



# A Socio-Cultural Study of *Jugnū*: A Newsletter from the Red-Light Area of Muzaffarpūr

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## Abstract:

Muzaffarpur (Muzaffarpūr) is a city in India's eastern state Bihar. Situated in Bihar's Tirhut division, the city was founded in the eighteenth century under British Raj. Muzaffarpūr's red light area is known as Chaturbhuj Sthan (Chaturbhuj Sthān), after a famous Vishnu temple situated in midst of the locality. About a kilometre-long road houses over 3500 sex workers in Chaturbhuj Sthān. Despite several efforts during the late twentieth century to advance the conditions of residents of Chaturbhuj Sthān, the plight of sex workers remained mostly neglected as they continue to be stigmatised and viewed as either trafficked victims or moral criminals. They struggle for justified treatment in society against all biases set against them. Amidst all this, a social activist from Chaturbhuj Sthān, Nasīma Khatūn, who proudly wears the badge of being 'the daughter of a sex worker,' took an initiative by starting a handwritten Newsletter in the interest of sex workers. This paper attempts to present the views and aspirations of the residents of Chaturbhuj Sthān via their writings published in *Jugnū*. The paper also covers some elements of interview conducted with Ms. Nasīma Khatūn and analyses seven different editions of the *Jugnū* that were published between 2005 to 2022.

**Keywords:** *Jugnū*, Nasīma Khatūn, Muzaffarpūr, Chaturbhuj Sthān, Sex Work

## Introduction:

The rich tapestry of Indian literature is woven with threads of diverse genres, themes, and styles, reflecting the multifaceted nature of the country's traditions, lives, and cultures. Yet, within this vibrant literary landscape, the voices of marginalized communities have often struggled to find their rightful place. Writings from these communities—Dalits, Adivasis, women, LGBTQ+ individuals, and others—serve as crucial counter-narratives to the dominant discourse, providing profound insights into their lived experiences and the systemic injustices they face. These narratives not only challenge the established socio-cultural hierarchies but also play a vital role in the ongoing struggle for social justice and equality in India. By documenting oppression, celebrating cultural heritage, and advocating for rights and recognition, as the literature of marginalized communities, *Jugnū* invites

readers to engage with the realities of those who have long been sidelined. As these voices gain prominence, they enrich Indian literature with authenticity, resilience, and the power to transform societal perceptions and attitudes.

The issue of sex work, in particular, did not become a topic of national debate until recent times when the recognition and rights of marginalized women began to gain attention. Sex workers have advocated for their inclusion in the labour market and the decriminalization of their profession, which would help erase the social stigma and elevate their social status. The lack of research and criticism on such literatures indicate the neglect of mainstream feminist and post-colonial discourse in bringing the narratives from the communities of sex workers to the forefront. Residents and practitioners in red-light areas face issues of discrimination and misrepresentation, that emerge from their alienation from the society.

This paper aims to highlight the underlying themes of variety of experiences of residents of Chaturbhuj Sthān via a handwritten Newsletter, *Jugnū*, published in the fourth largest red-light area of India - Chaturbhuj Sthān in Bihar. The Newsletter sets an important milestone that marks writing as a form of expression as well as resistance towards the problems encountered by the families of sex workers within the socio-cultural, economic and political realms. The study employs Qualitative and Descriptive Methodology for a systematic evaluation of the select editions of the magazine.

## Sex Work in India

The term 'sex worker' reflects a recognized form of labour, conferring rightful worker status, visibility, and voice. Coined by Carol Leigh in the late 1980s, the term underscores that sex work is a legitimate means of livelihood. In India, sex work is primarily governed by the Immoral Traffic (Prevention) Act (ITPA).<sup>1</sup> While it is not explicitly illegal to engage in sex work in India, many activities associated with it are criminalized. Under the ITPA, running a brothel is illegal and soliciting sex work in public places is prohibited. Procuring, inducing, or detaining a person for the purpose of prostitution is criminalized. The sex workers cannot legally operate within a certain distance of public places like schools and temples. Activities such as pimping, pandering, and owning or managing a brothel are also illegal. Additionally, public solicitation and living off the earnings of sex work are punishable offenses.

