

The Relegated Status of Commercial Sex Workers in a Patriarchal Society:

Analysing Sanjay Leela Bhansali's Movie *Gangubai Kathiawadi*

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Preface

In 1989, Kimberlé Crenshaw coined the term ‘intersectionality system of power effects those who are most marginalised in society. In the Indian scenario mainstream feminism advocates only for the rights of upper-class and upper-caste women by neglecting the issues faced by women from unprivileged social setup. This thesis attempts to understand the harsh realities revolving around the lives of commercial sex workers by focusing on the experiences of the protagonist of the movie *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. *Gangubai Kathiawadi* is a 2022 Indian Hindi-language biographical crime drama film which portrays the life of commercial sex worker who lobbied for the rights of sex workers.

The dissertation titled, “The Relegated Status of Commercial Sex Workers in a Patriarchal Society: Analysing Sanjay Leela Bhansali’s Movie *Gangubai Kathiawadi*”, is divided into four chapters. The first chapter deals with the intersectional feminism, basic details about Sanjay Leela Bhansali, the director of the film and Alia Bhatt, who plays the titular character in the movie. It also gives an overview about sex work and the movie which the researcher has taken for the present study. The second chapter titled, “The Ostracisation of Commercial Sex Workers”, deals with the social stigma attached to the profession of sex work and the ways through which a sex worker experience discrimination throughout the life. The third chapter titled, “The Retaliation Against the Marginalisation of Sex Workers”, discusses the way the protagonist fight against the oppression. The concluding chapter gives a brief summary of the whole discussion along with the researcher’s own analysis and observations.

Chapter 1

Introduction

In the 1970s and 1980s, a group of African American feminist scholars and activists first developed intersectional theory. They leveled accusations against the women's movement that it neglects black women and misunderstands oppression. According to them, racism and sexism are not separate systems, instead, they connect and overlap thereby creating a complex arrangement of advantages and burdens. When a white woman is penalized for gender, they are privileged by race. In a similar way, black men suffer from their race but garner an advantage from their gender. But when it comes to black women, she faces oppression on the basis of their gender as well as race.

'Intersectionality' was a term first used by American professor Kimberlé Crenshaw to highlight that the discrimination black women face is different and much more than, what white women face. She coined the term in her article *'Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Antidiscrimination Doctrine, Feminist Theory and Antiracist Politics'*. Kimberlé Crenshaw is an American civil rights lawyer, she is a professor of law at UCLA and Columbia Law School. She is a pioneer in critical race theory, black feminist legal theory and civil rights. She is the co-founder of the African American Policy Forum and she also hosts a podcast, 'Intersectionality Matters'.

Members of privileged groups especially white males should not only check their privilege but listen to those they have oppressed because those groups possess a superior understanding of the world. Initially, the primary focus of intersectional feminism was a black woman. But the number of victims quickly multiplied. Intersectionality is an all-encompassing theory of human reality, constructed to be immune to criticism. Often when we advocate for women's rights, we talk about very specific women like cisgender, heterosexual, upper-caste and upper-class, and able-bodied. For instance, in Indian context, a news reportage of rape cases gives plenty of

coverage to sexual violence against women with privilege but seldom reports the scale at which similar violence takes place against a woman from a lower caste and class background. The history textbooks do not teach us about most anti-caste activists, disability rights activists, transgender persons, LGBTQ+ rights activists, etc. In 2016, CBSE removed a section of the history textbook that discussed the Nadar community who were forced to keep their upper bodies uncovered by the caste council of the Nairs. This was perceived as a sign of respect towards the ‘upper’ castes, and the Nadars had to pay a ‘breast tax’ if they chose to cover themselves. The practice sparked a series of violent agitations known as Maru Marakkal Samaram, or the Channar Revolt in 1822, where women from the Nadar and Ezhava communities demanded the right to wear the same clothing as the so-called upper-caste women. Until 1858 hostility around the issue continued because the Nadar women were unsatisfied with the compromises they were being asked to make- those who were Christian converts were allowed to wear a Kuppayam (a jacket-blouse of sorts), but not allowed to wear any apparel in the style of Nair women, who wore an upper cloth around their torsos. Thus, their efforts and resilience are neglected and not given a place in our academics and textbooks.

Intersectionality throws light at the crossroads at which different marginalized identities overlap, be it class, caste, sexual orientation, gender identity, disability, religion, etc. The more overlaps these are, the more invisibilised and at the margins they tend to be. In Indian society where class distinction is prominent, intersectional feminism means that one can understand that an upper-class, upper-caste, straight cisgender Hindu woman without disability holds more privilege than any woman who deviates from one or more of these factors. These identities which form when these factors stray away from the “norm” may face entirely different forms of discrimination that need to be highlighted and fought against. It is not acceptable to talk about “women’s issues” and only speak about issues faced by the most privileged of these

women. Thus, intersectionality identifies marginalized women as experiencing multiple forms of visible, interacting discrimination. For instance, in the case of women in tribal communities, there is resistance, because the idea is that these communities are collectively marginalized and if there is reference to women's discrimination within that communities, might create problems for the movement. This is because marginalized women's oppressions are often invisible. Complex intersectionalities create different kinds of disadvantages and take it back into the work to be able to make some changes.

Although Crenshaw first used the term 'intersectionality' in 1989, it has since then been used globally and in different contexts. Intersectionality may be defined as an approach to analyse how social and cultural roles, identities, and categories intertwine to produce multiple areas of oppression. One's gender, religion, social class, or political affiliation tell the whole story of the life and self. Just as one's identity constitutes one's social roles, social status, personal history, and future aspirations, any individual or group identity has a similar multifaceted composition. Intersectionality is used as an important theoretical paradigm in Sociology, Women and Gender Studies, and Critical Race Theory. The complexity and compounding of social roles, social processes, and their histories that create various outcomes, such as oppression and privilege cannot be understood by concentrating on one analytical category (such as gender) or one source of oppression (such as powerful men in a heteropatriarchal society). One cannot describe oneself completely and effectively in a sentence, nor can one's gender, social class, occupation, or political affiliation tell the whole story of one's life and self. Just as one's identity constitutes social roles, social status, personal history, and future aspirations, any individual or group identity has a similar multifaceted composition. Intersectionality is used as an important theoretical paradigm in sociology, women and gender studies, and critical race theory. The complexity and compounding of social roles, social processes, and that create various outcomes, such as oppression and

privilege cannot be understood by concentrating on one analytical category (such as gender), or one source of oppression (such as powerful men in a heteropatriarchal society). One has to understand identity categories as entwined and social processes as intersecting.

Patriarchy is a heteronormative society, sometimes known as heteropatriarchy, which is a hierarchical order that accepts and rewards people's gender expression and sexual orientation. To be accepted as "normal", one is expected to be straight, cisgender, married at a "suitable" age, and raise a family. Thus, social acceptance is contingent on not just gender expression and sexuality, but also age, and economic status. Having a career, giving children a good and stable home, being a good citizen, and being healthy are not merely issues of character and domination, but they are also contingent on a man's gender and other aspects of his identity. Not all men dominate women, not all women are oppressed, not all men are breadwinners, and not all women are stay-at-home mothers. The overarching theory of intersectionality helps to understand not just how social structures operate, but also how the society exercise the agency within given social structures. It helps to think critically and see clearly beyond stereotypes and helps to understand not just oppression, but also a privilege.

Intersectionality as a concept emerged from Black Feminist Legal Studies. Black feminist tradition studies marginalization from the perspective of race relations and racial domination, it studies current social processes as rooted in African American history and the lived experience of marginalized races.

Black women's Blackness or femaleness continues to place their needs and perspectives at the margin of the feminist and Black civil rights agenda. The singularity of the burden (one's race, sex, or class) becomes the defining factor in rights, theorization, jurisprudence, and justice. This kind of monolithic thinking about identity places the most vulnerable in society in precarious positions, from a policy as well as

public opinion perspective. The problem of social justice, Crenshaw averred, is not a lack of political will, but a disturbing, uncritical acceptance of the dominant paradigm of discrimination, which adopts a single-issue framework. The parameters of discrimination are tightly defined so as to make the process simplistic. This marginalizes people whose experiences cannot be explained through a singular axis of oppression. Crenshaw wrote about marginalized women in the United States. The theoretical framework, however, has universal applicability. Patricia Hill Collins in *Black Feminist Thought* states that, “Black feminist thought demonstrates Black women’s emerging power as agents of knowledge. By portraying African-American women as self-defined, self-reliant individuals confronting race, gender, and class oppression, Afrocentric feminist thought speaks to the importance that knowledge plays in empowering oppressed people (Collins, 221)”.

Thus, the Black Feminist standpoint is all about expanding the boundaries of feminist theories and activism and including multiple experiences, perspectives, and standpoints in it. Feminist theory is not merely the domain of middle-class White women or upper-class academicians. Everyone’s voices must be included lest one start believing in only one form of oppression, sexism, affecting one identity category, white women who wrote about their experiences that circulated in academia and media as feminist consciousness. Collins emphasized the need for looking at race, class, and gender as “interlocking systems of oppression”. This meant a radical re-visioning of how one understands oppression and privilege collectively and individually. Each one exists, in a matrix of domination where structures of gender, race/ethnicity, class, age, and religion determine their experiences. Crenshaw has argued that mainstream feminist thought derives a lot of theoretical and dialogical strength from Black women’s history and experiences. Yet lessons from power oratory or writings are never fully assimilated

or applied in feminist intervention. The challenges to patriarchy embedded in Black feminist writings could be and is useful to feminist theory, but feminist theory per se couldn't be useful to Black women because, written from a privileged white feminine perspective, the claims and premises were inapplicable and unresponsive to women of color. The authoritative universal voice of the white woman is quite similar to that of the "non-racial", "non-gendered", and "objective" white man. The feminist voices arising from a similar socio-cultural context, concentrate only on gender, but never race. There is no understanding of "different" social, historical, economic, and political contexts that shape lives within the Black community where notions of "men", "women", "power" and "patriarchy" are differently understood and applied.

