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Abstract

This article is concerned with a long-standing problem concerning the nature and value of women's labour in modern India. The first part of the article offers a theoretical overview of the issues involved, arguing for an intersectional framework that would reorient a focus on women through questions of gender, class, caste and sexuality. Issues relating to the prominence of the domestic sphere, stigma and public labour, and the abjection of sex work are brought into this frame. The second part of the article uses the method of exploring women's life narratives or autobiographies to investigate this problem through the places occupied by labour in a life story, drawing on the writings of Rashsundari Debi, Binodini Dasi, Baby Kamble, Baby Haldar and Nalini Jameela. The third part of the article reflects on the insights gleaned, in particular on the kinds of conflicts that structure women's relationships in the world of labour and on the further questions this raises for feminist analysis.

Keywords

Labour, gender, caste, class, sexuality, autobiography

What makes all the work that women do in a country like India elude worth and value? Why has more than a century of struggle yielded so

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little on this front? Would the representation of women's lives in their own words, if not on their own terms, tell us something about this? This article is an attempt to investigate an issue that seems to defy resolution, from an unusual angle. With the help of a small selection of pioneering autobiographies written by women from the late 19th century into the first decade of the 21st, I hope to shed some light on the theoretical and political challenge of women's labour in our context, which is as persistent as it is confounding.

The problem is not one of absence or loss; women's labour has by no means fallen off the agendas of activists and academics. However, even though they are expanding, current interests suffer from a remarkable degree of ideological, disciplinary and thematic compartmentalisation. Thus, we have a wide range of well-established and emerging fields, such as, labour history and its engendering; the macro analysis of women's labour participation rates in different sectors of the economy; women's role in subsistence economies; transnational studies around the care economy examining women's paid and unpaid care work; domestic workers and their struggles; sex work and debates around prostitution and trafficking; anthropologies of marriage and kinship; recent caste-based approaches to discrimination and exclusion in labour markets; Dalit women's movements; and queer critiques of sexuality and marriage. And yet, despite the significance of this enormous body of work, the interconnected yet conflicting characteristics of women's labour—unpaid and paid, domestic and public, structured as much by caste and sexuality as by class—are not sufficiently highlighted. In the case of sex work/prostitution, the hardening of strongly polarised positions may have prevented adequate attention towards the range of conflicting meanings that make women's work so problematic in the first place.

Given such a situation of multiple yet disconnected investigations into women's labour, it is surely odd to be choosing the lens of life stories. After all, what could be more singular than writing a woman's life?[1] My strategy in these preliminary explorations is twofold. The first part of the article will attempt to identify some of the sources of the problem and why a more multivalent analysis has proved so elusive in the Indian context in particular. As we shall see, contradictions abound once an effort is made to bring a range of interpretations to bear on the labouring bodies of women. Second, I am interested in exploring what we can learn about the place and value of labour imposed upon very different women, from

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the kinds of conflicts and problems they articulate and find worth telling. It is precisely the disparate ways in which women in changing historical and social contexts have reflected on labour in the course of writing more generally about themselves, their experiences and their worlds that interests me here—what is sayable, for whom and why. To guard against misunderstanding, I am certainly not interested in privileging women's voices as necessarily more authentic in comparison to all the historical investigations, ethnographic accounts and statistical analyses available. Rather, it is simply to see what questions are asked or not asked, and what answers are offered in the retelling of life itself, and how such a perspective might complement existing concerns. The texts I have chosen are Rashsundari Debi's *Amar Jiban* (*My Life* partially translated in the volume *Words to Win* by Tanika Sarkar), Binodini Dasi's *My Story and My Life as an Actress* (translated by Rimli Bhattacharya), Baby Kamble's *Jina Amucha* (translated as *The Prisons We Broke* by Maya Pandit), Baby Haldar's *Aalo Andhari* (translated as *A Life Less Ordinary* by Urvashi Butalia) and Nalini Jameela's *Njan Laingikatozhilali* (translated as *The Autobiography of a Sex Worker* by J. Devika).

Some Theoretical Considerations

Let me outline the problem as I see it, beginning with the findings of those who have analysed women's work within the Indian economy as a whole and so provided an effective framework for contemporary and historical analysis. One of the early shocking discoveries that went into the *Toward's Equality* report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India of 1974, was the long-term decline in women's work participation revealed in the decennial Census of India, a decline that could not be put down to colonial policies alone as it continued even after Independence. A couple of decades later, in the wake of the famous 'feminisation' thesis put forward by Guy Standing (Standing, 1989), which looked at global data from across the world to claim that the flexible workplace after structural adjustment now preferred women to men, most feminists examining Indian trends refuted such processes here.[2] The only signs of feminisation during the 1990s till 2005 seemed to be in agriculture, a sector where the largest proportion of women workers (mainly unpaid family cultivators and wage workers) were already to be

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found, and therefore hardly the site from which an argument about the positive effects of the new global economy could be made. Moreover, following 2005, statistical sources have pointed to disturbing declines in women's work participation rates, most markedly in manufacturing. As Nirmala Banerjee pointed out, the whole question of 'feminisation' needs a much more nuanced analysis, especially in countries like India, where it is necessary to contextualise the initial position of women in relation to their possible entry into the labour market, both in relation to larger economic trends as well as micro level experiences in select sectors (Banerjee, 1997).[3]

Since the 1970s, the burden of many scholars and activists in India has been to show that our data sets are fundamentally misleading—women are indeed engaged in productive economic work of all kinds, but our accounting systems are unable to capture and measure this. Efforts to improve the situation led to important changes, for instance, in Census enumeration after 1991, as well as in expanding definitions of women's unpaid work in the National Sample Surveys (NSSs).[4] But this does not remove the huge gap that is recorded between men and women in our workforces, especially in urban areas. After all is said and done, not to put too fine a point on it, we have one of the lowest female work participation rates in the world. When it comes to recent trends, some speak of an overall stagnation in women's work, and others notice levels of volatility, oscillating nonetheless around a very low average. Indrani Mazumdar and Neetha N. have recently made an important intervention in current debates by distinguishing between trends in women's paid and unpaid work. The figure they put out, based on analysis of NSS data (64th Round 2007–2008), for women's overall paid work is as low as 15 per cent (Mazumdar and Neetha, 2011). By way of clarification, what this means is that only 15 per cent of all women in India receive a direct payment as self-employed, through a wage or salary, whether in the so-called formal sector or the informal sector, whether working as home workers in a putting out system, in factories, in fields, as domestic workers or in the service sector. In other words, no one beyond this figure receives remuneration for the work that they do. Notice that the period of their analysis coincides with a time when India has witnessed the highest growth rates in its economy, and where a certain commonsense would have us believe that we live in a time of unprecedented job opportunities. But what the data in fact says is that the contemporary economic regime

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is one where 85 per cent of all women, however long and hard many of them may be working—at home, on family farms, in various artisanal or other productive contexts—are effectively living in relations of dependency, fundamentally attached to households, since they are engaging in some form or other of unpaid family labour. These relations of dependency, while initially those of a daughter, are subsequently invariably structured by marriage. And from what we know about the lack of any effective implementation of property rights for those with land, assets or other forms of capital (implying, in other words, the negligible presence of women as employers), this means registering the enormity of such dependency and its wider ramifications for any discussion of women's work and chances for autonomy in India. This leads to my first point in an analytical account of women's labour in our context: the centrality of the household and of the family within it (which are by no means co-terminous, as we shall see).

It is commonplace to list the range of work that is constitutive of the core of domestic labour—food preparation, cleaning, child care, house maintenance. (Notice that this list omits sexual services, a point I will come back to later.) In a pioneering essay on the materiality and ideologies of domestic life, Kumkum Sangari has drawn on the thesis of Colette Guillaumin that:

> unpaid household labour is given the framework of lasting personal relationships which are not and cannot be measured in terms of time and money… hence that patriarchies build personal relationships into exploitation, operate inside the spheres of relationships of love, nurture and sexuality, are indeed inseparable from them.