With such complex structure of the laws regarding practice of sex work in India, the workers often find themselves juggling between earning their livelihood as well as fighting the stigma held against them. Since engaging in sex work privately is not illegal, an individual can sell sex voluntarily without facing legal repercussions. However, due to the criminalization of associated activities, sex workers often lack legal protections and rights, making them vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and harassment by law enforcement and others.

Sex workers face significant social stigma and discrimination, impacting their access to healthcare, housing, and other essential services. The legal framework does not adequately protect sex workers from exploitation and abuse, leading to a cycle of marginalization. Activists and advocacy groups have called for the decriminalization

of sex work and the implementation of laws that protect the rights and safety of sex workers. There have been ongoing debates and discussions about reforming the laws related to sex work in India to ensure better protection and rights for sex workers. However, significant legal changes are yet to be implemented.

### Sex Work in Muzaffarpūr

Chaturbhuj Sthān is a historical red-light area located in the town of Muzaffarpūr in Bihar, India. A red-light area is a district in a city or town that is known for its concentration of establishments offering commercial sex services. These areas are typically characterized by the presence of brothels and adult entertainment venues. Chaturbhuj Sthān has a long and complex history, closely intertwined with the cultural and social fabric of the region. Historically, the area has been a significant centre for courtesans and performers for centuries. It is believed to date back to the times when *tawaifs* (courtesans) were respected for their artistic talents and played important roles in the political, cultural and social life of the region.

Chaturbhuj (lit. 'four-shoulder' in Sanskrit) is a concept in Hindu iconography where deities are depicted with four arms. This representation, found in Hindu literature, symbolizes divinity, power, and dominion over the four quarters of the universe.<sup>2</sup> Chaturbhuj Sthān is believed to have earned its reputation and name after the famous Chaturbhuj ('four shoulders' - an epithet for the preserver deity, Viṣṇu) temple situated in middle of the locality.

Factually, Chaturbhuj Sthān was known for its *tawaifs* who were skilled in classical music, dance, and poetry. They were often patronized by men of nobility and other wealthy individuals. However, during the British rule in India, the status of *tawaifs* began to decline. The British viewed their profession with moral disdain, leading to increased stigmatization and marginalization. After India gained independence in 1947, the stigma around the sex work persisted. The residents of Chaturbhuj Sthān too faced social ostracism and legal challenges which further marginalized the community. In an interview recorded on 18<sup>th</sup> March 2024, Ms. Nasīma Khatūn, a dedicated social worker from Chaturbhuj Sthān, recollects the oral narratives about dance practices that took place around the temple. The tales around the history of Chaturbhuj Sthān that have been passed on generationally, recognize this area as a cultural and educational hub. It is believed that several children from royal households visited Chaturbhuj Sthān to receive *talīm* (education) in literary arts and *tehzīb* (mannerism). On excelling in their education, they received a *prashasti patrā* (certificate of merit) by the *tawaifs* who groomed them.

Chaturbhuj Sthān, like many red-light areas in India, faces significant social stigma. The residents, especially women, engaged in sex work, often struggle with societal discrimination and lack of access to basic services. The economic condition of the residents is generally precarious with limited opportunities for alternative livelihoods. Many women are forced into sex work due to poverty and lack of education. However, it is extremely important to note that the practice of *tawaif* tradition in Chaturbhuj Sthān is not synonymous with the trafficking of women in or around Muzaffarpūr. In fact, interviews with Nasīma Khatūn strongly emphasize the role played by organizations like 'Parcham,' in rescuing the trafficked girls and women. She asserts that there are several

hotspots throughout the city which serve as trafficking sites but ironically Chaturbhuj Sthān, the infamous red-light area of Bihar, is not one of them.