Crenshaw believed that a more effective language and framework need to develop that recognizes the "intersection" and those that are impaired by their location within. The issue is not so much of a political will as of limited understanding of life experiences shaped by various forms of disadvantaged roles and identities. The existing discourse on discrimination needs to be revised and re-centered, which would lead to more effective politics, policies, and legislation. To date, she is promoting the usefulness of intersectionality as a powerful tool for sociological and legal analysis. In recent years, scholars such as Leslie McCall and Jennifer Nash have written about the complexity and significance of intersectionality.

Intersectionality trains scholarship to come in terms with the legacy of exclusions of multiply marginalized subjects from feminist and anti-racist work, and the impact of those absences on both theory and practice. Intersectionality, by focusing on the ways in which the differences between various social groups and categories are constructed, is useful to understand how these differences become relevant to politics confronting the simultaneity of oppression. It argues for the conceptualizations of categories and their role in politics, rather than seeking abolition of categories themselves.

Issues of religion and state, nationalism, and democracy can rarely be separated in India. In a similar way issues of women's rights are inextricably connected with issues of social class and developmental paradigms, the caste system and caste politics, religion, and religious fundamentalisms, and issues of gender and globalization. In a society like India which discriminates against people on the basis of caste and class, the atrocities done against women from the lower strata of the society are extreme. Their life experiences are completely different from that of a woman from upper-class and upper-caste society. Indian feminism to an extent revolves around Brahmin women. Brahmin-Dvija feminism is really similar to what is defined as "White Feminism" in the west. It ignores the rights of women, trans people, and queer people from the marginalised sections of society. In such a situation an unprivileged woman experiences three-layered oppression, by men from both forward castes and backward castes, and by women from forward castes. These feminists have always been ignorant of the rights and demands of women from backward castes. They close their eyes against the implications of caste on women. They focus to bring only their own issues and demands to the attention of the public whereas a section of poor women still lives in utter helplessness. A study about some of the issues that women fight for on a daily basis, will help to understand how the mainstream feminism is interested only in speaking for the cause of upper-class and upper-caste women. Brahmin-Dvija feminists fight for glass ceilings and equal wages, etc. They don't speak about the necessity of having a leave schedule or increase in the pay for the domestic workers in their houses, "maids" they call them, their basic rights as human beings and as workers and the emotional as well as the sexual abuse they go through by the men in the household.

There is nationwide outrage about the rape cases of Brahmin-Dvija women, but the same people remain silent when a sexual assault happens to a woman from the marginalized section. It is an indication that mainstream feminism is not always

inclusive. Any time there is any discussion around women's rights in India, there is a specific set of women who will speak out. These women coming from economically and educationally well-off families are least bothered about the issues and pathetic living conditions of other women, it is entirely different for the people from oppressed communities. Not all women have the same amount of security and social capital to reveal their identities. They do not relate to these conversations lead by Brahmin-Dvija women, who are their oppressors since ages.

Brahmin-Dvija feminists call sex work a "choice" by completely erasing the history of it, and how women from marginalized sections are forced to do it. They look at sex workers with disgust and completely secludes them from their movements for equality. Thus, a sex worker is facing oppression from multiple areas of society. Even in the media representation, these women and transgender people are discriminated. The videos of these women getting stripped off, being paraded, naked, beaten up goes viral, but that is not the case when it happens to Brahmin women. Brahmin-Dvija feminists fight for leadership roles in sectors like media, justice, law, academia etc. and celebrate the progress of their women in that sector, whereas these same women will not hire people from marginalized sections at all. Basically, when women talk about women's rights or women in general, the "women" for them are women from forward castes. Bell hooks says the same about white feminists and their racist white feminism.

Intersectionality means feminism that represents all differences and works towards a more inclusive world for all the oppressed identities. But this has now shifted to a feminist practice where Brahmin feminists will grab the mic from marginalized women, talk about them and get global recognition for "their" work for these women. Intersectionality is not a sub-theme of feminism. It is what feminism is and should be. It is high time that women should acknowledge their privilege and stop occupying all the space. They need to redistribute the sources that they have to be marginalized without

acting like a saviour. Instead, women need to use their social capital for amplifying the voices of the marginalized. They should also learn to reform their casteist, racist, transphobic and ableist households.

Gangubai Kathiawadi, released on February 25, 2022 is an Indian Hindi-language biographical crime drama film directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali and produced by Jayanatilal Gada and Bhansali. The movie stars Alia Bhatt in the title role while Shantanu Maheswari, Vijay Raaz, Indira Tiwari and Seema Pahwa play vital roles. Ajay Devgan's guest role adds extra charm to the movie. The movie is based on the chapter *The Mother of Kamathipura* from Hussain Zeidi's novel *Mafia Queens of Mumbai*. S. Hussain Zaidi is a well-known Indian author and former investigative journalist. His profound knowledge as a journalist helped him to bring informative works about the society. Zaidi's notable works include *Dongri to Dubai: Six Decades of the Mumbai Mafia*, *Mafia Queens of Mumbai*, *Black Friday*, *My Name is Abu Salem* and *Mumbai Avengers*. The Mumbai mafia has been his focus in all of these works.

Sanjay Leela Bhansali is one of the greatest Indian directors. Though he did his course from Film and Television Institute of India, he portrayed what he faced in childhood more on the screen. He was born on 24th February, 1963 in Mumbai. He was highly impressed by Raj Kapoor and Guru Dutt's films. Raj Kapoor's direction style impressed him a lot. His mother is Leela Bhansali and his father is D.O. Bhansali. He has a sister called Bella Sehgal. Sanjay Leela Bhansali had a terrible childhood, his father was an alcoholic and kept a toxic relationship with the family. He was a film producer but his films never did much level. Because of which the family suffered financial crisis a lot. His mother somehow raised her two children. Often money lenders would come to their home and small Sanjay would try to escape from them. Since his father was always intoxicated, he couldn't even speak to people properly. He had a unique negativity towards life. He always yearned to leave that room as he felt suffocated there.

He knew that whatever happened a mouse or a cockroach might climb onto his body. He wanted to get rid of life.

All these things have left a deep impression on Sanjay Leela Bhansali's mind. The films he made did show a glimpse of his childhood. In the beginning, he worked with great director Vidhu Vinod Chopra as his assistant. He somehow started with the film *Parinda*. And the first time his name was run on credits he was asked what name to put, he added his mother's name to his name. He also assisted in *1942 A Love Story*. When Sanjay Leela Bhansali refused to direct *Kareeb*, he separated from Vidhu Vinod Chopra. He made his film *Khamoshi. The musical*, which was hit musically but flopped at the box office. After that, he did film *Hum Dil De Chuke Sanam*. It had a great star cast like Aishwarya Rai, Salman Khan and Ajay Devgan. With the film's good music and his great skill in direction, the film did great. Then came his 'miracle' movie, *Devdas*. With actors like Sharukh Khan, Aishwarya Rai, Madhuri Dixit in the lead role, the movie did wonders. Sanjay Leela Bhansali topped the list of film directors. He made film *Black* with Amitabh Bachan and Rani Mukherjee, and after that he never looked back. Some of his films didn't perform well at box office, but still he had reached his goal. His 2018 movie *Padmaavat* turned out to be a blockbuster. The movie had received an equal share of controversy too, he was even slapped while shooting this movie. But as a director he never wavered, he managed everything and went ahead with *Padmaavat*.

He sometimes turned to TV and sometimes to commercial cinema. But Sanjay Leela Bhansali gave films which were different from formula films, *Bajirao Mastani* is its ultimate example. He also won best director awards many times for his films. Sanjay Leela Bhansali's films are famous for its palatial sets, the exuberant dance sequences and a grand canvas of storytelling. In short, every film of Sanjay Leela Bhansali is an extravagant affair. While these aspects of his film are very evident and well known,

there are many aspects to his movie making which not many people are aware of, such as his love for using water as a motif and his obsession with anklets. Apart from being a feast to the eyes, his films are also a study in symbolism. The humongous set, the decorative art, the beautiful properties, antique styles, lavished production designs are all an expression of an artist who lacked all these and spent his formative years in poverty. His camera language can be compared to another director Wes Anderson.

His symmetrical wide-angle design of the frame gives an idea of the perfection and detailing of even the smaller elements in the frame. The horizontal camera movement gives the separation and also keeps it focused. The top angle shots give a larger-than-life effect and keeps audience engrossed. As a young man Sanjay Leela Bhansali always yearned to do what his dad couldn't do. He creates a world of his own and transports the audience into a dream-like situation and to fulfill that he uses colours in such a way that no Indian filmmaker does. In certain scenes, there is use of a single colour in its various shades. This monochromatic look helps to focus on the drama and the emotion without any distractions of different colours. This gives a sense of detail and also directs one's eye where it is more important. Whereas in certain scenes there is a blend of analogous colours to give a sense of harmony and visual pleasure. The use of multiple complementary colours which are desaturated or pastel colours gives a soothing effect and a dream-like quality. Multiple, complementary and opposite colours give a sense of joy and festivity. In short, he really knows how to use the colours to affect the psychology and amplify emotions of the viewers.