Sangari goes on to speculate whether this is the source of ideologies of selfless devotion in contexts like ours, which render this domain as non-alienated labour by daughters, wives, mothers and daughters-in-law (Sangari, 1993, pp. 4–5). After considering the narratives in the next section, we will have an occasion to re-examine this thesis in the light of women's own accounts from the 19th century to the present day.

Prominent analyses in India, when trying to conceptualise women's work, have drawn from both feminist and Marxist traditions of understanding labour, where labour represents value, and women's low status was seen to be a consequence of their lack of acknowledged economic

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participation. Considerable effort and much debate have gone into contesting conceptions of productive and non-productive labour. Given the low levels of women's presence in the workforce overall and the even lower proportions of those women who are paid for their labour, broadly two kinds of arguments have been forthcoming. The first, which I have already touched upon, involved making women's labour more visible, giving it value by attempts to measure it, especially domestic and family labour. The second consisted in demanding an increasing share for women in labour markets that were turning out to be increasingly masculinist. Contrasts have been drawn between north and south India, for instance, arguing that the lower work participation rates in the north made for more gender inequality, especially towards daughters.

However, this is where we already come up against a problem. A feminist analysis, even of a Marxist-feminist kind, that looks only at the gendered division of labour within the domestic sphere and women's chances for paid work in the labour market beyond it, is flawed. Even when differences of caste and class are acknowledged, these become secondary to the main effort of highlighting the working of patriarchal biases. Over and over again, in a range of studies, the main focus is to question the perception of women as non-workers, at best supplementary or contingent, whether they be poor or educationally highly qualified.[5]

Borrowing the concept of intersectionality may be helpful here. Though the explicit use of the term comes from the work of Kimberle Crenshaw, the idea it draws from goes back to the first black feminist organisations of the 1970s, such as, the Combahee River Collective. Their statement described the simultaneity of oppressions experienced by black women in American capitalism, and the need for an 'identity politics' precisely because of ways in which those at the 'bottom' or at the 'intersections' of gender, class, race and sexuality were getting lost (Combahee River Collective, 1979). 'All the women are white, all the blacks are men, but some of us are brave' was the title of a black women's studies text of that time, which nicely captures the problem of intersectionality (Hull et al., 1982). In other words, if we go back to the conceptual underpinnings of identity politics, its purpose was never to prioritise a particular identity (such as, black women) against other structures (such as, capitalism), but rather to recognise what constitutive mechanisms (such as, race) were disappearing at the intersections. In the context of my discussions here it is the determinations of caste, class and

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sexuality sustaining the domestic sphere which are in danger of getting lost. This is not to diminish the gender dimensions of domestic relations, given the ongoing naturalisation of the sexual division of labour, but only to say that feminists need to do more than to render this dimension more visible. To put it differently, those at the margins or 'bottom' of hierarchies of caste and sexuality inhabit extremely fragile domestic spaces and are invariably rendered invisible in the reproduction of the domestic spheres of those in positions of relative privilege.

Labour as Stigma

Bringing in questions of caste raises some fundamental questions for a Marxist-feminist approach to theorising women's labour. To put it at its sharpest, a labour theory of value stands in conflict with a caste structured society wherein public labour represents stigma and humiliation. In her suggestive discussion of the problems B.R. Ambedkar and Dalit theorists have encountered in relating caste to class, Anupama Rao argues that the experience of labour as degradation and not just exploitation has profound implications since stigma cannot be valourised like value-producing labour (Rao, 2012). This is because stigma cannot be abstracted from the body. I would want to add that this is also because the body is always 'sexed'. If there is a distinctive quality to the degradations of (male) Dalit labour, this quality attains a new register when the labouring body is that of a Dalit woman. In the course of a wide-ranging review of the relations across caste, gender, sexuality and labour, dwelling on the social status of the work that lower caste and Dalit women undertake, Meena Gopal has pointed out how it is precisely the nature of the work she has to perform that signifies her as low, inferior and stigmatised (Gopal, 2012, p. 6). While her labour in other households for the women of those households marks her as clearly inferior but provides a modicum of respectability, those forms of paid labour associated with public manual work most definitely do not, and are precisely the signs of her lack of social status, from the rural agricultural labourer to the urban construction worker. Notice that all these are forms of paid work. This is why it is not enough to offer a gender or class analysis of women's paid and unpaid work in our context. As Meera V. had argued several decades ago, the overwhelming proportion of women's paid work has been

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subject to the stigma of being lower caste; apart from its onerous and vulnerable nature, it also marks the lower caste working body as sexually available to men of all castes (Meera, 1979). This is how a contrast comes to be drawn with the dependent unpaid labour of other women, who nonetheless hope to avoid such sexual and caste stigmatisation by their withdrawal from the public domain of paid work and protection within the institution of marriage.

Maitreyi Das (2011) has looked at patterns of women's labour participation by education and caste in contemporary India: In the statistical picture she provides, Dalit and adivasi women predominate both among those with no education and who labour 'out of necessity'; middle and upper castes with education up to primary levels of schooling and employed husbands 'opt out of the workforce'; only with further education (where predominantly upper castes are to be found) is there a small if positive correlation with work. So-called lower castes or backward castes (including I may add Muslims) are among the most invisible of India's working women, folded into households and family labour. If one were to plot women's labour participation in relation to education and income in a graphic form, the Indian case, therefore, takes on an overall U pattern, namely, high labour participation among the poorest as well as among the relatively well to do at the other end of the spectrum, with very low levels for large sections of women in between (unlike most other parts of the world where women's labour participation increases with education and income). This is a harsh empirical reminder of the combined normative and structural effects of caste and class in India's economy today, when the dominant view is that the hold of caste is weakening, especially in the link with work and occupations. Even more significant is that this pattern does not appear to have altered to any appreciable extent with the promises of globalisation and 'inclusive growth'. Against the contours of a field unwilling to think beyond economic criteria, Ashwini Deshpande has unveiled what she calls 'the grammar of caste' in the discriminatory and exclusionary workings of India's labour markets (Deshpande, 2012; see also Thorat and Newman, 2010). But this also means that the actual struggles of working women, especially those who are most marginalised, will require a correspondingly nuanced analysis as they negotiate simultaneously with stigma, poverty and family oppressions. The effects of access to education also need much more careful analysis than the equivocal comment Maitreyi

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Das herself provides—'women with education may stay out of the labour force because of an income effect, but this conclusion is muddied by the lack of jobs that women would want to do' (Das, 2011, p. 153). This is why one must underscore that only a tiny segment of overwhelmingly urban upper caste women have gained entry into a workforce with no connection to a labouring body, who may therefore work without social stigma (including in the ever-shrinking spheres of formal and government employment, and the more globalised enclaves, such as, the financial, media and entertainment sectors), though this by no means precludes other gendered and sexual forms of harassment. This picture clearly calls for more detailed analysis than I can offer here.

How then do we square a labour theory of value with a stigma theory of labour, the very negation of value, whose fullest contradiction is embodied by Dalit women?

Domestic Work

There is a further flaw in most theorisations of the domestic sphere, whose common assumption is that the sexual/gender division of labour within it can be analysed outside the market and its logic. Here it becomes necessary to pause and recognise that the domestic sphere is both a familial sphere and a household; that the domestic sphere is not outside the market, but is rather co-constructed by it. Let us revisit the list of activities mentioned earlier—cooking, cleaning, child care. One cannot but notice that these labours are as much structured by lasting personal relationships (within the family) as they are by paid domestic work, albeit to varying degrees and in historically changing forms. Or to put this differently, the reproduction of class hierarchies through the family requires the differentiation of women's domestic labour into those who can lay claim to the assistance of paid domestic work and those who cannot do so. Rajni Palriwala and Neetha N. have called this social structure 'stratified familialism' (Palriwala and Neetha, 2011).[6] Cooks, housemaids, babysitters or child carers—these are all clear occupational categories for which wages are paid. Notice further that over the last decade, paid domestic work has risen the most in urban India, whose only other competitor in salaried work is (school) teaching. In rural contexts especially, the boundaries of the domestic economy extend well beyond the

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'home', including a range of subsistence labour, the collection of water and fuel, and here, too, both unpaid and paid labour are involved.