Amidst complicated legal framework and stigmatization from society, there usually remains a lack of means that enable the residents of red-light areas like Chaturbhuj Sthān to clearly understand their stature in society. The sex workers are often pushed to hide their identities with limited access to rightful information. Their freedom of movement often gets restricted to the red-light zones. They cannot dwell anywhere in the residential areas of the city as independent, rent-paying tenant for practicing sex work on commercial terms. Any activity that they undertake gets written out of the public sphere by the regulatory grid on grounds of immorality. This legal ambiguity affects the lives of the residents and workers in Chaturbhuj Sthān. While it is believed that several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and activists work to improve the conditions in Chaturbhuj Sthān, the issue gets more complicated as one compares the data with narratives of ground reality. Chaturbhuj Sthān witnessed a sudden rise in activism and implementation of welfare programs during the 1990s but most of the efforts fizzled out in no time. A report published in *The Business and Political Observer* on 22<sup>nd</sup> April 1998 by Neeraj Bhushan points out that the fall was mainly caused due to ‘poor planning and social resistance.’ The report presents testimonies from multiple sources—sex workers, residents of Chaturbhuj Sthān and activists—and reads thus:

In a bid to free around 1000 sex workers in the country’s second largest red light area, ambitious income generation and education schemes were started for the women and their wards. The projects ranging from starting schools to imparting job related training and disbursing loans to start small business were implemented, with the help of UNESCO and Bihar-based voluntary organisation, Adithi.

At least 500 sex workers were given loans to start afresh, says Anita Khatoon, a volunteer with one of the NGOs. However, the benefits failed to reach the poor and needy.

“All packages have lapsed into oblivion, as have the sex workers who have once again turned to their time-tested traditional business,” rues Rajendra Prasad, a senior citizen of the area.

“So much hue and cry was raised over operation Ujala to uplift the lot of social workers, but the scheme brought more worries than smiles to the poor women of the locality,” says Prasad (Bhushan, 1998).

On a brighter side, these initiatives did ignite hopes and determination amongst a few residents of Chaturbhuj Sthān, who could now see the possibility of opportunities that awaited them. One of the most notable activists from Chaturbhuj Sthān is Nasīma Khatūn, whose lifetime of genuine efforts are noteworthy. Khatoon is known for her unstinting efforts to bring positive and practical changes to the community. *Jugnū*, a handwritten Newsletter, managed by Nasīma Khatūn is one such initiative that has created an extraordinary impact on the lives of residents of Chaturbhuj Sthān. Since marginalised issues faced by sex workers are often divorced from mainstream trajectories and tabooed, there rises an ardent need of media interventions that may bridge the communication gap. For residents of Chaturbhuj Sthān, the magazine *Jugnū*, emerged as one of the only mediums via which they could voice their issues and aspirations.

## Nasīma Khatūn

Ms. Nasīma Khatūn hails from a family of sex workers in Chaturbhuj Sthān in Muzaffarpūr, Bihar. Despite the stigmatization and challenges associated with her background, she has risen to become a significant advocate for the rights and well-being of sex workers across the country. Hailing from a marginalized community, Nasīma Khatūn was exposed to the harsh realities faced by sex workers in Chaturbhuj Sthān and neighbouring red-light areas of Bihar. This early exposure instilled in her a deep sense of empathy and a desire to bring about change. Her life took a new turn during the 1990s amidst the awakened efforts by NGOs and independent activists. In those days, the controversial yet prominent Indian bureaucrat, Rajbala Verma, was known for her contributions to the welfare of sex workers in Bihar with her strict and demanding approach. Her efforts focused on providing access to healthcare, education, and vocational training to help the sex workers transition into more secure and respected livelihoods. In fact, the ‘Ujala Project’, discussed in the earlier quoted report by Neeraj Bhushan, reached its peak during Verma’s period of work in Muzaffarpūr during 1995. The scheme aimed to uplift the living conditions of sex workers by ensuring that their children received education and healthcare. Verma’s approach involved collaborating with NGOs and other stakeholders to create a support system that addressed the social stigma and economic challenges faced by sex workers. Khatoon remembers Verma as the first and only administrative officer of those times “to have actually come and indulged with residents of Chaturbhuj Sthān.” She insists that the ‘Tri-sem yojna’ introduced during those days was a crucial step with effective impact on the lives of families of sex workers in Chaturbhuj Sthān. However, the project was short-lived and could not be carried forward efficiently in future.