The analysis of the development of characters in Bhansali's movies, shows light into the fact that his characters are three-dimensional and the obstacles they face are enormous. The fight which the characters put up against a formidable obstacle is what gives his audience a message of hope and inspiration. Bhansali's secret ingredient to create the magical, memorable moments which everyone remember is not his madness

in his perfection and detailing but his ability to improvise on the day spontaneously. On the day of the shoot, he is not scared to change everything to discover the right emotion and the feel. He expresses this completely through his actors. When they are in love, we can see the real passion between them. And when they show their dark side, we truly believe them even though it is against their character. To add to the atmosphere of the drama he uses the elements of nature like Akira Kurosawa uses, whether it is water, wind, or even fire. Sanjay Leela Bhansali exactly knows when to use it.

Living in Mumbai, Sanjay had witnessed women getting sold off for Rs 20 and 50 during his childhood. This made him insensitive to the inhuman practices of patriarchy. He cried a lot and was moved by the story of Gangubai after reading Hussain Zaidi. It gave him nostalgia for the women's faces he had seen and forgotten and brought him back so many stories that need to be told and heard. He nurtured the story of Gangubai for seven years and dropped it with *RamLeela*. Still, he lived with Gangubai for seven years talking and laughing with her. He interacted with and tried to understand so many things the novel said between the lines which are not mentioned. Sanjay Leela Bhansali celebrates Gangubai, a woman who got up and said to accept them in society, legalise prostitution and give their children education and the right to live.

The matriarch in Gangubai gave her the courage to fight for the betterment of commercial sex workers at a time when feminism in India was yet to come. Her fight against injustice inveigled Sanjay. His intense respect for Gangubai can be read from the way he depicts her. The film industry in India is still ruled by men, a woman's identity is conveyed through her relation to a male in the movies, whereas the hero is given a grand entry and his valor is highly glorified. In the movie *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, Sanjay Leela Bhansali shatters this male-centeredness by making Aliya's introduction scene astounding. The backbone of *Gangubai Kathiawadi* is its powerful script written by Sanjay Leela Bhansali, Utkarshini Vashishtha, and Mitakshara Kumar.

The blend of socially relevant and poetical dialogues of the movie has the charm to move the audience and instigate active thinking from the perspective of a sex worker. Sanjay Leela Bhansali has been successful in his ability to transform the spectators into the old Kamathipura where a matriarch fearlessly grabbed the mike from the oppressors and spoke for the sex workers.

Aliya Bhatt was born on 15 March 1993 to filmmaker Mahesh Bhatt and actress Soni Razdan. She studied at Mumbai's Jamnabai Narsee School known to be the school for kids of celebrities. When teachers would appreciate her singing, she realized that she enjoyed being the centre of attention. At age, she played a young Preity Zinta in the 1999 film *Sangharsh* which was written by her father. Growing up, she actively participated in dance and music. Bollywood movies inspired her to become an actress. At age 18, just after completing school, she bagged her debut film *Student of The Year*. This opportunity to realise her childhood dream triumphed over the need to attend college. While the film was a commercial hit, her acting failed to make her role as iconic as Kareena Kapoor Khan's Poo in *Kabhi Khushi kabhie Gham*, another Karan Johar directorial venture. At age 20, her role of an abducted girl suffering from Stockholm syndrome in Imtiaz Ali's *Highway* won critical acclaim. Then it was the role of a Bihari migrant in the 2016 crime drama, *Uda Punjab* that proved her versatility as an actor. At 25, she played the challenging role of an undercover RAW agent in one of Bollywood's highest-grossing female-led films ever, *Raazi*. She learned the morse code, driving, and Urdu for her role as Sehmat Khan. This was touted as her best performance at the time.

Numerous awards later her next two films *Kalank* and *Sadak 2* were unexpected box office flops. Her 2020 release *Sadak 2*, which was directed by her father, bore the brunt of nepotism a few months before the film's release. In 2022, she debuted in Telugu films with SS Rajamouli's period action drama *RRR*. In the same year, she

played the lead as a brothel owner and mob boss in Sanjay Leela Bhansali's big-budget biographic film *Gangubai Kathiawadi*. Gangubai's real family had filed a defamation suit against the makers for portraying her as a prostitute instead of a social worker. By 28, this actor of range had delivered 10 box office hits out of the 14 films she had done. Coming from a financially sound background, Aliya Bhatt herself has admitted that she was ignorant of the discrimination and marginalisation of unprivileged people. Her lead role as Gangubai was challenging at the same time enabled her to find her true potential as an actress. She explored in detail the lives of sex workers, their way of talking, and other mannerisms. Aliya Bhatt dedicated herself for being identified as Gangubai. Aliya Bhatt through her powerful dialogue and fiery eyes consumes the spirit of Gangubai's protests. When Aliya Bhatt was just nine years of age, she along with her mother went for the audition of Sanjay Leela Bhansali's movie *Black*. The sparkle in Aliya's eyes made Sanjay foresee a great actress in her, so he rejected her and wanted to save her for a film in future. Aliya Bhatt always yearned to work with him. The script of *Gangubai Kathiawadi* flabbergasted Aliya, but she had faith in the director and believed in her ability. She found it easy to assimilate whatever ideas conveyed to her by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. She was able to flow and feel every bit of Gangubai. Sanjay Leela Bhansali gave her the opportunity to contribute and participate in the filmmaking process. When she was given the freedom to think and to contribute to become Gangubai, Aliya brought a true feminist back to life. Aliya started with the basic technical preparations. From voice modulation to get the Gujarati characteristics and twang to the accent, she had a dialect coach on the sets for a brief time. Aliya needed to show the mother-tongue influence in Gangubai's dialogue. Sanjay wanted Aliya's voice to communicate more bass as she had to portray both the younger and older versions of Gangubai. He never insisted she follow a diet chart, but be happy and calm. She had to shoot the film for two years, so she had to hold the character close to her for quite a long. She watched a

couple of documentaries to observe the facial expressions of the sex workers. Aliya was moved by the deadness that comes on their face because of all the situations they go through. Aliya always preferred to go by her director's vision, even if it means not preparing for a part and turning up at the sets without any idea. Portraying Gangubai, in all her strength and complexity, was the toughest task for Aliya because Gangubai was an emotional character, a rebel, but still shows a lot of angst in situations she finds herself in.

The movie *Gangubai Kathiawadi* revolves around the true story of Ganga Jagjivandas Kathiawadi who was born in Kathiawadi, Gujarat. She was attracted to the world of cinema and yearned to pursue a career in acting. When she was 16 years old, she fell in love with her father's accountant and eloped with him to Mumbai. Just before their marriage, she was sold off to a brothel by her beloved for 500rs. Young Gangu was shattered and had nobody to rescue. Coming from a conservative family background she couldn't go back as she was sure that her family will never accept her return. She was forced to have sexual intercourse with a man by the owner of the brothel. Finally, Gangubai decides to lead the rest of her life as a prostitute as a way of showing her protest. She learns about the pathetic conditions of prostitutes in the brothel. They are denied of the agency to speak. Sex workers are often marginalized from mainstream society. The women trafficked into such brothels are never given safe treatment, instead, they are forced to face brutal suppression and beatings. Gangubai was determined to bring a change in the life of commercial sex workers and she always advocated for their dignity and rights to live a decent life. She gradually ended up operating her own brothel. Gangubai gave a powerful speech in favour of prostitutes at the women empowerment summit.

Many times, people who expect to work for the cause of these oppressed people look down on them. Sex work is often seen as a social taboo, even though there are

many millions of adults engaged in consensual sex work globally. Compared to men, female sex workers are higher in India. They belong to the lower strata of society and different factors force them to take this profession. Unfortunately, mainstream feminists do nothing to improve the quality of their life. This movie portrays how women from marginalized communities encounter oppression from different layers of society such as profession, gender, social and financial status, health and education, and so on. But as discussed earlier, Indian feminism which largely focuses on the lives of privileged women tends to ignore the atrocities done against prostitutes. They raise concern for the gender parity of women from so-called upper caste and middle-class families in terms of career and education. Thus, the sex workers remain voiceless and the issues of privileged women are addressed.

The family of Ganga Jagjivandas Kathiawadi had close ties with the Kathiawadi royal family. Though Ganga's father and brother gave prominence to her education, she always had her mind wavering on the Bollywood film industry and wanted to become an actress. Ganga got betrayed by her husband who sold her to a brothel in Kamathipura, but that setback brought out her fierce face of her. She became the matriarch of Kamathipura. Ganga owned several brothels back in the 1960s. Over time, Gangubai became a well-known name in Mumbai. She had strong connections with the underworld as they were her clients. Given her history, she had a soft corner for the girls forced into prostitution. She dedicated her life to the betterment of sex workers and orphans. Her advocacy led her to gain a strong political status. Gangubai's speech on the empowerment of prostitutes left the then Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru impressed. He questioned her why she chose prostitution over finding a husband. To this, Gangubai asked him if he would marry her. She was an object of fear for the criminals and pimps of Kamathipura.