Thus, the normative household extends well beyond the domain of the familial, and indeed makes the normative family possible. While the history of various forms of servitude was a well-known aspect of pre-modern households the world over, it is interesting that with the rise of the women's movement and feminism, one of whose breakthroughs was to expose the oppressions of the home through housework and the sexual division of labour, servants were conspicuous by their absence. (This situation has changed post globalisation following major international migration patterns of domestic workers from third world locations to first world homes and workplaces, leading to the formulation of the care economy.) One might even want to speculate on the seeming disappearance of the black 'help' from white middle class households in post World War II United States, including the extent to which Betty Friedan's conceptualisation of the 'problem with no name' suffered by the American suburban housewife, was not simply a crisis of marriage and family ideology but equally due to the loss of the black women who did everything from cooking multi-course dinners, cleaning the house, to taking care of young children.

Having highlighted earlier the contradictory realm of women's public labour outside the home through the conflicted lens of stigma and value, I am now trying to get to the peculiar nature of the normative domestic realm—where wives render their labour 'lovingly', seemingly outside the circuits of exchange value, but actually not, for there is a market wage for housework already in place, whose bottom end is amongst the most exploited imaginable. When we keep asking ourselves about the persistent non-recognition of women's work in the home (my wife does not work, my mother does not work, say patriarchal husbands and children to this very day), we are simultaneously forgetting the labours of those that are even deeper in the shadows, whose devaluation, in my view, is part of the overall problem of valuing domestic labour itself. An essential aspect of this overall devaluation, of course, is that 'their' domestic spaces need not count for anything in comparison to 'ours'. This is the humiliation and failure every domestic worker knows, as she combines poorly paid domestic work in the households of others together with unpaid labour in her own.[7]

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It is my further submission here that this complex domestic relation of power and exploitation, which results in making the unpaid oppressed housewife 'the employer' of the paid servant, requires structures of non-economic forms of discrimination under modern capitalism—race and ethnicity elsewhere, caste in India. The question of what kinds of paid domestic work are done by what castes and in whose households and at what wages, deserves detailed analysis. But I can probably risk the provisional generalisation that the most ubiquitous and basic work of cleaning other people's homes is a lower caste if not Dalit occupation. I would further venture to say that the very decades of globalisation, which have witnessed some mobility for dominant middle castes, and much more for sections of urban upper castes, along with a significant reduction in fertility patterns, have led to a marked increase in the individualisation and intensification of personal relationships between husband and wife, and increasingly in the bringing up of children as women devote themselves to 'child craft'.[8] All this is placing unprecedented and enormous demands on such women, to the extent of pushing even the tiny segment of those with 'good jobs' to consider giving them up (in interesting contrast to an earlier generation and familial patterns). Further reinforcements can be found in contemporary capitalist workplaces, the media and right wing ideologies. At the same time, the sustainability of the new family requires an increase in paid domestic services. Consider the growing market for provisioning adivasi women as live-in maids in north Indian cities; or again the rise in various levels of 'nursing' care for the elderly, especially in the demographically aging southern states.

Let me now return to the list of household tasks mentioned earlier in this article and the missing item: sexual services and the relationships of love and intimacy that are becoming part of an evolving new norm. While the women's movement in India has been at the forefront of exposing marriage and family as sites of violence, discrimination and exploitation, questions of love and sex and the fundamental underpinning of these institutions, has received at least some sustained critique from queer perspectives.[9] What makes these aspects of the domestic domain so intractable and difficult to discuss? One radical answer could be that this is because they belong within the realm of the pure relationship, carried by eros and affect, thus not work at all. Perhaps. It would be nice to think that we inherit something of the libertarian strand from

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Alexandra Kollontai to Herbert Marcuse on this score. But there are signs that today's companionate couple might be closer to inhabiting the world so hilariously and yet starkly described by Laura Kipnis as 'surplus monogamy' (Kipnis, 2000). Surplus monogamy refers to all the surplus labour that has to go into the creation and sustenance of sexual intimacy, the extra hours, the renunciations, the sheer labour of it all. No other aspect of lasting personal relationships has been more romanticised, or subjected to silence, while perhaps sharing considerably more with Marx's discussions of the onerous production of surplus value in Volume I of *Capital*, than has been allowed for! While this may well be part of the intractability of this domain, I would also like to suggest that a fundamentally related aspect is due to the enormous distance that today separates the normative domestic sphere from the world of sex work. This is in some contrast to earlier times, where the historical record amply attests to the open yoking of procreative and non-procreative sexualities, 'good' and 'bad' women, including the high social status that certain women could achieve as in the devadasi tradition of southern India, and the greater visibility of prostitutes in social life, which lasted well into the early decades of 20th century colonial India. Also consider the Marxist-feminist Alexandra Kollontai, for one, who could not imagine liberation without socialising household labour, as well as critiquing both marriage and prostitution as part of the same system of control, so much so that no genuine change was possible without addressing both these institutions in the same frame. There are few contexts or struggles today, where such sexual relations, even if hierarchised, are nonetheless brought together. Contemporary debates over prostitution and sex work, and especially trafficking, rarely feel the need to bring the institution of marriage into their analytical and political grid to begin with. The telling exceptions concern those marriages that are debased and suspect precisely because the wives may have been bought or ostensibly trafficked.[10]

While the paid domestic worker is part of the reproduction of the household but her exploitation rendered invisible within it, prostitution is sought to be segregated from the rest of society, under constant threat of abolition. Knotty questions surround comparative levels of earnings, and whether higher earnings 'compensate' for the enormous levels of stigma associated with sex work, and the extreme abjections of family life.

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I have been trying to theorise women's labour in the Indian context by indicating the extent to which it is shot through with contradictions. There are the contradictions of caste which render paid labour as stigma and vulnerability rather than value and autonomy; the contradictions of class whereby the ubiquity of the caring domestic sphere must include its co-construction through the market of paid domestic work, and, finally, the 'abjected'[11] sphere of sex work. Where then are the signs such that these contradictions of caste, class, gender and sexuality, and the deep dependencies on marriage and family, could be questioned if not subjected to transformation?

Women's Life Stories

This brings me to the texts (autobiographies/life narratives) and the women who wrote them. Scholars commenting on the emergence of the autobiographical form, beginning in the latter part of the 19th century in colonial Bengal, invariably focus on the term 'new'—the new woman, the new voices, the new writing. In her pioneering study of Bengali women's writings from this period, Malavika Karlekar proposed that a 'new femininity' emerged from the *antahpur* or the inner quarters, dismissed by many as a realm of foolishness, mindless ritual and idle gossip (Karlekar, 1991, p. 195). Instead she argued for subtle forms of resistance, even if the evidence came from but a few women and could not be called a movement. Partha Chatterjee reformulated this very question of the new as the question of modernity—under the specific conditions of colonial society, this modernity was 'to be found less in the external domain of political conflict and more in the "inner" space of the middle class home' (Chatterjee, 1994, p. 137), and the principal archive for his thesis were women's autobiographies. The main constraining force for this new woman came from her own complicity in the cultural project of nationalism. He further claimed that the very first autobiography of them all, *Amar Jiban* (*My Life*) by Rashsundari Debi—who struggled as a housewife to read in secret for fear of what would befall her if she were discovered—did not qualify as modern. Her text was too structured by the belief that her achievements were not hers but shaped by the inscrutable fancies of a divine power, and was hence more beholden to the

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devotional literature of an earlier era (*Ibid*., p. 142). This reading has been directly contested by Tanika Sarkar who argues that her writing is a 'modern articulation about the inwardness of an individuated self' (Sarkar, 2001, p. 222); Rashsundari certainly refers to her life 'as entirely of God's designing, but she does, nonetheless, have a clear sense of the social making of it' (*Ibid*, p. 121).