Officials of the welfare department admit that the ‘crusade’ to improve the lot of sex workers mainly dependent on Verma, who had roped in several NGOs to make the venture successful. “It appeared as a light indeed was at the end of the tunnel when we saw welfare schemes being introduced by the administration to uplift our lot. Many of us were the beneficiaries,” says Kamla Rani (name changed), a prostitute turned primary teacher. Jobs and loans for starting small scale industries were also introduced with a fervour that raised a lot of hopes among the people. Major emphasis of the packages offered was on income generation, health awareness, and imparting free education in a bid to bring them into the mainstream, says Anita Khatoon.

But most of the schemes, notes Khatoon, fell through. Measures were “doomed to fail as no one could guarantee the sex workers reformed life by merely launching schemes. The situation should have been tackled in a planned manner,” say the activists.

With Verma out of the scene, the welfare schemes died its natural death. A pink foundation stone of a ‘market complex’ inaugurated in 1995 stands in a cattle shed, bearing new testimony to some reform measures that went haywire (Bhushan, 1998).

After years of struggle and setbacks, while Nasīma Khatūn emerged as a peer educator, some of the other newly emerging ‘activists’ caused more harm than any good. Initiatives were taken by organizations such as ‘Samaj Sudhar Committee’ to forcefully shut down sex work and indulge the sex workers in activities—such as making candles and incense sticks—that could barely generate any income. The hollowness and dubiousness of such activism were most evident when the sex workers demanded better standards of living and work opportunities and a senior female ‘activist’ rebukingly remarked, “how dare you negotiate as prostitutes,” recalls Khatoon. This person was rude and ignorant to the plight of the very people for whose upliftment she was working.



Agitated by the workers' demands, she got everyone concerned, including several children, arrested. Khatoon comments on the incapability of media in the present times to report such events in an authentic manner, "It is said that pimps have been arrested. No one tells you how old are they." She believes that although sex work communities are believed to be matriarchal, the men are equally discriminated in this society, in fact sometimes more discriminated than women. Khatoon asserts the need for rehabilitation centers and work opportunities for all genders alike. It must be emphasized that the statistical data should not just include sex workers but also their children.

Nasīma Khatūn's first hand experiences with such brutal societal stigma and discrimination fuelled her commitment to advocate for rights of families of sex workers who continue to bear the shame of their family's profession that fed their stomachs. She decided to dedicate her life to improving the living conditions and rights of sex workers as well as the people associated with them. Over the years, she has worked extensively to create awareness amongst the people about their legal rights and possible work opportunities. She has championed the cause of better healthcare services for sex workers, ensuring they have access to necessary medical treatments and facilities. Understanding the transformative power of education, she has worked tirelessly to provide educational opportunities for the children of sex workers, aiming to break the cycle of poverty and exploitation. Khatoon clarifies that her efforts are not directed towards opening a space and teach the same things that many other organizations and activists in Bihar teach all the students alike irrespective of their age and educational qualification. She instead emphasizes the need of quality learning, thorough revision of lessons, vocational training and physical fitness training. She looks after establishment and more importantly management of support networks that provide a sense of community and solidarity among sex workers, offering them a platform to voice their concerns and seek assistance via her Community Based Organization 'Parcham,' which can be credited for several initiatives such as *Police Pāṭhshālā* and *Jugnū*.

Unlike an NGO, a CBO (Community-Based Organization) is a local, informal group focused on improving a specific area. While the NGOs can collect funds and receive tax deductions, the CBOs are informal and lack legal status. Both rely on donations for funding.<sup>3</sup> Nasīma Khatūn explains this arrangement and comments, "There is a lack of *yōjnā* (scheme/policy), therefore there is a need of *pariyōjnā* (projects)." Her organization 'Parcham' has mostly been dependent on donations, fundings and mutual cooperation with local authorities. Therefore, Khatoon eloquently prioritizes to spend the fundings on benefiting the families of sex workers of Chaturbhuj Sthān, rather than investing in establishment and legal management of 'Parcham' as an NGO. Even during the course of this research, she was on a mission to get the *Aadhaar* cards made for as many children of Chaturbhuj Sthān as possible. Despite facing numerous personal challenges, including societal ostracism and threats, Khatoon's resilience and determination have remained steadfast. Her journey from a marginalized background to becoming a prominent advocate is a testament to her unwavering commitment to social justice.