During the period 1960-1980, Mumbai was under the control of Karim Lala who was infamous as one of the three “mafia dons of Mumbai” in India. Gangubai’s friendship with him earns her respect and authority, and she makes use of it by constantly working for the sex workers. She became an adoptive mother to the orphans born on the streets of Kamathipura, she made arrangements for their education and a better career. Along with earning a lot of money and leading a luxurious life, she was always busy working for women, especially sex workers. She can be called a “true feminist” always. She spoke about how the service of a sex worker in Kamathipura safeguards other ordinary women from rape and other violence. Her meeting with the Prime Minister brought significant changes to the darkness-filled brothels of Kamathipura. Gangubai passed away at a very early age of 38 from a heart attack in 1979.

Every human being aspires to live a dignified as well as a peaceful life, get a quality education and secure a decent job, and have a supportive family. Unfortunately, in a society that distinguishes each individual based on the accumulation of wealth, caste, class, religion, colour, disabilities, gender, and so on, not every individual is fortunate enough to lead such a life. Their bodies and thoughts are controlled by an elite section of society. Their “insignificant lives” are mere playthings for them. The section of commercial sex workers is often under the control of traffickers and pimps. Prostitution is the act of engaging in sexual intercourse for monetary gains. Different factors like poverty, broken marriages, and unemployment force a woman into this “socially condemned profession”. A significant number of sex workers are cheated by job offers and get trafficked to various brothels. These victims of the flesh trade live in constant fear of getting sold off for money as once they fall into the vortex of the sex trade, getting back to normal life is not an easy affair. The flesh trade continues to be a devastating cyclone throughout the world that shatters the hopes and aspirations of

many. India is one of the countries where prostitution is legalized. A glimpse into Indian history indicates that prostitution was an accepted profession. A whole chapter has been devoted to it in Kautilya's *Arthashastra* written in circa 300 BC and Vatsyana's *Kama Sutra* written between the first and fourth centuries AD. By 300 AD, the system of dedicating unmarried young girls to gods in Hindu temples known as the Devadasi system, which often made them objects of sexual pleasure to temple priests and pilgrims, was an established custom. Studies show that it still prevails as an institution in some Hindu temples, mostly in Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh. Since laws have been passed against it in all states, its operations are clandestine. Prostitution during the 18th and 19th centuries of British rule was not considered a degrading profession. Indian prostitution was completely independent of the Britishers and other foreigners.

In every corner of the Indian subcontinent temple dancers, aristocratic courtesans, independent village girls, and big brothels could be found. Slowly the profession started receiving aversion from society. People refuse to talk about a sex worker even in our own so-called "progressive" era. Rather than solving the causes behind their decision to choose sex work, the patriarchal society composed of women judges their behaviour and mercilessly addresses them with derogatory slurs and shut them from their elite conversations. Even the majority of the movies portray them as easily "approachable" women who are only after money, and devoid of self-respect and dignity. Throughout the span of their life, a sex worker remains a victim of multiple oppressions. There are around eight lakhs of female sex workers in India. Most are victims of trafficking, and tens of thousands are children. One of the reasons trafficking is flourishing in India is a lack of political will. Most of the politicians are men and they are elitist, sexist and casteist and they don't care, when low-caste females are sexually exploited. Sometimes victims can be as young as 3, mostly from impoverished villages.

Activists and police face an uphill battle against trafficking. The lack of an adequate number of female cops and women in the Cabinet intensifies the issue.

There are a plenty of Acts, Amendments, and Bills for ensuring the rights and women's representation, but none of them are useful in bringing down these menaces. Even in Northern states, many of the women representatives are uneducated, either their husbands or other men in the party do all the governance-related matters, by making the elected women mere puppets. A sex worker's life in this male-dominated world thus becomes more horrible than one can imagine. The mainstream feminists from the upper echelon of society refuse to share the baton of power with the impoverished women, rather their sorrows and rights are effaced from the annals of history.

Exercising powers under Article 142 of the Constitution, the Supreme Court of India on May 19, 2022, asked states and Union Territories to “implement” and “to act in strict compliance of” certain recommendations made by a panel appointed by the court in 2011 on the rehabilitation of sex workers. The apex court while recognising sex work as a profession said, “Needless to say, this basic protection of human decency and dignity extends to sex workers and their children, who, bearing the brunt of social stigma attached to their work, are removed to society's fringes, deprived of their right to live with dignity and opportunities to provide the same to their children.”

When the majority of commercial movies revolve around formulaic storylines, expertly choreographed fight scenes, spectacular song-and-dance routines, emotion-charged-melodrama, and larger-than-life heroes, socially relevant movies like *Gangubai Kathiawadi* with its powerful message has the potential to bring radical changes in the society. The project attempts to find out about the exploitation of commercial sex workers and the challenges they come across in the pursuit of their rights and demands. The next two chapters analyse the movie *Gangubai Kathiawadi* through the stigma and victimisation associated with sex workers and their profession, and the ways in which

Gangubai establish their community identity in an intolerant public by overcoming patriarchal constraints and notions. The concluding chapter aims to provide an overall summary of the project.

Chapter 2

The Ostracisation of Commercial Sex Workers

Gangubai Kathiawadi is a 2022 Indian Hindi-language biographical crime drama film based on the chapter *The Mother of Kamathipura* from Hussain Zeidi's novel *Mafia Queens of Mumbai*. The movie is directed by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. The movie stars Aliya Bhatt in the title role and Ajay Devgan in the supporting role. The movie stars Shantanu Maheswari, Vijay Raaz, Indira Tiwari, Seema Bhargava, Varun Kapoor, and Jim Sarbh as supporting cast. Aliya Bhatt and Sanjay Leela Bhansali take us to the harsh living conditions of commercial sex workers.

The movie is set in Kamathipura, Mumbai which is also known as the red-light area. The term red-light originates from the red light that was used as the sign of brothels. Behind those flashy lights lives a large section of female sex workers in darkness. India is widely regarded as having one of the world's largest commercial sex industries. Prostitution describes sexual intercourse in exchange for remuneration. Its legal status varies in different countries, from punishable by death to complete legality. The immoral traffic (prevention) act, 1956 deals with sex work in India. According to this act, voluntary sex is not illegal, instead certain activities related to prostitution like owning or running a brothel, pimping and pandering, kerb crawling and child prostitution are made punishable. But there are a lot of brothels illegally operating in Indian cities including Mumbai, Delhi, Kolkata, Bangalore, and Chennai. As of the 2016 estimation of UNAIDS, there were around seven lakhs sex workers in the country.

Despite these constitutional provisions, children and women from the marginalised section are subjected to sex trafficking. Once they are forced into this activity, it is really difficult to escape or seek help as the people involved in the illegal trafficking is supported by corrupt law enforcement officers who take bribes from trafficking establishments and sexual services from victims. The perpetrators use the

bodies of these innocent women and children as a piece of mere flesh to satisfy their greed for sex and money.

Gangubai Kathiawadi throws light on all these aspects of the sex trade in India by focusing on the life of Gangubai Kathiawadi who fiercely opposed the injustices cast upon them. Gangubai Harjivandas is born and brought up in a wealthy Gujarati family. Her father is a barrister. Young Ganga enjoyed a peaceful life with her close-knit family members. They encouraged her to earn a quality education. But Ganga always aspired to act in movies. At the age of 16, she falls in love with her father's employee Ramnik Lal (played by Varun Kapoor). He tells her that his aunt who is well connected in Mumbai has promised to feature Ganga with Dev Anand. Ganga gets enchanted by Ramnik Lal's honeyed words and left for Mumbai with him secretly, and that "journey" changes the course of her life from a happy teenager to a courageous brothel owner in Kamathipura.

Ganga's hopes slowly begin to smash as she enters Ramnik's aunt's filthy house. She sees a lot of women dressed in obscene clothes sleeping there. Ganga who is highly excited to meet his generous and loving aunt gets introduced to Sheila Masi (played by Sima Pahwa), a woman clads in colourful saree and makeup and a cunning smile on her face. Ganga realises Ramnik's deception and that pierces her heart, it is evident when she says, 'My body! My dreams and my trust were sold for just Rs 1000 by someone I loved. Any glimmer of hope that I had was killed in the next six days. I was branded as one of the whores of Kamathipura' (*Gangubai Kathiawadi*, 19:01).

Sheila Masi, to whose brothel Ganga is sold off gives her just two days to surrender to her demands. Ganga is sure that her family will never accept her back and finally decides to comply with her destiny and lead the rest of her life as a sex worker. Ganga seems determined and she covers her tears with make-up. Sheila Masi has a merciless attitude to the workers in her brothel and exploits them. She wants women to

appear before her clients on time so that she can make enough money. Ganga who was born in a prestigious family gets demoted to one of the sex workers on the streets of Kamathipura. She gets forced to wear dresses that expose her body parts. Young women pose in a seductive way to invite customers so that they can find a day's meal. The sex workers give Ganga training in every aspect of prostitution.

Mumbai's Kamathipura has been home to thousands of sex workers that were trafficked here from across India and neighbouring countries for decades. This area suffers from extremely poor sanitation and its residents are packed together in very small rooms. Sheila Masi gets an exorbitant amount of money from customers, nevertheless, the sex workers are paid less. Yet the sex workers never dare to question Sheila Masi, as they are afraid of her rogues who often beat them for disobedience.