My own interests in the five disparate texts I have chosen are much more limited and strategic, given the theme of this article. Questions of modernity and the 'new' are undoubtedly at work in all the texts we will be looking at, and are surely never 'resolved' when change is as ongoing in the context of a globalising nation in the 21st century as it was in colonial times. Given the variety of texts and their span—the first version of Rashsundari's Bengali autobiography was finished in 1868 and a final version published in 1897, while Nalini Jameela wrote hers in Malayalam in 2005—I cannot even begin to provide the requisite account of their respective times and places, the discourses that made them possible or their subsequent impact. This is no doubt a severe shortcoming, given that meanings are always historical and contextual. (However, those of us dependent on the English translations are very well served by the commentaries, introductions and, in two cases, additional interviews provided. Indeed, it is these new versions, including all the scholarship that has accompanied the work of translation, that makes possible the specific use I wish to make of them here.) Each of these women has been granted a pioneering status as writers by virtue of their social location in diverse ways—housewife, actress, Dalit leader, domestic worker, sex worker—so that each of them is understood to have cleared a space without precedent. By focusing in an extremely truncated way on what these women wanted to say about their labouring lives within their overall reflections and strivings, I hope to open up the concerns raised in the first part of this article to further discussion.

Rashsundari Debi

To begin with the earliest one, Rashsundari Debi was born into a Hindu upper caste zamindari family in what is now Bangladesh, saw almost an entire century unfold, but barely commented on any of its public events,

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hence leading what would seem an 'uneventful, unremarkable life' (Sarkar, 2001, p. 1). Married at 12, in charge of a large, landed household a few years later, all that appears to set her apart is her extraordinary drive to learn how to read, and later to write, in a family for whom this was sacrilege.

In his foreword to *Amar Jiban*, Jyotirindranath Tagore, elder brother to Rabindranath Tagore, has this to say: 'This book is written by a woman… Her autobiography reveals that she is, indeed, exemplary. Her domestic skills match her piety and her love for God' (*Ibid.*, p. 137).

Here are Rashsundari's words when her mother-in-law became blind and, at the age of 14, she had to take over running a household of about 25 people:

> Lord, I can't possibly cope with all this on my own. With this prayer on my lips I started on my life of labour. Women were not educated in those days. They had to do all the work at home. If they had a single moment of leisure, they were expected to tend to the head of the household. That meant they had to stand at his side meekly and humbly. People used to insist that women were only meant for domestic chores. Newly wedded girls had to be especially hard-working and quiet. …My veil had to reach down to my chest, and, dressed in this way, I did all the work… This was how young married women were supposed to work. And I worked this way, too. (*Ibid.*, p. 160)

Rashsundari thus manages to produce a remarkable double voice within a seemingly simple sentence form that would otherwise have come across as mere complaining. Her life of labour was God's will, she goes on to say, but he made her see it as her responsibility so that she could not resent it. It is at this moment that she first mentions her great longing to be able to read a religious manuscript.

Much of the early text is structured around play and work, idleness and labour. Interestingly, childhood is not only about playmates and a mother's love, but also includes learning how to cook and keep house for an aunt crippled with gout. But a new 'life of labour' (a phrase that occurs frequently), from dawn to midnight, meant managing family, guests and servants; enduring 20 years of child bearing with days when she might not have a single meal ('Anyway, let us not talk of all that…'), including losing both children and grandchildren. While evoking the popular image of a bird in a cage, subjected to endless work, yet 'it was

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as if my mind had sprouted six arms', two for the household, two for her sons and two 'to reach out to the moon' (Sarkar, 2001, p. 181). How times have changed, she repeats over and over again as the book progresses—of which the most obvious is the transformation in attitudes towards the education of women.

Rashsundari Debi thus inaugurates for her Bengali audience a new mode of writing, in which she recalls all of 88 years of a life lived. At the very outset of her text she refers explicitly to 'her body, her mind', 'this very life of mine', their 'several different forms' in 'different times', not all of which she entirely remembers (Sarkar, 2001, p. 140). Many commentaries both at the time as well as later, have focused on her religiosity, her views on education, in ways that provide greater depth to the history of social reform. Here I have tried to highlight the everyday grain of life that she reflects on, within which labour came to occupy such a unique place. It is in Rashsundari's invocations of her labouring self that we detect most forcefully what Tanika Sarkar has referred to in her afterword 'On re-reading the text' as the distinction between the narrating self and the narrated self. This split self structures *Amar Jiban* quite openly and so provides 'a larger horizon of self-understanding that is not available to the narrated self at various different phases of the lived life' (Sarkar, 2001, p. 214). Aspects of this split identity are visible precisely in the ways in which Rashsundari emphasises the onerousness of women's daily work, giving it perspective in the very moment of description, including deploying modes of self-deprecation even as she registers her complaints against a time that she believes has thankfully changed.

Binodini Dasi

Before discussing Rashsundari further, let me bring in other voices. Born in 1863 in Calcutta, Binodini Dasi should have been a full witness to the new world, by Rashsundari's reckoning. But as subsequent commentators have demonstrated, no stronger indictment of the new womanhood is to be found than in the writings of the most celebrated actress on the Calcutta stage at the time, a product of the new middle class culture, but whose dedication was rewarded by a series of betrayals (Chatterjee, 1994, pp. 151–155). In her review of Rimli Bhattacharya's translation of and detailed introduction to Binodini's *My Story* and *My Life as an Actress*,

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Susie Tharu interprets Binodini's betrayal through the chasm between the life she created on stage through her lofty characters, to the delight of all around her, and the life she herself was debarred from by society, as a prostitute, an outcaste (Tharu, 2008, pp. 192–196).

I would like to approach Binodini's writings by tracking more closely her journey as a working woman without ascribing any predetermined meanings or taking for granted her status as a 'fallen creature'. Even though *My Story* is structured as a series of letters to her now dead 'benefactor' for whom she finally left the theatre, both the texts (as written in the original Bengali, subsequently translated into English within a single volume by Rimli Bhattacharya) are all about becoming and being a professional actress. Moreover, she begins her story as a young child born into a family 'without means and property', and refers to herself as a 'despised prostitute' only much later on. Already at the age of nine—having experienced the death of her baby brother and vague talk of having been married to a boy of poor folk, but who then disappears forever—she is apprenticed by her mother to a singer and soon after that to her new 'workplace', the theatre. To be able to earn a living, receive wages to ease their financial burdens appears uppermost in her reflections, amidst eagerly received instructions on how to become a performer on stage. Interestingly, we never quite know how she learnt to read and write, since she hardly received the *stree shiksha* of the time.[12]

Her early life is an account of moving from one theatre company to another, going on tours as far afield as Delhi and Lahore, discovering a special mentor, accompanied by her mother who remains a shadowy presence. Matters come to a head as she became more conscious of playing 'superior roles' while registering her ability to become the very character she was representing. It is when 'circumstances' obliged her to become a rich man's *ashrita* (concubine, literally 'dependent') that her narrative and reference to herself as 'a child of poor people' cracks open: He did not want her to continue working, or at least, not for a wage. Only at this moment does she call herself a despised prostitute whose constant companion is deception—but the compromise she then agrees to is that her salary would now be handed over to her mother. I emphasise this also because of the reason why she left this company to join Star Theatre, with which she subsequently developed the strongest relationship: She had fallen ill due to overwork and 'applied for a month's (earned!) leave' in order to recuperate, but this was denied to her.