## ***Jugnū*, the Newsletter**

‘Parcham,’ founded by Nasīma Khatūn, is a ‘Community Based Organization’ (CBO) that advocates for the rights and welfare of sex workers in India. It aims to empower marginalized women, combat social stigma, and provide support through educational and vocational training programs. One of its key initiatives is the Newsletter named *Jugnū* which allows marginalized voices from Chaturbhuj Sthān to vocalize their stories and challenges.

The Urdu word *Jugnū* literally means a glow-worm or a firefly. While the name of the Newsletter has been interpreted variedly by different sources, Nasīma Khatūn clarifies that there was no significant explanatory idea that led to the Newsletter’s nomenclature. She says that *Jugnū* appeared to be a sweet name that aligned with the two or three-syllabic names of the-then popular comic viz., Nandan, Champak and Tinkle in the Hindi speaking belt of northern India. The significance of the name was realized much later when its popularity grew, and people started pointing out how *Jugnū* was the luminous light that shined from the dark areas of the society. Khatoon admits the significance of the nomenclature as ‘a sweet unintended coincidence.’

*Jugnū* aims to amplify the voices and experiences of marginalized communities, particularly the children of sex workers in Chaturbhuj Sthān. It seeks to empower readers by raising awareness about the rights, challenges, and achievements of these groups, fostering a sense of community and solidarity. The Newsletter serves as an advocacy tool, educating the public about social issues and promoting systemic change. It often highlights the work of activists and organizations addressing these issues. ‘Parcham,’ through *Jugnū*, advances its mission of promoting gender equality, social justice, and the rights of residents and workers in Bihar’s red-light areas, especially Chaturbhuj Sthān. The organization supports the production and dissemination of *Jugnū*, ensuring its accessibility to a broad audience. *Jugnū* is significant for providing a platform for voices often silenced or overlooked in mainstream discourse, highlighting the lived experiences of subaltern communities. By featuring stories of resilience and advocacy, *Jugnū* acts as a catalyst for social change, motivating readers to engage in and support the cause of justice and equality. *Jugnū* transcends the role of a Newsletter, serving as a powerful instrument for empowerment, education, and advocacy, aligned with missions and values of ‘Parcham.’ Through its content, *Jugnū* fosters a more just and equitable society by amplifying marginalized voices.

The idea of publishing *Jugnū* was conceived in 2002 and one of its earliest extant copies dates back to its fourth edition published in July 2005. The said edition is eight pages chronicle and printed on both sides of papers. The other editions that could be retrieved during the course of this research includes the ones published in December 2007, February 2009, August 2009, September 2021, January 2022 and August 2022. While the contributors of *Jugnū* have varied over time, the early editions of the Newsletter were edited by a volunteer from Chaturbhuj Sthān named Ms. Nikhat. *Jugnū* is a Hindi or rather Hindustani Newsletter wherein every piece of writing as well as drawing is handmade. The script used is Devanagari, while the words used are amalgamation of Hindi, Urdu and occasionally of English. This ensures maximum accessibility of information amongst the targeted readers of the community. Khatoon explains the emergence of the Newsletter as follows:

*Jugnū* was born out of fear. It was started so that their (sex workers') words could be said as they are meant and not the way others interpret it. Grammar wasn't important, the ideas were. The four-page handwritten magazine has now evolved into 36-page printed magazine. *Jugnū* became a medium to break the caste barriers. *Jugnū* actually transformed several lives (Khatoon, 2024).

The texts are published in the contributor's handwriting, adding antiquity and genuineness to the sources. They convey the unique personality of each of the writer through their handwriting style, making it more personal and intimate. The effort and time invested in handwriting something suggest a higher level of intention and sincerity which can be perceived as more authentic. Each handwritten text—including fiction, nonfiction and poetry—is unique with individual variations and imperfections that are absent in mass-produced typed or printed text, adding to its authenticity.