Every brothel has a madam or a pimp who controls the lives of its members. They are expected to look after the health of sex workers by providing them with awareness about sexually transmitted diseases, the importance of using contraceptives as well as ensuring safety from mobsters. Unfortunately, they are only after money-making and the lives of the employers are not at all a matter of concern for them. In certain brothels, it is a common practice for underage sex workers to be tricked into taking steroids by their madams who tell them the pills are "medicine for good health." Actually, steroids are not medicine, they are commonly used by farmers to fatten their cattle. Cow steroids are highly addictive and can cause many harmful side effects including kidney failure, reproductive abnormalities and can even lead to death.

Coming back to the movie, after her first sex work Ganga completely disowns her old identity. She burns the note given to her as the first salary. Her first client Govind gives her a new name, Gangu. She starts living on her new identity from then onward. Soon Gangu becomes the most sought-after prostitute in Kamathipura. Her clients start showering her with gifts.

Gangu starts questioning Sheila Masi and exerts their rights over her imperious decisions. In our society sex work is stigmatized and people are perceived with aversion. Just like any human beings employed in other sectors, a sex worker to has the right to live with dignity. There are a lot of factors that force a woman to engage in sex work. Around 68 percent of women sex workers in India entered the profession voluntarily due to factors such as lack of education and poverty. Another section of women is trafficked from across the globe. The problems that exist in Indian society may be different compared to Somalia and Ethiopia, but many states in India share a similar face of poverty to these countries. The relentless and remorseless discrimination among people on the basis of caste is one of the prime reasons for poverty. Access to clean drinking water, food, shelter, education, and job opportunities are distant dreams to them. India has acquired economic growth, yet the disparity between rich and poor remains the same. Government is inefficient to prevent the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the rich. Some women are promised some other jobs, but later get sold off into brothels.

Despite these facts, once they start their career, sex workers should be treated well and get all benefits other human beings receive. Gangu is no longer ready to remain in servitude to Sheila Masi, she takes her friends to watch a movie. Even when they take a day off, men try to make sexual advances as if their bodies are mere objects to be taken for granted. A sex worker most often gets subjected to violence from certain clients. Even without their consent, they get raped. The brothel profit-minded brothel head ignores these abuses. In the movie, Gangu gets raped by a criminal named Shaukat Abbas Khan (played by Jahangir Khan). He attacks her gruesomely. Sheila Masi who demands double pay from him remains silent and finds pleasure in the plight of Gangu. Severely injured Ganga is rushed to hospital. Afraid of the legal consequences of running a brothel, Sheila Masi refrains from giving a police complaint.

At the hospital, Gangu again faces discrimination from the health care workers. She is treated as an outcast from the rest of the patients in the general ward. She is given a dark filthy room as if she is a disgusting creature. Our society often denies basic medical care to sex workers. Leading a terrible life, issues like rape and other atrocities lead to trauma and affects their mental health. Unfortunately, our medical system is intolerant of them and refuses to address their concerns. In the movie, Gangu is ill-treated by a nurse who says, “These people are treating the hospital like a brothel. Smoking, cursing, yelling all the time...This dump is the right place for them” (*Gangubai Kathiawadi*, 32:56).

Sex workers’ lack of education and awareness puts them at greater risk of contracting STDs. For the general population HIV test is recommended only if they have a recurrent fever, symptoms of tuberculosis, diarrhea, or an STD. But when it comes to sex workers, they often need to get their HIV test done while seeking medical care even if no symptoms of STD are present. In some cases, the tests are done even without their permission.

The domination of India’s already expensive health care system by the private sector secludes unprivileged people. The country ranks low on world rankings for access to healthcare. According to the government, nearly 22 percent of India still lives under the poverty line and it makes public healthcare their only option. The society’s preconceived notions regarding sex workers further degrade them to the lowermost strata of society. Other serious diseases like cancer, heart diseases, and lung and kidney disorders remain untreated and eventually succumb to death. The “whore stigma” prevents women from getting good medical treatment. There were reports of doctors not letting a sex worker come in front of them. Some of them who are already informed of their health rights do not always have full agency in protecting themselves. There are occasions when rapacious government officials and police along with criminals often

force them to have sex without protective measures, threatening them with blackmail, extortion, arrest, and violence.

The current discourse on HIV labels them as “vectors” and “carriers” of the disease and that has led to further stigmatisation of sex work. Public health officials tend to ignore the complex web of political, economic, and social factors affecting the heterosexual transmission of the virus, instead, they have singled out women in prostitution as core transmitters. They are always treated as outcasts infecting the large community, earlier with their compromised morals, and now with HIV, despite the fact that they can act as powerful actors in preventing the spread of HIV by educating the male clients.

Some public health officials have begun to recognize the sex worker for her role in prevention but they have failed to include sex workers in meetings, conferences, and programme planning. Society’s unwillingness to accept that the movement for the rights of commercial sex workers can be informed by the women in sex work is as much a part of the denial of human rights as discrimination of mainstream women on the basis of caste, class, race or religion.

Coming back to the movie *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, Gangu with her resolute mind decides to take revenge against Shaukat Abbas Khan. She learns that he works for Rahim Lala (played by Ajay Devgan), a famous gangster in Mumbai. Rahim Lala is loved and respected by everybody and is quite famous as a man of principles. Gangu meets Rahim Lala fearlessly to speak about the atrocity done against her by his worker. Gangu firmly believes that she and her profession deserve to be respected and demands justice from him. Her stubbornness can be deciphered through these words, “You worship your business, and so do we. What if someone disrespects it?” (*Gangubai Kathiawadi*, 35:44).

Only if a sex worker is healthy and has peaceful mind, they can concentrate on their work. Gangu's serious injuries all over her body and inability to work for days on a stretch bring her a huge loss in her business. Relying on the meagre wage given by the brothel madam, a day's loss means a lot to a sex worker.

In the present conservative society, sexual intercourse between two individuals before marriage is considered a sin. Craving for sexual pleasure is a natural instinct of human beings just like food and air. There was a time when our ancestors used to talk about sexuality without bringing the issues of morality. Later, when pre-marital sex began to be treated as a taboo, it forced human beings to suppress their desires for sex. Lack of proper sex education and sexual frustration are the root causes of abuses against women in the society. Even at schools and colleges, adolescents are not given a proper understanding of sex. On reaching puberty as part of hormonal changes they become curious and start using the internet and other sources to collect information, and here lies the problem. Out of ignorance, they start watching pornographic content and eventually become addicted to it. Pornographic content along with affecting mental health, plays a role in the development and perseverance of misogynistic views. They picture women as an object of consumption.

There is a domain of violent porn and it explicitly shows women getting forced to have sex including violent acts. These videos make them believe even without their consent women can be forced to have sex. A woman getting raped by her husband within marriage is also partly due to this. Such men become more ferocious to sex workers as they lack the agency to seek the help of police. Especially sex workers of colour, migrant sex workers, and transgender sex workers experience a greater risk of sexual violence and assault.

Police violence against sex workers has a pattern that includes assault, public 'gender searches' (police strip searches for the purpose of viewing genitalia) and rape.

As a result of the stigma associated with their profession, they are left out of the national conversation #Me Too. They are also ineligible for rape victim compensation funds or received reduced amounts. Sex work is often positioned as sexual exploitation and violence. As a result, the everyday violence and exploitation that sex workers face is overlooked, ignored or accepted and it results in discrimination by state and non-state actors. According to the Pan India sex worker survey, sex workers are prone to verbal as well as physical abuse from law enforcement officers. Some of them are forced to pay bribes to the police.

Across India, discrimination against sex worker permeates the criminal-justice machinery, and that results in a lack of protection under the law. They face illegal detain and torture from police. A sex worker's rights, when arrested, are routinely violated in blatant violation of the guidelines on arrest and custody laid down by the National Human Rights Commission. When they are abused and beaten by private parties and approach the police, their right to remedies is routinely denied by the police who refuse to lodge First Information Reports or investigate the acts of violence. Various human rights organisations have documented systemic violence against and police harassment of women, men and transgender persons in sex work. Its effect is deepened by criminal prohibitions of sex work. The facilitation of social stigma and marginalization of sex workers by criminal prohibition impedes them from enjoying the protection of the law when they face violence or abuse.

In most cases, such atrocities remain unsolved, the mainstream media refrain from bringing their plight to public attention. Instead, they are only interested in covering the news of politicians and celebrities, as they are sure such news will attract public attention and gain ratings. They turn their back on the morality and ethics of journalism. When they get the attention of the public and government authority, significant changes can be brought to their lives. In some areas, the media persons are denied entry by the

brothel head and their mobsters. In a country like India, where a large section of the society still doesn't have access to smartphones and social media, the terrible living conditions, injustices, and oppressions inflicted upon them go unnoticed. Even if she is ready to exhibit her terrible life, the rest of the society which leads a lavish and peaceful life becomes intolerant of their profession. Media is expected to act as guardians of justice in the society and it scares the perpetrators of inequalities and prejudices. On the contrary, they dismiss the concerns of sex workers as worthless. Whenever there is a discussion about them, the self-proclaimed feminists hailing from elite family backgrounds who don't have any ideas and connections to a sex worker's life speak about them.