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From here onwards Binodini reflects more frequently on the tension between her desire to earn a living and the 'unfair' burden of 'selling her body'. Plans to start a fresh company involved a new 'protector' in her life, whose offer of the enormous sum of half a lakh rupees went to constructing a new theatre, initially to be in her own name. She even recounts how she carried earth-baskets herself to encourage the labourers. In the end, of course, it was named Star Theatre and even the promise of receiving some shares in the company, when her protector wanted to sell, did not materialise. So she threw herself ever more fully into her roles in the most popular plays—from the utterly Hinduised *sati* figure to that 'queer phenomenon' the girl graduate of Bengali society. Towards the end of her narrative she swings from her 'resolve' to be financially independent, no longer subordinate to anyone, to having to leave the stage once and for all, due to 'various estrangements and betrayals'. The end is bitter isolation: 'I have no kith, no kin, no religion, no work, no rationale, no reason for living' (Binodini, 1998, p. 107).

This was no mere striving to become part of *bhadramahila* culture, to be educated into companionate marriage for the new Hindu nation. Binodini's desire for fulfilment through her work, and the raging at a world that called her polluted, went radically beyond the boundaries of the more prominent agendas of the new women of the turn of the century and their nationalist project.

Baby Kamble

It is a giant leap from Binodini to Maharashtra and the world of Baby Kamble, born in 1929. Her narrative *Jina Amucha* (literally *Our Lives*) is believed to be the first of its kind by a Dalit woman, and her writings were initially serialised in Marathi magazines before being published as a book in 1986. We discover only in the translator Maya Pandit's subsequent interview with Baby Kamble herself that she started writing in secret and kept her notes for 20 years before fortuitous circumstances made their publication possible, thus inviting comparison with Rashsundari almost a century before. Maya Pandit's probing into the lack of the more 'personal aspects of her life' in the text was met with the direct response: 'Well, I wrote about what my community experienced… I really find it difficult to think of myself outside my community'

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(Kamble, 2008, p. 136). In his afterword, Gopal Guru has also commented on the difference between Rashsundari's narrative and Baby Kamble's as being the consequence of their respective caste locations—while both used indirect speech, the former was 'folded into the kitchen', whereas Dalit women's writings could 'flow freely from the domestic to the public spheres' (Kamble, 2008, p. 161).

As in all the other texts we are considering, this one begins with childhood—living with grandparents, a father who was mostly away as a contractor, generous to a fault, thus leading to hardships at home, and a mother kept 'locked up in the house' whose 'honour' meant that no one 'could see even a nail of such a woman' (*Ibid*., p. 5). If Rashsundari finessed the art of complaint, and Binodini's pain became her weapon of attack, Baby Kamble used a dark and searing humour that is as much directed at her own community's ignorance and superstitions as it is to the Brahminical society that oppressed them. 'Meek slaves of the earth' Baby Kamble calls Mahar women, for whom the favourite religious month of Ashadh, with its rituals and house cleaning, meant even more work. The power of her description comes in vivid accounts, such as, where the high point of bathing children and washing the patched rags that passed for a sari was the frenzied activity of killing lice by the thousands. The Mahars were less than human, robbed of the power to think, worse than animals—after all bullocks were fully fed, they had to depend on leftovers, dead cattle, garbage. In a remarkable section she describes the humiliation Mahar women suffer selling firewood and grass at a fixed distance from the Brahmin housewife, who is obsessed with checking for bits of thread or hair that might be stuck there and cause pollution. Do these Brahmin women not know that their very 'life blood has soaked the firewood', with the 'sweat of their bodies in their rice dishes', she asks? One could hardly come up with a more stunning image of untouchable bodily labour as stigma and humiliation, even though it constitutes the basis of the 'prosperity and wealth you enjoy' (*Ibid*., p. 56).

And yet, these very slaves, Baby Kamble goes on to say, were sufficiently human to be able to make arrangements to acquire slaves of their own—the daughter-in-law. Almost satirically, the marriage of nine-year-olds is recounted, the torturous labours that had to be endured, the taunts from everyone, especially the mother- and sisters-in-law. Particularly vicious are her words about the mother's need to poison her son's mind against the child bride, and the lengths she was prepared to go 'lest he

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fall in love with her'. Should the girl run away and then be forced back, the *sasu* would call her a slut who must have met a Mussalman,[13] and so incites her son to 'stand tall as a man' by chopping off her nose (*Ibid*., pp. 98–102). In the course of the interview with Maya Pandit, who asks Baby Kamble quite pointedly why her own marriage figures nowhere in her story, we learn that she was married at 13, one of the first marriages to be performed in the 'gandharva'[14] mode proposed initially by Babasaheb Ambedkar. Both became activists in his movement. Although Baby Kamble had a supportive mother-in-law, she had to hide her writing from both her husband and son, even endure the husband's violent jealousies while becoming a political leader.

I would be doing an injustice to Baby Kamble's narrative if I did not underscore the extent to which it is interwoven with the 'new path' out of wretchedness created by the entry of Babasaheb Ambedkar into their lives during the 1930s, and the transformations that followed his movement. As Sharmila Rege points out, children were increasingly sent to school, clothed and given hair cuts; Mahar girls carried out amazing battles with abusive upper caste schoolmates by coming up with insults of their own—why was Gandhi a toothless baldy? Because Ambedkar had kicked him in the teeth and given him a shave! (Rege, 2006, p. 220).

Particularly significant in the context of my focus on labour is that Baby Kamble refers especially to Ambedkar and his call to bring their humiliations to an end when it comes to her choice of work. 'Run a business for your own community, who else could you work for?', were his words. She therefore set up a grocery shop for fellow Mahars, which gradually made 'tidy profits', and allowed enough spare time for her secret writing and her public politics. The book closes with questions and exhortations to the new daughters and daughters-in-law of the present. Education is now so much more available, many of them are even graduates, and yet, or perhaps precisely because of this, Baby Kamble reminds them about the earthen pots, the carcasses and the starving children from which they have been rescued.

Baby Haldar

Baby Kamble's story is thus a collective political journey, and we will shortly look at the only other text that refers to a movement, namely, the

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politics of the sex workers' struggles as narrated by Nalini Jameela. But before that we have Baby Haldar's story *Aalo Andhari* (literally *Light and Darkness*, published in Hindi in 2002) translated into English as *A Life Less Ordinary*, which takes us into the present time through the recollections of a 29-year-old domestic worker. Originally written in Bengali and dedicated to her school teachers, she wrote at the encouragement of her employer, in whose house she was able to read Taslima Nasreen's *Amar Meyebela* (*My Girlhood*), along with other well-known Bengali writers.

Childhood in Baby Haldar's world (in rural Durgapur) was about hating home and loving school, with an absentee father who worked as a driver, and a mother who walked out on the family one day. Not able to come to terms with a bickering new Ma, she was then married off all of a sudden to an older man, who forces himself on her one night, making her pregnant at 14. The language of the text moves from first to third person in tones of bewilderment and fear, not understanding most of what is happening to and around her. There is the cruelty of a husband who gave her no money for food, the experience of giving birth to her first child, being beaten for enjoying the company of women in a neighbouring household who were visited by men. Interestingly, an unspoken sexuality structures this text quite fundamentally—in her discomfort over the relationship between her father and step-mother, in her naivete about the household of sisters just mentioned, and especially as she comes to recognise that she could be the object of the attention of other men. The first such man was unwelcome and only led to more beatings and severe violence, but subsequently she made demands of friendship to an old childhood playmate, and became a go-between in an inter-caste neighbourhood love affair. Contrary to expectations, it was the home of her in-laws, who lived in another village, that offered some kindness and respect in an otherwise violent marriage. Another brief source of respite came from earning bits of money by teaching the local children.