The cover of all the editions of *Jugnū* is manually designed with handmade sketches of musical instruments and *ghungarūs* (ankle bells), both of which are symbolic representations of the performance art and culture associated with the *tawaif* tradition in India. Musical instruments like *tablā*, *hārmōnium* and *sitār* were crucial in *tawaif* households, enhancing their performances and establishing their cultural status. The *tablā* provides the rhythmic foundation for music and dance, while the harmonium and sitar added melodic depth. In earlier times, these instruments helped preserve classical Indian music traditions, elevated the *tawaifs'* status, and attracted high-profile patrons. *Ghungarūs* are equally crucial in the representation of *tawaifs* as classical dancers in India, serving both practical and symbolic purposes. Practically, they aid in maintaining rhythm, provide auditory feedback, and enhance the visual and auditory appeal of the dance. Symbolically, *ghungarūs* are tied to sacred rituals, represent a connection to the earth, signify cultural identity, and mark a performer's proficiency and achievement. However, in the case of *tawaifs*, the *ghungarūs* often also symbolize their imprisonment. With severe complexities regarding the laws that modulate the practice of sex work in India, many sex workers in Chaturbhuj Sthān camouflage under the *tawaif* identity to prevent themselves from public scrutiny. Meanwhile, there are also some age-old *tawaifs* who strive to keep the cultural tradition alive by performing *mujra* (a traditional form of dance performed by *tawaifs* at *mehfils* (gatherings) and private chambers of wealthy patrons on a daily basis to earn their livelihood. They are often accompanied by *ustads* (the music maestros), who play *tablā*, *hārmōnium* and *sitār* during their performance.<sup>4</sup>

Even in the modern times, *ghungarūs* and the musical instruments remain integral to the artistic identity and cultural influence of the *tawaifs*. The hand-drawn sketches of multiple *ghungarūs* and musical instruments on the cover of the Newsletter tend to leave a deep impact on viewers due to their uniqueness, authenticity, and ability to convey personal touch and emotions. Though the drawings are conceivably the result of lack of means to produce digitalised designs, they succeed to build stronger emotional connections. Hand-drawn images on the cover as well as inside some editions of the Newsletter also allow for greater artistic expression and reflect cultural and personal contexts that resonate deeply. Their originality and the viewer's increased engagement with the details contribute to a more personalized and impactful experience compared to the often-generic feel of a professionally designed cover page.



*Jugnū* (July 2005) features the columns titled *Sūchṇā* (Information/Notice), *Akhbārōn Sē* (From the Newspapers), *Hamārē Sapnē* (Our Dreams), *Anubhav* (Experience), *Sex Work/Dhaṇḍhā Karṇē Sē Sambandhi Kāṇūn* (Laws Related to Sex Work/Business) and *Javāb Dō* (Respond). Some of these segments became a prominent feature of many editions of the Newsletter, developing a systematic approach towards conceivability and execution of *Jugnū*. As can be observed from the titles, *Jugnū* is a blend of informative data and creative flow of ideas.

By disseminating information regarding legal rights, social services, and protections, the recurring columns like *Sūchṇā* and *Akhbārōn Sē* undertake the responsibility of enhancing the understanding of entitlements and available mechanisms for justice and support to the residents and workers of Chaturbhuj Sthān. In different editions of *Jugnū*, one can find information about varied matters of importance such as constitutional rights, alarming rise of foeticide, consequences of drug abuse, domestic violence, child labour, worldwide discrimination against the marginalized communities, complexities of ITPA, etc., penned down in explainable manner by reliable sources. Awareness of successful legal cases, reforms, and advocacy initiatives hold the potential to motivate individuals from these communities to assert their rights, engage in activism, or seek assistance. *Jugnū*'s coverage of issues affecting the marginalized groups highlight their challenges and achievements, fostering a sense of identity and belonging while promoting broader societal recognition and understanding. The selective clippings of news reports published in *Jugnū* serve as an educational tool that offer insights into the experiences of others in similar circumstances, thereby expanding the community's knowledge base and resources.

The segment *Anubhav* (Experience) of *Jugnū* presents some extremely intimate details of the lived experiences of Chaturbhuj Sthān' people who have witnessed its evolution as a red-light district. The following excerpt penned down by the then District Project Officer, Mr. Jeevan Kumar in the July 2005 edition of *Jugnū* is noteworthy:

I still remember my childhood when there used to be a dancer in my village – Meena. We used to call her aunt. Back then, she was acknowledged for her art, not her body. I still remember her role of 'Basanti' in the play 'Sholay'. Like a respectable lady, she used to come to our house and also shared happiness and sorrow. With her death, a chapter came to an end. Both her daughters had to go out in search of employment, where they were compelled to put their bodies ahead of their art<sup>5</sup> (Kumar, 2005), (trans. Author).