They never invite one of the sex workers to come up and raise their concerns and change the status quo. The "assumptions" and "imagination" of the sophisticated proponents of the women's movement are far from reality, and it intensifies the double marginalization of sex workers. Mainstream feminists refuse to talk about the horrific punishments meted out to sex workers, including burns with cigarette stubs, beatings with wooden oars boats and double-up barbed wires, and electrocution. While on the contrary, somebody who is knowledgeable about the lived experience of sex workers, the trauma and crestfallenness through which they pass, will be able to give them proper guidance and counseling to overcome the situation. For instance, Manju Singh, a rescue worker of an organisation called Guria used to live in an orphanage called SOS organisation. She along with her husband Ajeet Singh has rescued over a thousand girls from sex trafficking in Varanasi, the holiest city of India which is also a centre of underground flesh trade. She talks about the double standards of society, "In the light of the day men with clean reputation will say, these things should stop. Once the sun goes down it's the same faces you will see lurking in these red-light areas". The role of women like Manju Singh becomes crucial in giving mental health care and courage to

children rescued from brothels to stand up and give valid statements against the abductor in the court who has tortured and brutalized them.

Gangu's meeting with Rahim Lala becomes a life-changing moment for her. Rahim Lala with his preconceived notions regarding sex workers can be seen not showing seriousness in the conversation. But when Gangu shows him the deep wounds inflicted upon her body by Abbas Khan, he gets startled and that sight infuriates him. He realises the issues and rights of sex workers are a serious concern that demands immediate intervention by him. He offers Gangu safety from Abbas Khan and accepts her as his sister. The next time when Shaukat Abbas Khan arrives, Rahim Lala rushes to the spot and beats him mercilessly.

Sheila Masi and the entire crowd assembled there get awestruck seeing a mafia king like Rahim Lala himself intervening in the rescue of a 'sex worker.' Sheila Masi realises that Gangu isn't like other sex workers she has been exploiting relentlessly. Gangu becomes the next brothel owner after the death of Sheila Masi, and it marks the beginning of her protests and triumphs for sex workers against their persecution from the hostile society.

Chapter 3

The Retaliation against the Marginalisation of Sex Workers

Gangubai, clad in a white saree and a big round bindi on her forehead becomes a symbol of justice and wisdom in the lives of downtrodden women and children of Kamathipura. They feel confident and optimistic within the safe hands of Gangubai. New hopes and aspirations start sprouting in them. From the filthy dustbins, where the patriarchal and beau monde society cast space for them, the sex workers start realizing their worth as 'human beings.' Gangubai becomes intolerant of any atrocity done against her community and people. Gangubai believes that only if she wins the election to choose the president of Kamathipura and overthrow Raziabai (played by Vijay Raaz) a transgender woman who owns a brothel in Kamathipura she will be able to exert her authority more strongly. Nobody dares to compete with Raziabai, fearing the consequences. Raziabai is financially sound as well as enjoys more support from people. Nevertheless, Gangubai is resolute in her decision to contest the election. Getting enough funds for meeting the expenses of election campaigns and related activities became a daunting task for her.

Gangubai meets Rahim Lala with a plan of handling his alcohol business in Kamathipura. Customers consume alcohol and come to the brothels, if they provide alcohol at the brothel itself Gangu will get a sufficient amount of money to win the election. For Gangubai winning the election is not just for securing the post of president, but a means to put an end to the crucifixion of sex workers. She says, "Sir, I know this is wrong, but my intentions are good. It's not about values, it's about the lives of those women. And I have to win this election for them. If I win, I can fight for them and try to change their lives for the better. Or else, Razia will continue to make our lives hell!". (*Gangubai Kathiawadi*, 1:04:20)

Rahim Lala surrenders his principles before Gangubai's good intentions. He accepts her as his business partner and assures her twenty percent of the profits from the sales in Kamathipura. That decision was not just for Gangubai, but for the 4000 women in Kamathipura. But Raziabai in order to overthrow Gangubai's plans orchestrates a police raid. But Gangubai who anticipates such challenges takes precautions and overcomes everything. Raziabai exploits the sex workers in the brothel and makes a profit by exploiting them. Since she enjoys power and money, nobody has the courage to speak against her. Raziabai continues to browbeat Gangubai several times. If Raziabai wins the election she will make the lives of sex workers hell, in no way they will achieve freedom from torment.

The patriarchy with its agenda of 'submissive women' cannot digest the entry of women into politics and holding prestigious positions. Through several attempts, women are sidelined from coming to the forefront of society. A deep analysis of the history of feminism, especially the first wave of feminism that occurred during the 19th and early 20th centuries throughout the western world aimed at securing women's right to vote. Times have changed, today women have the right to vote and contest elections. But the number of women becoming MPs, MLAs and Chief Ministers are very less. The chances of a sex worker contesting elections are still a distant dream. The aversion associated with the profession sabotages their voice and concerns. The elected representatives often purposefully ignore this section of the society. Despite universal adult franchises being enshrined in the constitution, this is still a dream for a majority of sex workers in India.

The reasons for their not voting range from their own ignorance and lack of documentation to the failure of institutions to draw them into the process. Recently the Supreme Court of India directed States and Union Territories to immediately start the process of issuing voter ID cards, Aadhar and ration cards to sex workers across the

country. Even if Gangubai is not representing any political party, she through democratic means yearns to dismantle the autocratic leadership of Raziabai. She envisions a peaceful atmosphere for the sex workers, where they are able to enjoy their profession without any external threats. Gangubai gets humiliated in public by Raziabai, yet Gangu is steadfast in winning the elections as it will earn respect not just for herself, but for all the women in Kamathipura. Gangubai is brilliant in her each move to earn public support and give counterstrokes to Raziabai. The sight of the lives of sex workers and their children getting squashed in the confines of the four walls of a brothel lacerates Gangubai's heart.

When a situation forces a woman into prostitution, she is worried about the future of her children. Especially if it is a girl, the traffickers and clients set their evil eyes upon them. During childhood itself, these young girls get raped and attacked violently in front of their mothers. A sex worker's child's life is not safe in the society. Throughout their life, they have to bear the slurs associated with their mother's profession. No mother wants to see their children in a brothel, but circumstances force her to get them raised in such a place. Some of them become drug addicts or pickpockets. These innocent children don't have a happy childhood. At an age they should be playing, these kids are forced to stay at home and see various men come and go, the sounds of women calling for their clients.

Eventually, it affects their mental health. They are forced to hide their identity. Not their faces, hands, feet, or colour, but their official documents, because they contain their address. Thus, along with their mothers, sex workers' children are also isolated often. Many of them don't have access to education because most of them are scared to go to school. They live in fear that people might find out where they belong to. In an interview given to Brut India, Taniya, the daughter of a sex worker who is currently

working as a Zumba trainer and trainee flight attendant shares her story of surviving child abuse from her stepfather. She says,

“At night when I would be sleeping, he used to touch my private parts...and I could never say anything to him. I always had a fear that If I tell this to my mother, she will get angrier with me because she used to already misunderstand me. So, I always had that fear and I never told my mother about the abuse. At one time I felt that I am living exactly my mom’s life. The only difference was that I was not a sex worker, otherwise, I was living the exact same life...facing domestic violence...taking his beatings...There’s one thing I remember from my teenage years...I used to come back from school...still be in my uniform, and he would be ready to have sex with me.” (*Brut India*, 1:44-2:38)

They have no future, they sustain in the worst conditions in terms of access to nutrition, education, and happiness. With no recourse and no one to rescue, the girls become prostitutes while the boys become pimps as they grow up. Many of them do not know their fathers, as their mothers prefer not to let them. Therefore, the child grows up in an environment where they could not get guidance and support from one of their parents. They never get to feel the love, values, and compassion that a child in normal family experiences. Some women are forced to entertain customers even in the late stages of their pregnancy. They live with their children in small toilet-sized rooms. Out of constant exposure to sexually transmitted diseases, these children are most vulnerable to getting transmitted.

Coming back to the movie *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, in the brothel Gangubai witnesses a 15-year-old young girl Roshni, who is given opium and hidden by her own mother Kusum to keep her away from traffickers. Kusum fears that those men who come to the brothel every night will spot Roshni and will be devoured just like them. Kusum’s anxiety about her daughter can be read in these words,

“What life? We have no home, no roof, no husband... Every night we sell our bodies so that our children may lead a better life. I’m tired of hiding her. How long can one keep a bird caged up?” (*Gangubai Kathiawadi*, 1:26:00)

But Gangubai is aware of the fact that it will eventually addict Roshni to opium. A lot of children share a similar fate. They are punished throughout their lives for faults they haven’t done. Kusum decides to either kill Roshni or get her married. But she doesn’t want to lead her daughter into the life of a prostitute. Gangubai arranges Roshni’s marriage with Afshan (played by Shantanu Maheshwari). Being a daughter to a sex worker doesn’t mean she has no hopes and aspirations to lead a normal family life. Just like any other girl of her age, who live outside the brothel she too has the right to get educated, get a decent job, and marry somebody whom she loves. On the contrary, our society is parochial in attitude to sex workers and often finds it difficult to “mix” with them or to accept a proposal from them. Gangubai arranges a lavish marriage for Afshan and Roshni and he becomes the first groom of Kamathipura.