Baby Haldar first ventured into domestic work when she had three children and was at her wit's end. Finding work in a Brahmin household who nonetheless let her do 'everything' from cleaning and washing to cooking (thus clearly indexing her status as lower caste), she soon made a name for herself as a good worker. This meant working in other households in the early hours, returning to get two children ready for school, cooking and doing the housework, fetching the children and going back to more work in other households in the evenings, while her sons went for tuition. Baby

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Haldar mentions friendly employers but focuses on housewives who wanted to check her work closely, and who resented the presence of her baby daughter and the warmth she received from others around.

When the abuses and jealousies did not stop, and Baby Haldar asked herself what she had in common with her husband anyway, she finally moved out, and then left for Delhi where her brother lived. The rest of the book is about finding her way in the strange city with three children, coping without a man, living with the gossip, getting work and a place to stay. When the memsahib of the household she worked for demanded that she move in with her two younger children it seemed to solve everything, until she realised that she had no time to breathe. 'Often I'd be working till eleven at night and there was no concern that my children might be hungry or that I needed to go and check on them' (Haldar, 2006, p. 129). While the sahib might intervene to say that she needed some rest, his wife did not like this, and was furious when she visited her brother and her elder son.

Unable to bear the endless work with her children locked away upstairs, Baby Haldar left this job even though there was nothing else at the time. Put in touch with another sahib, an elderly man living with one of his grown sons, work began somewhat uncertainly when she was expected to start at dawn for just 800 rupees, with no time to eat anything; this meant that she would already have to look for additional work elsewhere to survive. And yet she soon sensed a special 'compassion' in him, so that gradually the relationship transformed—'think of me as your father, brother, mother, friend, anything…' the Sahib tells her (*Ibid*., p. 141). She describes how he discovered her looking at Bengali books while dusting them, encouraged her to read, and sometime later pressed a notebook and pen into her hands—'write about anything… about your life'. The text ends with the publication of her book; the blurb informs us that she is working on her second one.

Nalini Jameela

Just a year after Baby Haldar published *Aalo Andhari*, Nalini Jameela first tried her hand at writing about herself—'I am Nalini. Was born at Kalloor near Amballoor. I am forty-nine years old.' (But when a client came across this, she promptly lost him since she had claimed to being

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just 42!) So goes her anecdote in the introduction to what became a highly controversial best-selling autobiography in Malayalam *Njan Laingikatozhilali* (*I am a Sex Worker*), which then went through a second revision before she found it 'satisfactory'. Nothing could be more 'new' than the term she uses, a neologism in Malayalam, that combines the word for sex *laingika* with *tozhil*, a term that, as J. Devika highlights in her introduction, means both labour and profession. Nalini Jameela explicitly rejected terms like *veshya* or other Malayalam epithets for prostitution, given all the contempt they connoted.

Like Baby Haldar, her story began with loving school, and having a difficult life at home. Her invalid Ezhava father only had a small pension from his military days; then her mother lost her job as a factory supervisor because of allegations of her father's communist ties. At the age of nine she made the choice to earn money for her family, 'no one thought of it as child labour in those days' (Jameela, 2008, p. 9)—starting out in a tile factory, then a short stint of domestic work, and, finally, she grew up carrying baskets in clay mines. With an extraordinary light touch she dwells on looking out for small increases in pitiable wages, trying to get by as a girl with lighter loads, and coping with sexual violence everywhere. A short section discusses Nalini Jameela's three-and-half-year first marriage to a man who turned out to be a thug and hooch dealer, and who then died of cancer and arrack.

Responsible for the financial support of two young children and a mother-in-law, the step to sex work came from learning of moneyed men who 'needed women … the way the husband does', which could earn her the unheard sum of 50 rupees. Two chapters of her autobiography dwell on the ins and outs of her life as sex worker, beginning from the Emergency years. Her first client was a police officer, very gentle at night but who promptly had her arrested the next morning. We hear about different arrangements, some called 'Company Houses'—the closest Kerala got to having small brothels, with brokers and *goonda*s; learning how to find the right pick-up points in towns; precious moments of happiness; different clients—local, medium type and high class, as she put it. When the money she kept sending to her mother-in-law was returned one day because there was now an uncle in the Gulf, Nalini felt like leaving the trade. Two more marriages followed—the first husband lied to her about his previous wife; the second lasted for 12 years. He turned out to be Muslim (for whose family she added Jameela to her

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name); she lived with him and her baby daughter from the previous marriage, before he went 'astray' and that broke down too.

It is hard to convey the flow of the text, and the experiences she recounts—setting up a trade in plastic name boards in Ooty, surviving severe illness with a stomach tumour, times with good money to being reduced to depending on alms in a mosque. Above all, there are the enormous trials of bringing up a daughter 'on the streets'. She 'drifts' back to sex work. The narrative changes decisively when she discovers and joins an organisation for sex workers involved in HIV AIDS advocacy. It is through her political involvements that she found the resolve to stay with sex work, gave her first public speeches, demanding a change of attitude towards the profession, especially the need to go beyond all the complaints and helplessness. Interspersed with further experiences—getting her daughter married, accounts of sex workers who have taken their lives, or been killed—and her new life as an organiser and documentary film maker, who travelled to national and international meetings without hiding her profession, she provides arguments and her perspectives: Sex workers are freer than housewives who have to serve and clean after their husbands. Rehabilitation is largely a myth—is it possible to restore lost family and social ties? Distinctions must be made between what is acceptable and unacceptable—in the latter category belong, she says, the brothels of Mumbai responsible for the stereotypical image of the victimised sex worker; and 'sex rackets', where girls are kidnapped and tortured. Sexual exploitation is different again, happens in many contexts—the question is whether those who find themselves in such situations without their consent, would then nonetheless want to become a sex worker.

> That doesn't mean that we always enjoy doing it. Take a construction worker… The fellow who does scavenging work for the municipality does the job for a living. Sex work is a little above both these kinds of work… No one demands the rehabilitation of the scavengers who work under the unhealthiest of conditions… (Jameela, 2008, pp. 112–113)

Theorising Women's Narratives

Having provided a brief account of the problems and contradictions besetting women's labour in the first part of this article, the second part

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moved on to the texts of five women, each with their singular style and language of articulation. This final section draws upon the narratives to seek some answers.

In *Writing a Woman's Life* Carolyn G. Heilbrun named 1973 as the 'turning point for modern women's autobiography', since it is only then that an American poet and writer May Sarton decided that she had to retell her story, having recognised what had been unintentionally concealed in her first account, 'written in the old genre of female autobiography, which tends to find beauty even in pain and to transform rage into spiritual acceptance' (Heilbrun, 1988, p. 12). It may not come as a surprise that for Heilbrun the watershed in question was obviously made possible by feminism. We, therefore, cannot help but notice that the varying kinds of critical consciousness emerging from each of the texts we have briefly discussed bear a definite resemblance to Heibrun's yardstick (which she identifies as the readiness to cross prohibitions, such as, naming anger or claiming power over one's life), yet without explicitly drawing on the political vocabulary and history associated with feminism or women's struggles. My primary focus, in any case, has been to look more closely at their reflections on labour, one that continues to bedevil feminists to this very day.

