

## **Kerala comes to Manhattan: Marginalisation of sex workers in Kerala**

*September 8, 2003*

### **Kerala Comes to Manhattan: A PONY member reports...**

Subhash's talk at NYU was informative and fascinating. Many PONY members/friends were in attendance. (PONY is the acronym for Prostitutes of New York.) Staff members from FROSTD, a New York outreach program, also came to the talk. We experienced a few snags with the audio equipment but still got to see some amazing footage of the sex workers' movement in Kerala, India.

Earlier in the day, we had a different, more intimate, discussion at GMHC, with a smaller group of interested people. One new PONY member was so enthused that she came to both events. This was her first encounter with PONY. So Subhash was also a catalyst for PONY's ongoing work.



Photo: ?  
Subhash Thottiparambil speaking at Gay Men's Health Crisis (GMHC) In New York.

Subhash is a terrific person and a hard-working human rights advocate. I feel very fortunate to have met him and I learned much from his two presentations. We are lucky to have Subhash in our lives.

While listening, one thing became clear to me: the legal and social problems faced by sex workers in the US are in many ways similar to those in India. The mystique which surrounds third world life is in many ways a distraction from global reality. The moralistic policies of our own government where health and sexuality are concerned are mirrored in some Indian policies: Subhash spoke a lot about how "abstinence," ignorance and "Victorian morality" are woven into governmental AIDS policy. He also spoke about the impact of religious and ethnic intolerance on people's lives. In the US, we are acutely aware of parallels which can be drawn between Hindu nationalism and other forms of nationalism.

In one film: At the sex worker conference, there was live music, dancing and a keynote address from a popular movie actor who sang a capella. The conference itself was multi-lingual with various languages of India spoken or sung, plus English. The president of the DMSC was quite beautiful. I don't know whether she is herself a sex worker. There were others on film with pretty faces but hers was a memorable and uncommon beauty.

I was curious to know more about the role of telephony in Kerala's sex trade. Subhash told us that very few people in the Kerala sex trade have landline telephones. If they operate by phone in Kerala, they are using mobile phones. New customers arrive through word of mouth, not from the internet or the newspapers.

Between events, I asked Subhash some questions about caste, religion and the street-based prostitutes of Kerala. He told me that many are dahlits; many come from the "lower middle" castes and that it's not unheard of to encounter a brahmin who is working the streets as a prostitute. (Neither is it common.) Many sex workers are Muslim or Christian. As a Western prostitute, I felt unsure about my questions regarding caste and still do. The whole thing is further complicated by a desire to know more about a country some of my ancestors came from. I felt safer discussing this in private, not during the general Q&A.

After these two events, Subhash returned to Atlanta to complete some work with the CDC. Thank you, Subhash, for taking the time to make this trip to New York! It is deeply appreciated!

And thank you to everybody who made this happen, especially Joe Lavezzo and Melissa, for being so generous with their resources.

— Tracy Quan

## **Marginalisation of sex workers in Kerala: some realities**

By Subhash Thottiparambil

Sex workers face constant discrimination and violence in Kerala society. They face a variety of medical, legal, social and economic barriers.

There are about 20,000 Sex workers in Kerala. Half of them are street based. They are marginalized in the medical system and receive inadequate medical care. They experience discrimination in the hospitals and cannot always pay for their medical expenses. Sex workers also have specific health needs around sexual health and also physical and mental traumas due to violence.

Sex workers are legally marginalized by a system in which prostitution is criminalized and those who engage in sex work find themselves enmeshed in a debt trap. Sex workers are fined for their work, but the only way they can access money to pay off fines is through more sex work. These women have no legal and political rights, making it impossible to make a legal case for physical or sexual violence received in the work place.

## **The HIV/AIDS Intervention**

Targeted intervention among "high-risk groups" is a highly effective intervention strategy. The National AIDS Control Society and State AIDS Control Societies with USAID and DFID funds have been investing a lot on this. Gates



Subhash Thottiparambil

Foundation,UNAIDS,UNDP,FORD,International AIDS Alliance and other big small foundations are also providing grants.The standardized international strategies and program components like IEC/BCC, Condoms,STD Care, Creation of Enabling Environment etc., were included. Some Care and Support programs were also initiated.

In India,We never addressed the laws criminalizing sex work and its premises; stigma attached to sex work, human rights violations both by the public and police, gender-power relations in sexuality and differences among the different segments of sex workers.

The experience shows that no project can work effectively in a criminalized atmosphere. There never developed a co-ordination between the law making- implementing authorities and the health departments.

There is no organization of sex workers except in Sponagachi for collective bargaining with the clients. Without sexworker's organization they can never bargain with clients; if one denies, another should not cater.