Gangubai wins the election and becomes the president of Kamathipura, though destiny took her childhood home, the entire Kamathipura becomes her own home. She gathers the sex workers of Kamathipura and assures them to return the love and trust they give her. For the first time, the sex workers of Kamathipura get a “leader” to protect them from illegal trafficking, rapes, economic exploitation, and all other serious issues revolving around their lives and make them capable of respecting themselves and their profession. Gangubai gives three important lessons to sex workers in her victory speech. Her eyes gleam with pride when she says,

“First, people think we’re dishonest, no problem. Complete honesty! Second, a flower, by nature is fragrant...whether it’s in a temple or a shrine, at a brothel or a funeral...spread your fragrance. Satisfy your clients fully... But also remember to get paid...fully! We want progress. Third, live with dignity. Never fear anyone. Be it the

police, be it an MLA or a minister or a pimp. Fear no one.” (*Gangubai Kathiawadi*, 1:38:34)

Even if it is a local election, her success begins to change the destiny of Gangubai and other women in the brothel. Women have the strength and capabilities to rule and take the decision. Gangubai has a vision for a better future, and she is given space and power by the people who elected her. Gangubai comes up with various plans to bring a ray of hope to the brothels. She dares to question anybody who condemns the sex workers and denies their rights. To make sex workers financially independent, Gangubai opens bank accounts for them, even if the bank refuses to admit them at first. Even in the 21st century, a vast majority of women are dependent on their husbands, fathers, or any male member of the household for income. Even educated and employed women are forced to submit their hard-earned money to their husbands. Many of them still don't have bank accounts of their own, even if they have one it will be either controlled by their husband or father. In such a circumstance, a woman engaged in sex work is subjected to a more deplorable state. Many of them are not even paid by the brothel owners, some clients beat them for asking for money. A sex worker entertains clients throughout the day without any rest. Nevertheless, they live in extreme poverty.

Gangubai's stance to make them financially independent during the 1960s is highly commendable as women's movements raising voices for financial stability hadn't developed then. Gangubai has no role models or a motivator to give awareness and timely guidance. It is her experience that gives her aims and good leadership quality.

Every occupation gives its employers holidays to relieve themselves of the tensions and fatigue, as well as to enjoy and celebrate festivals with their families. A sex worker who is denied existence itself never gets such privilege. They always live in a fear of police raids and work like mere machines to satisfy the lust of men. They aren't

treated as human beings who have emotions, pain, and desires but as a piece of “meat”. A sex worker of G.B Road, New Delhi’s biggest red-light district shares her life as a helpless victim, “We start working as soon as our eyes open. Sex work happens all day and night. We don’t have a choice. We take whoever comes. Some men are old, some are fat or young. Some men are high on drugs. We have to deal with them all. Other times we hit them and send them away. We have to work until our bodies can’t take any more.” (*The lives of sex workers and their children on G.B Road, New Delhi’s biggest red-light district*, 4:12-4:34)

Gangubai on the other hand make the sex workers start celebrating everything in their life. She lavishly spends money for celebrating the Navratri festival and also assures that no men touch them on that day. Most often when the world outside laughs and shares love and camaraderie, these sex workers sell their bodies to get bread and butter, to meet the two ends of their life. For the first time in the history of Kamathipura, Gangubai closes their business for an entire night and makes the sex workers dance and enjoy the festival.

Gangubai’s journey to the position of a powerful matriarch is not a cakewalk for her. She faces multiple threats from the “intolerant and sophisticated” society around her. The ward secretary along with a local school near Kamathipura filed a petition to evict the sex workers. By projecting sex work as a bad influence on the students, they have the hidden agenda to demolish the brothels and build apartments there. These exploiters are very well aware that a sex worker who is vulnerable to constant oppression will not question them. Sex workers are ignorant about the legal system as well as lack the financial stability to move to court and raise their concerns. Since the sex workers lack valid ID proofs and other documents, even compensation is denied often. The profit-minded private companies continue to exploit the marginalized even today by depriving them of their land and homes. The sex workers don’t have a

collective voice, they live in a state of constant vulnerability. Since these women do not have many employment options, most of them are forced to solicit on the streets. Most house owners refuse to give houses to sex workers for rent even if they are ready to pay an exorbitant amount. The rise in 'street-based sex work brings a change in the social relationships among sex workers, pimps, landlords, and residents. A study conducted by the School of Habitat Studies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) about evicted sex workers of Kamathipura says, "These women seeking sex work as a livelihood strategy...are prone to violence due to their increased visibility on the streets, in the absence of the relative anonymity and cover the brothels offered."

Self-appointed custodians of morality have time and storm into different brothels, using time-worn rhetoric, appealing to moral and religious sentiments– to dismantle centuries-old facilities and drive out sex workers onto the streets without any thought given to rehabilitating the inmates. In most cases, the drives are carried out ostensibly motivated by the desire to uphold the values of society and get rid of so-called evil influences. However, in the overwhelming majority of such cases, these people have an ulterior motive, mainly to occupy the land on which the brothel is established. Brothels are by no means new additions to the social structure, and neither have they been forced on anyone as part of some devious imperialistic or colonial plan.

The existence of brothels fulfills certain needs of society and helps curb serious atrocities like crime and sexual harassment. They provide opportunities for men to relieve sexual tension. If brothels give counseling on health, medication, and other relevant issues, a brothel-based worker can have an improved life much better than being a streetwalker. Evicting sex workers from brothels will only result in making the situation worse by increasing the number of floating sex workers who are vulnerable to diseases, extortion, and crime. In most cases, women evicted from brothels are not provided with an alternate mode of living.

Child prostitution exists in all countries, irrespective of their level of economic development, and the problem is observed in its severity in Asia and South America. Legal brothels, if the authorities take strict measures to control it, can ensure the prevention of minors' entry into the profession, thus protecting their rights and confirming their safety.

Gangubai with her indomitable spirit decides to question the actions of the school authority by demanding admission for the children of her brothel in the school. As discussed earlier, the children of sex workers live with the taboo and slurs associated with their mother's profession throughout their lives. Article 21-A of the Indian Constitution guarantees free and compulsory education to all children in the age group of six to fourteen as a Fundamental Right. Yet a vast majority of children born to sex workers are neglected by the public education system. Girl children are more vulnerable to the sex trade, some sex workers also feel pressured to enter their daughters into prostitution. Since children living in brothels get early exposure to sex, they often use their own sexuality to get attention from others, which increases their vulnerability to sexual exploitation. Even if a few of them get access to education they are forced to drop out as they face ostracization on account of their mother's work. Children have also reported that teachers take them inside and inquire about their mothers' rates, and this harassment affects their young minds badly. In the movie *Gangubai Kathiawadi*, the school authority at first denies them admission, they even exhibit their aversion to Gangubai and the children whom she raises as her own. To this, she gives a befitting reply, "So what if they're from a brothel? They have a right to education. And I'll make sure they get it, Father. Imagine if one of them becomes a doctor, an engineer, or a barrister... Her life will change." (*Gangubai Kathiawadi*, 1:54:26)

Being born into a brothel doesn't mean they should also lead the lives of sex workers and it is the responsibility of government authorities to intervene and make sure

that they get the opportunity to get quality education. A few NGOs have started providing education to sex worker's children, but they aren't yet able to reach out to everyone. When children from subjugated sections of society get educated and reputed positions in the government, it results in the overall advancement of their community and puts an end to the denigration. Piyush Shah, the founder of Sainath Mandal Trust, came forward for the education of sex worker's children. The school started in the Gujrathi School located in the red-light area. She says,

“Children born and brought up in brothels are more often subjugated to abuse within their homes and are ostracised in social spaces. Due to the pandemic, around 200 children were sent back to the red-light area from various children's homes and NGOs. We are concerned about their safety, health as well as education. With a belief that education is not limited between the walls of the classroom, we will be taking them to the gardens, malls and other public places so that they will get practical knowledge.”

(Sex workers feel elated as their children attend school)

At the school Gangubai meets Hamid Fezi (played by Jim Sarbh), a reporter of Urdu Times who gets attracted to her confidence and pride about her profession. He understands her pain and realises that it's time for the world to know about her struggle. He arranges her an opportunity to speak about sex workers in a women's rights movement conducted at Azad Maidan. Hamid Fezi instils confidence to deliver the speech in front of a huge crowd of 500 people. He also prepares a fiery speech for her to be delivered at the meeting.

The irony is that a few elite guests who are invited to speak about women's rights which includes the education for sex workers feel revulsion to share the dais with her. Nevertheless, Gangu's speech turns out to be a huge success, she tears the “fiery speech” prepared for her by Hamid Fezi in front of the crowd and decides to open up what is there in her heart with powerful words sharper than a dangerous knife. Gangu

knows that the mortifying experiences, sorrows, protests against the ostracisation of sex workers cannot be contained in a short speech prepared by somebody from outside. She harshly criticises the double standards of the society towards a sex worker. Gangubai warns the so-called “caretakers” of the society who conveniently ignores the sex workers that they might find her words a little offensive. She says,

“All of you...all of you sitting here must have some occupation...business! A doctor, an engineer or a teacher. Some sell snacks, alcohol, clothes soap or utensils... A qualified person sells his intelligence but we sell our bodies. We can work bloody hard!

What’s

wrong in that? Why do they object only to our establishments? Why is only our profession seen as immoral? Men from your neighbourhood come to ours and yet our neighbourhood is infamous. Why?” (*Gangubai Kathiawadi*, 2:08:32)

An elder woman has the authority to decide what to do with her body. If a woman on her own interest without getting trafficked or forced by somebody decides to engage in sex work she shouldn’t get discriminated or marginalised to the lower strata of the society. It is the society’s responsibility to support as well as give them a peaceful atmosphere to work like any other profession. As Gangubai has rightly pointed out the same men who preach about morality to the public seek the sex workers at night. The educated women who have the agency to speak never considers sex workers as a part of them. There are mushrooming of various institutions for caste, religion, gender and so on to make people aware about unity and respecting each other’s interest, but such talks forget to include the plight of sex workers. It is important to respect every profession and the people involved in that. Irrespective of a few people who are reluctant to listen to a “sex worker’s words”, the crowd becomes silent at her and realises the need to ensure them a decent living just like they enjoy.