We discover, to begin with, that all their childhoods are broken and effectively ended by entering lives of labour. This is significant in itself, in spite of Nalini Jameela's casual remark that child labour was not an issue in 'those days', which in her case would have been as recent as the 1960s. Furthermore, each one of them not only identifies women's labour as a problem, but turns it into an experience that enables their critique. Almost all of them discuss the sphere of the home, the ones they were born into or those they acquired upon marriage, as places where work has to be performed. (The only exception is Binodini Dasi, who resolutely articulated her work in relation to her life on the stage, not the unfair circumstances that led to 'selling her body', and whose 'home' is never explicitly alluded to after the first pages.) Let us recall Kumkum Sangari's arguments regarding the ideologies underpinning domestic life, such that women's lasting personal relationships render their labour as unalienated, as selfless devotion. This is not what we hear in the texts before us. Already with Rashsundari Debi, a transitional figure who desired and came to claim a modern sense of self, the very endlessness of household tasks provokes her double-voiced stance, inwardly critical

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and only apparently compliant. In the case of the others the critiques are sharper but also multivocal, as questions of caste, class and sexuality become visible.

As it turns out, the contradictions identified in the first part of this article find several echoes in these texts, but there are also new ones. Baby Kamble's style reveals the cross-hatchings of caste and gender in the lives of Mahar women—their degraded labour as untouchables in the fields and for the prosperity of upper caste households is sought to be overcome through codes of 'honour' in those Mahar households that can somehow create an *antahpur*—inner quarters—of their own, including the capacity to make slaves out of daughters-in-law. Baby Haldar's descriptions of her life as a domestic worker demonstrate the workings of her lower caste identity through her very labour, including the full recognition of the special dynamic that gets set in motion between a memsahib and her maid, as the time and effort that must be given in serving one household has to be at the expense of the servant's own. Sexuality is by no means absent in these two texts—its legibility, however, is largely confined to jealous and violent husbands and neighbourhood gossip. Where Binodini Dasi rails against the injustice of not being allowed to forget being born in the prostitutes' quarters, Nalini Jameela, a century later, politicises sex work. This politicisation is particularly complex when it comes to her family life—while she is able to walk out of bad marriages, oppose dominant norms of femininity and the labours of the housewife, protecting her own daughter includes trying more than once to find her a marriage that lasts.

These contradictions open up a further challenge that goes to the very heart of conceptions of gender hierarchy, which foreground women's oppression by men. Women certainly struggle against men in these narratives. Nor do I wish to diminish case after case of men who fail in their normative roles as providers and protectors. Some readily compound their failure with violence, as when Baby Kamble becomes politically active, Baby Haldar goes out to work or Nalini Jameela is thrown out of the house by her father. Binodini experiences failure at the hands of all the men in her life, both professionally and personally, and the worst betrayals are from those who present themselves as her mentors and benefactors. Rashsundari makes rather perfunctory mention of her *karta*, the head of the household, towards the end of her book, acknowledging that not having said anything about him made her story incomplete. He

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was a kind man, she allows. But her real purpose was to show that she could effectively handle a case of land litigation when he was away and she was left in charge. The one man who appears in a different mould is 'Tatush', Baby Haldar's employer, whose plea to be considered as her 'father, mother, brother, friend, anything'—in other words as anything but an exploiting master—appears consumed by a desire to transcend their working relationship into remaking her as a writer.

But where men occupy identifiably patriarchal positions in these authors' respective journeys, whether tragic or triumphant, my argument is that modernity's visible production of the 'new woman' masks the more complex and elusive fracturing of 'women' in the world of labour. Indeed, it is unclear whether they share a collective identity as women to begin with. Within the family domain itself we have heard about relations of power between daughters, mothers and mothers-in-law (and that too in hugely disparate upper caste, Mahar and lower caste homes); then there is Dalit women's waged labour for Brahmin households; the relations between memsahib and servant; finally, the politicisation of sex work, abjected from society. These texts demonstrate my further argument that these class, caste and sexuality inflected antagonisms are constitutive of the everyday devaluation of women's lives of labour. The reproduction of labour in households from the late 19th century into the present requires therefore much more exploration of the familial, sexual, caste and class hierarchies that distribute and relegate work to different women. Perhaps this is why Baby Kamble has so much to say about mothers-in-law in Mahar households rather than her own violent husband. Rashsundari complained that even though she had nine servants, they all worked outside, leaving her to do all the housework alone—'in those days we did not have Brahmin cooks', she adds ruefully (Sarkar, 2001, pp. 207–208).

In her introduction to Nalini Jameela's autobiography, J. Devika draws attention to the dominant feminine ideal in Kerala, 'procreative, disciplined, family-centric', that was given shape 'through wave after wave of social and community reformism in the twentieth century… [T]he Veshya—the prostitute figure—was marginally present in the early twentieth century…as its abhorrent Other. However, the labouring woman's presence was even more marginal. Jameela's text actually made this voice audible' (Jameela, 2008, p. viii). Nalini Jameela is very evidently engaged in writing back to Kerala's elites and progressives,

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and on more than one occasion she remarks on the growing social distance between the world of sex work and mainstream society. However, her text also demonstrates conflicted relations among the very margins Devika alludes to, when she mentions being equally unwelcome in the poor and Dalit parts of town. For her part, as we have seen, she placed sex workers somewhere above construction labourers and scavengers, remarking further that 'no one' expected such workers to enjoy the fruits of their labour or be considered for rehabilitation. Here she appears blind to movements, such as, the struggle for the abolition of scavenging as an untouchable profession, coming from these castes themselves, however limited their support from those 'above'. The grading of those abjected by caste, class and sexuality thus exacerbates conflict, and hardens differences among those striving for lives of labour beyond oppression, stigma and alienation.

Beyond Labour Oppression?

This article began by asking why women's labour eludes worth and value, and I have tried to be faithful to the insights provided by a few pioneering women's life narratives, as they created certain alternatives out of the conditions imposed upon them. By way of a conclusion, I am therefore tempted to press further and ask whether these texts offer a view beyond labour oppression. As we will discover, we are left with more questions, whether those of the women themselves or our own. We have seen how Rashsundari repeatedly connects a life confined to domestic chores with the absence of education, and she notes with great satisfaction that girls are now educated. *But for what, we have to ask, and how does it transform a life of labour?* We are not told. Her own life moves from the mute young bride to gradually enjoying the authority that comes with sons and grandsons, the ability to converse more freely with other members and servants, even use her secretly acquired literate skills to settle a court case. Thus, Rashsundari's affirmation of the value of education goes hand in hand with the firming up of a new upper caste and upper class feminine subjectivity, replete with son preference, and a clear aversion towards the onerousness of domestic labour, to be delegated to others, preferably servants. This is late 19th century rural Bengal. By this time Binodini has already become the most famous

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actress on the Calcutta stage—indeed is about to give it up. If anyone is clear about achieving happiness through work it is Binodini, whose capacity to reflect on and delight in her own talent for performance is only matched by her desire for a life without subordination. Her sense of injustice is total.

We then move to the world of the Mahars caught up in Ambedkar's movement from the 1930s as experienced by a woman who grew up near Pune. In her own life, Baby Kamble found some resolution to untouchable labour and household slavery in running her own little grocery shop. *Is this a way out then, from exploitation and stigma to the dignity of self-employment?* It was the women around her who stepped forward to break from humiliating if not hazardous food and labour practices in the wake of Ambedkar's call and who found in education the major path to liberation. But it is Baby Kamble herself who is moved to ask of a new generation of educated 'daughters and daughters-in-law' what they have forgotten as beneficiaries of this very movement, and the question remains unanswered. Baby Haldar and Nalini are our contemporaries, who are witness to the peculiar forms that the Indian economy has been taking, the former carrying out an individual struggle in the city of Delhi, the latter a collective one in present-day Kerala.[15] Both live outside the institution of marriage, both took up their respective professions because of the children in their care, and both appear not to have stopped working after becoming authors. Baby Haldar, acutely conscious of the exploitative nature of paid domestic work, ends her story with all the excitement of seeing her book in print. *Does such work become less exploitative when the employer has helped make you a writer?* We have already heard many of Nalini's arguments in favour of sex work. Probably the most startling of them all is her suggestion that the negative and unwanted experience of sexual violence (certainly ubiquitous in her early working life) be turned into earning a living as a sex worker. She offers descriptions of clients and their varying needs, some of which may not be explicitly sexual, and claims to have evolved a certain power in her relations to them. Sex for money 'now and then' is thus offered as a viable alternative, given the much worse conditions within which most women find themselves. *By turning sexual violation on its head, does sex work then offer an alternate path out of victimhood?*