Again, the projects drawn in the situation of brothels are used to address the situation of street based sex workers, for example in Kerala, where there is no red-light area or permanent brothel.In the absence of brothels, drop-in-centers are a must for executing the projects. But as there was no ground preparation from the part of Government in supporting the drop-in-centers it vanished from the projects in the course of implementation. This means there is no collectivity and no bargaining in condom use.

In the absence of collective bargaining the only alternative is using condoms oneself. But the condoms supplied to the female sex workers are male condoms, which mean they have to ask the clients, in hurrying conditions, to wear it. The power relations in sexuality are against the women, all they could do is wear something themselves. If the Government promoted female condoms in targeted interventions it would have succeeded immensely.

The concept of A (Abstinence) B (Be faithful to one partner) C (then use condoms if you can't stick to the other two) in prevention projects ran high.All the IEC (information, education and communication) materials produced by the State Aids Control Societies(SACS) had this moral overtone in it.

There is still no concept of Male Sex Workers (MSW) but only of Men Seeking Men or Men having Sex with Men (MSM). This stems from the assumption that sex workers are only women.

### **Saga of violence and discrimination**

Violence is so rampant.Sex Workers are not allowed to remain in the street.The cleansing process is abruptly carried out by all responsible officials.Physical assault,verbal teasing and murder goes on.In the last two years 10 sex workers were dead under suspicious circumstances that are known to us.Experience shows that both police and judiciary failed to take action in all these years.There was no report of who did it,who died and so on."A body of a woman found on the railway track" or

"Committed suicide" are the normal headlines in the remotest columns and in the space provided for obituary of news papers.

### **A historical perspective sex work in Kerala**

Kerala, was never ruled by one King and there never had a big kingdom, which means there was no big cities. Only when big cities came into being the mobile population came into existence. And only when big kings were in power, people from different parts of the world got attracted to the place and this invariably created the need for sex and then brothels. This had never happened in Kerala.

This did not mean that there are no sexual encounters. Kerala is rich in sexual encounters. Traders from all over the world came here and had lived and had all sorts of relationships with the local community. But there was no need of brothels as the need for sex was fulfilled by getting instant relationships. Only when people owned private property and land the family was created.

Initially relationships were existed. Then only husbands and wives are created. Then only the sexuality of women were controlled. Once the sexuality of women was controlled then the need for sex workers and brothels come into existence.

This has happened only quite recently in Kerala. A practice of Sambandam existed here which was the choice of women to make sexual contact with people they liked. There were no husbands. Only Karanavars existed. The karanavar wants his gene to be perpetuated so kept to his sisters sons and daughters. If he relayed on his wife and if she got pregnant by someone else, all his genes were lost and he would have to share his property with someone else's son or daughter. That is why when private property got divided into parts and joint family lost its ground all the fathers were born and the karanavar lost his power. Now karanavar (mother's brother) are replaced b fathers and husbands. That is why now there are sex workers.

But brothels are restricted by the British laws, which also came at the time of private property and its division started. Moreover all this came with modern education and all that came with education is considered "progressive". That is why everybody now denounces sambandam (women's choice of men) and talks only of marriage. So Kerala male is trapped in this mind set of 'progress' and along with him the women also. So 'morality' (british laws) has an upper hand, Every one is trying to become modern and stands for it. This is the dilemma we are in. We are the most 'Talibanized' people in the whole world. If we are not addressing gender-power relations in our culture, we are a doomed people. What we call our culture, is basically an oppressive male culture. Where, in reality, women are bought and sold by men, whether we call it marriage or not. What we call families, are slave houses.

### **The sexuality and sex work: denying our traditions?**

India is said to have the highest tradition of respecting sex workers. We had an open space to address sexuality issues. One can find verses from as many texts to support this. Ramayana, Arthasasthra, kamasutra, the gajuraho paintings are some of the examples of this reality. The induction of Victorian morality brought sexwork a sin and limited sex and sexuality to the darkness bed room murmers. The British law is adapted without much modifications as modern and consequent laws including PITA

construed towards the total sufferings and exploitation of the sex workers .The rest is history and current affairs.

### **Sex Workers Forum Kerala**

This forum is an informal association of the Sex workers in Kerala. We organize Sex Workers,run drop-in-centres for sex workers, organize conferences, run home for the sex workers children, We have been part of the HIV/AIDS prevention programs. There were two projects in Kovalam and Thrissur which were closed as government stopped funds to organise sex workers. Recently we involved in the feasibility study on female condoms with HLL and Female Health Company.

We make videos and conducts surveys and studies on violence. We also do Advocacy with media and like minded organisations ,open dialogues with police and various forums. Networking with sex workers organisations and human rights associations in the world is a major activity. I stand here to fulfill this mission.

*(Presented at New York University on September 8, 2003.)*



Photo: ?

**Subhash Thottiparambil with Juhu Thukral, Director of the Sex Workers Project of the Urban Justice Center ([www.sexworkersproject.org](http://www.sexworkersproject.org)).**