In our country's struggle to afford basic respect and dignity, female sex workers face even greater barriers. Sex workers are considered the antithesis of existing patriarchal norms in the society and are pushed to the margins. Their existence itself was denied for so long by many Indian states as well as their legal status is cloaked in ambiguity. Gangubai is determined that their voices must be heard and their right to a life of dignity must be allowed to bloom. This is evident when she says, "No matter who turns up at our doorstep, we don't judge them. It's our principle... we don't ask your religion or caste. Dark-skinned, light-skinned, rich or poor, everyone pays the same rate. When we don't discriminate among people...why do you discriminate against us? Why are we excluded from our society?" (*Gangubai Kathiawadi*, 2:10:16)

Gangubai gets support from political leaders, they help Gangubai to arrange a meeting with the Prime Minister of India to whom she without any fear demands the right to live with dignity and avoid the eviction of 4000 innocent women and children of Kamthipura. He assured Gangubai to set up a committee and discuss the issue. Her journey from a naive, cheated young girl to a woman of courage and wisdom is really mind-blowing. Gangubai engages in a lifelong battle against the "mighty hands" trying to annihilate them. Gangubai lives in the hearts of the sex workers of Kamathipura.

Chapter-4

Conclusion

“If you see inequality as a “them” problem or “unfortunate other” problem, that is a problem” - Kimberlé Crenshaw

Intersectionality is defined as a lens, a prism, for seeing the way in which various forms of inequality often operate together and exacerbate each other. People talk about various forms of oppression, but some of them are subjected to all these at a time. In Indian society, people are mainly discriminated against on the basis of caste and gender. Women who belong to the so-called lower caste on the caste hierarchy suffer a more terrible life experience as compared to a woman from an upper caste and enjoy financial stability. Most often these unprivileged women are denied basic human rights and continue to get exploited and marginalised throughout their lives. There have been a development of various organisations to speak for the rights of women since the last century. Unfortunately, most of them are dominated by the upper caste women, who give attention to issues faced by women of their own caste and neglect Dalit, Bahujan, Adivasi, Nomadic, and Muslim women.

It looks like the issues pertaining to Dalit women and their oppression are being addressed, although the reality points elsewhere. Women who think of themselves as bearing the torch of Indian feminism are challenged by the questions of Dalit women. The Indian feminist movement is led by Brahmin women and the perils affecting the lower caste women go unexamined whose living condition is far worse than the upper caste women. Poverty is the main threat encountered by lower caste women and it forces them into various menial jobs. At the workplace, they get exposed to multiple forms of discrimination including sexual harassment and verbal abuse. Dalit feminists critiqued the non-Dalit feminists' position on sex work and bar dancing which finds its deep linkages with castes' history, sexuality, and labour. They highlighted how they

were lamented by non-Dalit feminists about choosing between feminism and community.

Different circumstances force women into sex work other than trafficking. Decriminalising sex work and giving permission for legal brothels can bring down illegal trafficking and child prostitution in the world. They will also help to scale down sexually transmitted diseases or STDs by giving awareness to clients about preventive measures as well as denying access to those who refuse to follow the rules of brothels. In contrast, the proliferation of illegal brothels makes the lives of sex workers highly onerous by subjecting them to various forms of exploitation from the clients as well as the owners of the brothel. Security is of the utmost importance as a worker in any kind of job and that is why there are laws and rules in place to ensure that people are protected. Even though there is a strong legal system to protect women when it comes to the protection of sex workers, there is none and on top of that, they are stigmatised, marginalised, and exploited.

Sex workers' rights are non-existent, and those doing such work face discrimination due to their criminalised status. They have no place in society and are most often maltreated by the law and their landlords. Their fight to be given the same human, health, and labour rights as others, continue as they are not deemed as falling under the same category as other workers.

Ranging from physical to mental attacks, sex workers are always exposed to a slew of abuses. Sex workers face harassment from their own family members, clients, the community, and from people who are supposed to uphold the law. Most sex workers do not have access to clean and safe housing, as they are refused outrightly by owners or society. The brothel heads exploit them by paying less even if they work for hours on a stretch. Children born and raised in brothels share the same fate as their mothers since most often there is no government intervention to give them education and better living

conditions. Young girls are forced into child prostitution by the agents as well as boys are used in the illegal drug trade.

The mainstream feminists fail to bring these issues to the government's attention and grant them justice. The sex workers and children, living in the clutches of oppressors sacrifice their hopes and aspirations within the four dingy walls of brothels. In the attempt to secure the needs and demands of upper-class and upper-caste women, the sex workers are denigrated to the margins of society, and their agency to speak is denied. Gangubai without any back support, with a firm belief in her ability and potential demands justice for sex workers. Gangubai advocates for the rights of sex workers at a time when feminism or related movements for women haven't developed. Even when the media and politicians ignore the existence of sex workers, Gangubai brings changes to the status quo. It is not easy for her to make her fellow women courageous because for them speaking against exploitation is a herculean task.

The craving to satisfy sexual needs is a natural human instinct but the present orthodox societal norms look down upon sex before marriage or pleasure as a taboo and as a result majority of people suppress their needs and desires. Sexually frustrated human beings are a threat to the society as they start using force to get their needs done and it is the root cause of atrocities done against women even at home and in public. Through legal brothels when clients get an outlet to relieve their sexual tensions, it will result in plummeting the crimes against women and child abuse. Taking that into consideration a sex worker's role has to be appreciated as they are doing a social service. "Just imagine...if there was no Kamathipura...this city would turn into a jungle! Women will be raped, families will fall apart relationships will end and our glorious Indian culture will turn to dust." (*Gangubai Kathiawadi*, 2:11:27)

For women, sex work can be very profitable, and many of them may enjoy work that allows them to creatively express their sexuality. Through sex work, human beings

can safely explore their sexual desires in ways they cannot through the current social norm of heterosexual, monogamous relationships. The broad negative implications of stigma and discrimination against sex workers result in the creation of an environment conducive to social exclusion, violence, and HIV/STIs. Society's labelling of sex workers as criminals or as victims is equally stigmatising whereas framing sex workers as workers is fundamentally non-stigmatising. It leads to the acceptance of sex work as a job and thus can be judged by the same standards that are applied to other jobs. The framing of sex work reduces stigma from others as well as allows for positive aspects of sex work, including financial benefits, flexibility, independence, and job satisfaction.

A lot of factors including criminalisation, fuelling stigma, social marginalisation, and mistrust of police, social services and authorities prevent sex workers from reporting exploitation they experience or witness. Giving sex workers awareness about their legal rights as well as making them eradicate the aversion they have about their own profession and body is integral in ensuring their safety from various threats. Gangubai uses her position as the president of Kamathipura to bring order to the brothels through her sincere involvement to address the major issues faced by sex workers as well as to improve the standards of living for the next generation by opening up them the opportunity to get educated and married. Yet her quest for a life with dignity gets thwarted by the educated and elite section of the society several times. They live in constant fear of police raids, beatings, and abuse whereas the clients and brothel owners escape all these and make the lives of sex workers more miserable. Gangubai never lets an inhabitant of Kamathipura go homeless, instead becomes their foster mother who nurtures them with love and care. She makes use of the opportunities to turn the situations favourable for them. The movie *Gangubai Kathiawadi* throws light on all aspects of sex work and the ways through which they are tortured by multiple inequalities.

The movie is an eye opener to society in its emphasis on the need to include sex workers as one among us and start accepting them as “normal” human beings. It is the responsibility of everyone to help them solve the problems faced by the sex workers’ community and ensure protection from trafficking. The pushing of sex workers into the ‘other’ category by the public through slurs, jokes, and bad analogies is as dehumanising as it is dangerous. Children witnessing such cruelties done against their mother experience psychological traumas and hamper mental stability. A sex worker’s life is often taken for granted by the people surrounding them because of the lack of protective measures by the government.

The movie *Gangubai Kathiawadi* attempts to give awareness about the harsh realities of sex trafficking in India and how the criminals are supported by the police and other law enforcement agencies. Gangubai’s journey from a victim of sex trafficking to a powerful leader who tries to establish the sex workers’ right to live and point fingers at those who play with their lives is portrayed well in the movie by Sanjay Leela Bhansali. Even without much education, Gangubai’s awareness of the need to advocate for the rights of sex workers places her above all the mainstream feminists whose voices are raised only for a few “privileged” women of society. When the majority of the movies portray a sex worker woman as somebody who tries to attract the hero, lacking moral values and always approached by men, *Gangubai Kathiawadi* stands out by trying to give a realistic examination of the tragedies of sex workers’ life in the dangerous brothels of Kamathipura without anyone to extend a helping hand. The matriarch in Gangubai wants to change the way sex workers perceive themselves by teaching them to love their bodies, rather than mere bodies to be hated. Gangubai paves the way for her successors to work for the cause of ‘humanity’ by overcoming the barricades of man-made divisions like caste, class, religion, gender, and so on. To

conclude, the movie *Gangubai Kathiawadi* revives a selfless woman who might have been forgotten in the annals of history.

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