Having begun with a set of questions, we have found some answers and more questions. Five disparate life stories cannot in any way

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substitute for the process of collective thinking and struggle over the future of women's labour, nor can they in any way be taken as representative of women in the worlds of work. Thus, it would be wonderful if there were more life narratives, such as, of the 'factory girl' (whether in the jute mills of yesteryear or in the export processing zones of today), of adivasi women struggling to uphold subsistence economies against all odds, or of women in self-employment, including those made famous by the Self-Employed Women's Association (SEWA) or the governmentalised self-help groups (SHGs), all of which require contextualisation within recent history and India's globalising economy. It should be obvious that there is nothing essential or transhistorical about the problems identified in this article, given all that we know about the contingency of social processes, including, let us not forget, the working of economic regimes. In the face of the emergence of modernity under colonialism, followed by promises of development with independence and more especially after the onset of a neoliberal regime devoted to economic growth with increasingly precarious conditions of life and work, these texts from the world of labour strive for recognition and change. They attest to failed patriarchies as much as to the intersecting conflicts that constitute women's relations in the realm of labour. They also force us to rethink the institutions of marriage and family, given the deep divisions of gender, class, caste and sexuality upon which the successful household so completely depends. It is for us to ponder over why all this is more true today than at any time in recent history. At the very least, these texts provide us with testimonies that any movement must in turn be answerable to.

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Notes

1. Different modes of naming women's writings about themselves and their worlds have been debated in the Indian context in particular. Sharmila Rege has argued that Dalit women's writings should not be called autobiographies

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but rather 'testimonios', a term that she takes from South American women's writing (Rege, 2006). We will discover contrasting approaches in modes of writing when we come to the women's texts themselves, and so I leave the question open.

2. Among the first in-depth interrogations of the feminisation thesis in India, which focused very significantly on the different meanings of feminisation in labour markets (are women taking over men's jobs, are women entering new work spaces, and with what consequences?), see especially Shah et al. (1994).
3. For a recent overview, see Ghosh (2009), and John (2009) discusses the range of positions and debates on globalisation among feminists.

   Even though there are clearly no overall trends that indicate the large-scale entry of women into the Indian labour force, and these may, in fact, have declined in recent years, it is nonetheless still relevant to identify specific sectors—both old and new—however small they may be, where significant numbers of women workers are to be found. This could range from India's tea plantations, which took full advantage of migrant women during and after the colonial era, to the garment workers in south Indian cities producing for international 'brands' in the newly globalised 21st century. What unites such disparate workers is the extraordinary levels of exploitation that they have been and continue to be subjected to, which requires the kind of larger frame of analysis that my article attempts to outline. See Gothoskar (2012) and Neetha (2004), as well as some of the articles in this issue, for examples of micro-studies.
4. For early discussions of women's work in the context of the NSS, see Sen and Sen (1985) and on the census, see Krishnaraj (1990).
5. See, for instance, the articles brought together by Padmini Swaminathan (2012) and their framing. Indeed, in her concluding introductory remarks, Swaminathan herself refers explicitly to how 'research undertaken from a gender perspective seems to be concerned by gender perspectives alone, while lip service may be paid to structural factors' (that is, capitalist accumulation, paradigms of development) (Swaminathan, 2012, pp. 14–15). I would only add that structural factors are not exhausted by questions relating to development or capitalism but must include caste and sexuality as well.
6. As Palriwala and Neetha elaborate, 'stratified familialism' results in the production of class difference through the creation of a 'care deficit' on the part of all those women who labour and are then blamed for not being in a position to provide sufficient care in their households. Their study focuses on the abdication of care provisioning by the state as a matter of public responsibility rather than as a residual welfare measure, which in turn has a long history.

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7. Given the overwhelming feminisation of paid domestic work over the course of the last century, Radhika Chopra has provided an interesting ethnographic glimpse into the crisis faced by male domestic workers as 'invisible men' in negotiating their labour, identity and domestic spaces (Chopra, 2006).
8. I am grateful to J. Devika for suggesting this phrase.
9. As Rinchin pointed out in the context of a panel discussion on marriage and family from feminist, Dalit, Marxist and queer perspectives, marriage is the ultimate form that the binary division of the sexual and non-sexual takes, such that 'sexual liaisons are valued above others and the one sexual relationship in which sex becomes secondary after a while and "love and care" take over is the culmination of our quest. … Therefore, friends, siblings and others sharing home and life together will always be seen as living in limbo' (Rinchin, 2008, p. 576). Analyses, such as Rinchin's, however, are quite rare and are in urgent need of further amplification and debate. For an earlier argument on the need to develop better critiques of the institution of marriage within debates on sexuality, see John (1998).
10. The classic feminist essay which retheorised a universal system of the 'exchange of women' by bringing together Levi-Strauss, Freud and Marx is Gayle Rubin's 'The Traffic in Women' (Rubin, 1975). For a subtle critique of symptoms of unwitting hierarchisation within Rubin's sex–gender system, see Naifei Ding (2007). In the Indian context, the pioneering historical essay on the devadasi tradition and its relations to sex work has been by Janaki Nair (1993). See also the Sex Workers' Manifesto brought out by the Durbar Mahila Samanwaya Committee, reproduced in Kotiswaran (2011). Prabha Kotiswaran's introduction to existing scholarship on sex work is an excellent overview of the debates in India, and foregrounds especially the need to bring together analyses of labour, marriage and sex work (Kotiswaran, 2011).
11. The notion of abjection comes from the work of Judith Butler, who has drawn attention to the processes whereby the heterosexual matrix 'abjects' the lesbian as its 'constitutive outside' (Butler, 1993). I am using the term here to indicate how the sex worker today occupies the constitutive outside of a newly evolving normative marriage and family more generally.
12. Rimli Bhattacharya's erudite introduction, afterword and special chapter on the Bengali theatre situates Binodini's life both within the new class that so enthusiastically supported this kind of entertainment, and the history and influences that created the theatre form itself.
13. The explicit mobilisation of the trope of the Muslim male in Kamble's delineation of the 'slut' adds a communal twist to her tale of incitement. It brings Mahar culture close to the widespread gendered constructions of Hindu–Muslim conflict that were gaining currency from the 1920s—the interesting difference, however, is that whereas the typical communal scenario involved

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narratives of abduction and rape by Muslim men of Hindu women, here sexual agency is attributed to the tortured Mahar child-wife.

14. A 'gandharva' marriage, popularised within anti-caste struggles and for the promotion of inter-caste marriages, refers to simple marriages conducted by the young couple themselves, without the presence of priests or Hindu rituals, often confined to an exchange of garlands. Subsequently, Buddhist marriages became the norm in the Ambedkarite movement.
15. This is not to suggest that there are no collective organisations or struggles of domestic workers in the Indian context, though they do not find mention in Haldar's text (for some discussions, see Neetha, 2003 and Devika et al., 2011). Indeed it would be extremely instructive to compare the trajectories and forms that struggles of domestic workers and sex workers have taken in recent decades. While the international links in the case of the latter are obviously visible, so also are the solidarities from gay, lesbian and transgender groups in an effort to build a larger network for the articulation of non-normative sexualities, to which Nalini Jameela herself attests. For a suggestive set of reflections on attempts to bring sex workers within the ambit of a broader platform of workers' unions, see Sukhthankar (2012) and the findings of a recent survey among sex workers (Sahni and Shankar, 2011).

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