cultural part of the spatial-cultural configuration involves the understanding of combined meanings generated from the place making process by sex workers, clients and facilitators.

### **Data and methods**

We base this paper on triangulated information from key informants, observations, reported sexual experiences of migrant men and media. The paper is situated in a broader study on risk assessment of HIV/AIDS among migrant and mobile men in Goa. In this paper we use data from an empirical study carried out in Goa in 2004-05.

- Key informant interviews

To find out the different places where sex work takes place, key informant interviews among Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) in Goa were conducted. The NGOs are engaged in prevention and care issues related to HIV/AIDS. NGO outreach workers are selected as key informants, as they are involved in targeted interventions for HIV preventions programs among sex workers. They are also closely involved in the post-demolition rehabilitation of the sex workers in Baina, the former red light area.

- 'Walk through the places'

For an emic view of the practice of sex work, a so called 'walk through the places'- technique, a combination of ethnographic observation and 'imaginary walk' developed by the Chicago school (Blokland, 2003), is applied. The technique involves NGO outreach workers indicating and explaining the different times and type of sex workers who were selling sex in these places. The walk contributed to provide a thick description of sex work and the places. The NGO workers narrated stories of sex workers and their varied experiences in interacting with the sex workers.

- Client perspective narratives

To get a 'client perspective' on sex work interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) were conducted to understand the different places where migrant men from Karnataka go to find sex workers. Most research has been focussing on sex workers and not much on the clients, i.e. the demand side has been ignored to a large extent, as being under the gender myth of indulging in commercial sexual relations as typical male behaviour (Rushing and Contreras, 2007). The interviews (25) and FGDs (16) were conducted in Kannada and Hindi (languages spoken by migrants).

- Media

To get to know how the demolition of the red light district Baina and its aftermath, leading to a proposed rehabilitation of its inhabitants, was reported and constructed in the popular media, media messages are analysed. To get different perspectives, newspaper clippings were collected both from the press in Karnataka and in Goa.

## **Results**

### **Places for sex work in Goa:**

The urban places in Goa where sex work is negotiated and conducted vary considerably. Some are private places and some public places. This paper provides some insights in and theorizes about the cultural meanings associated with urban places for sex work. We refer to the places where sex work is transacted and negotiated as 'sex places'. As sex work is a stigmatized occupation, many sex places are secluded. The main sex places identified, from observations, interactions with migrant men and NGO workers, include bars, hotels, lodges, market areas, flyovers, bus stands, railways stations, parks and highways. Home based sex work was also reported by migrant men. We classify sex places as being contested, gendered and veiled.

### **Sex places: Contested**

On 14 June 2004, the Government of Goa -with an order from the High court in Mumbai, through the police and civil servants, demolished the cubicles of sex workers and houses of some migrants which bordered the red light area. The government's claim was that the cubicles and houses were built on illegal land. Media reports that were generated in Goa reiterated the government's sentiments of asking sex workers, their families and the migrants to go back to their 'native' places. News clippings show the contested nature of the place and the moral politics of the then government.

*...previous governments had made abortive attempts to remove 'the eyesore' from the costal paradise of the state.....Parrikar (the chief minister) may have just done what it was politically right for him to do...[Sanjay Banerjee, Times of India, Panaji, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2004]*

Whereas media reports from across the border in Karnataka, the place of origin of many sex workers and migrants painted a picture of displacement and evoked strong sentiments resulting in protests and stone throwing at busses belonging to the Goan government .

*Irked by Goa Government's action of evicting hundreds of Kannadigas (people from Karnataka) from Baina beach, Kannada activists stoned Goa Road Transport Corporation bus on Sampige Road at Malleshwaram....Minister P. G. R. Scindia (Karnataka) said on Monday that he would visit the area..[Naushad Bijapur, The New Indian Express-Belgaum edition, 21 June, 2004]*

The contested nature of this urban place for sex work and the moral discourse that surrounded Baina can be situated within Mary Douglas's (1992) framework of risk and blame. In the case of Baina, geo-politics of tourism combined with the blame of increasing HIV/AIDS rates made the government as an institution evict sex workers.



Figure 1 Map of Goa showing different places for sex work.

### Sex places: Gendered

Bars in Goa are places for exclusive male sociality. In the Indian context, consumption of alcohol is seen as a vice. Some men, due to religious reasons cannot drink at home so they come to these masculine places. Bars are the 'pick up' points for sex workers and lodges link further as a place where sex is transacted.

*A bar in Madgaon: sex workers sit hidden behind a wall near the hotel. When the waiter from the hotel calls them, a sex worker moves from her hiding place, jumps a small wall and goes to the hotel room. Then she comes back to the hiding place. This hiding is due to the fear of being caught by the police (Observation, November, 2004).*

Lodges are also essentially dominated by men: in lower end lodges women do not go unaccompanied. It is in these lodges that the hotel attendants arrange for the customers of sex work. But in some of the areas, lodges have an understanding with the sex workers instead: they provide the room for a price for a few hours. The sex workers charge the clients for the room.

Interviewer: where do you go to find sex workers?

Respondent: In Madgaon, sex workers ask 100 rupees and 60 rupees as rent for the lodge. This is for one shot. Meaning once the man's water comes then it is over.

Though sex workers do transact sex in these places they don't have a defined place of their own. The politics of visibility and invisibility lead sex workers to a placeless existence within the masculine domains.

### **Sex places: Veiled**

With the veil of darkness or nightfall public places become peripheral thus facilitating transgression of the place by the marginalized sections of the society viz. sex workers. In the public places discussed darkness and crowd metaphorically provide a veil for sex workers to negotiate and transact sex. Sex work in Goa takes place after dusk in places such as bus stops, under flyovers and bridges (see Fig 1). After dusk, flyovers and bridges are secluded places where sex workers wait for clients. NGO workers, in the walk through the places, also pointed out that men look for sex workers under flyovers and bridges. In day time, this urban place is busy with vehicles which ply by. At night the traffic is less and commuting goes down. The darkness of these places and relative seclusion provides a place for sex workers and their clients. Though veiled the places are not safe for the sex workers as they fear being caught by the police.

### **Conclusions**

Within the globalizing forces such as tourism and structural interventions, such as global aid to HIV prevention, there needs to be an emphasis on local implications. Especially the local meanings given by people and the changes in everyday geographies. Though this paper analyses places in Goa being contested, gendered and veiled, they are not exclusive but provide different dimensions in making places. The reconfiguration of places in Goa, such as bus stands and public parks, into places for sex work is the interplay of demand, supply of sex work and its facilitating agents. This paper puts forth the argument for locating HIV/AIDS prevention efforts, risk and risk behaviour in varying places. Thus expanding the horizons of 'context', this hitherto was limited to the analysis of cultural and socio-economic factors, to incorporate the spatial nature of disease, risk behaviour, health seeking behaviour and most crucially the people behind the behaviours as they go about it in different places.

### **References**

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