Such recollections present the rarely recorded evidence of lived history of the *tawaifs* and the shift of perspective towards their professions. Such writings back up the oral narratives that usually get passed on from one generation to another within the *tawaif* communities or the ones associated with them. *Jugnū* also presents the accounts of people from neighbouring areas and the problems being faced by their families, that many locals may resonate with and learn from. Another piece of writing titled *Pehchaani Basti ke Bechehra Jeevan* (Unknown Faces of the Well-Known Community), discusses the case of Anup, along with many others, who was born in Chaturbhuj Sthān and worked as Medical Representative. He expresses the continuous dilemma that he struggles with due to his residence in a red-light area.

He says, "It is not that people do not know that I live in this community, but it is a matter of my address. I live with a burden that I am not living by telling the truth, but I do not have the courage to say that yes,

I am a child of the red-light area. People will look at me with contempt; my job will be lost... How often have people said hateful and disrespectful things about this township in front of me; when they utter dirty things, I feel like protesting screamingly. I want to ask them what is it that I lack; do I not talk to the doctor better than you! But this scream remains stuck in the throat<sup>1</sup>” (Dev, 2009: 8), (trans. Author).

This account presents the unfortunate experience of Mr. Anup that he has to unwantedly go through on a regular basis. His testimony is a cry for appeal. He does not ask for any additional benefits, but mere independence to exist without any guilt and shame. His story highlights the self-alienation that so many residents and workers of Chaturbhuj Sthān have to undergo on a daily basis just because they come from a red-light area. Though the recognition of labour via the label of ‘sex work’ instils some hope for people of Chaturbhuj Sthān, the lack of sensitivity of society towards them keeps empowering the already dominant perceptions that stigmatize the sex workers as well as their families alike. It may be noted that for the families of sex workers in Chaturbhuj Sthān, a poignant self-alienation emerges when they face the contrast between their lives and others. Their trauma gets bourgeoned since they are often kept away from equal and unbiased work opportunities and viewed as the ‘other’ citizens in everyday life based on their background. Their position in society and culture illustrates the gendered complexities of caste and class, as they struggle for justified treatment of their othered self-image. The position of families of sex workers in Chaturbhuj Sthān may be viewed through Marxist lenses where they face alienation from the society in economic, social, political, human as well as ideological domains. They often find themselves misfit in the society not only because of evils in society but also socially subjugated stigma and distress within them. The fact that majority of sex workers in Chaturbhuj Sthān come from backward castes is not merely accidental but schematic of caste system which excludes some from having equal opportunity (Jha, 2016). The burden of shame is put on the families of sex workers in such a way that their feeling of belongingness to a community and perception about their independent selves begins to curl up.

The same article quoted above goes on to discuss the multifaceted problems that are faced by the residents and workers of Chaturbhuj Sthān on a daily basis. It includes multiple viewpoints and occasions that precisely portray the condition of the area. The writer Sanjay Dev points out the discontent that people of the community hold against NGOs because of their ingenuine and superficial role in bringing any change in their lives. It is not only difficult but extremely rare to find written records of the complexities of these issues unless it comes from a person or a source who has been an active participant of these atrocities. *Jugnū*, therefore, becomes an unparalleled medium to record and bring these stories to attention. The writings published in *Jugnū* are scintillating, to say the least. It is assertive that they be brought into public domain and circulated more widely.

Writing can be a powerful form of resistance in documenting oppression, challenging dominant narratives and empowering marginalized voices. *Jugnū* became a medium for people to tell their stories in a truthful manner. Being associated with this Newsletter gradually became a badge of honour for many oppressed voices that had neither found a fair representation in media nor an authentic medium of expression elsewhere. Many contributors

recount their feelings of pride and elevation after their association with Nasīma Khatūn and *Jugnū* particularly via their letters to the editor. They narrate their accounts of being associated with Nasīma Khatūn and realizing the transformative abilities that they hold within. Via the segments titled *Hamārē Sapnē* (Our Dreams) and *Bīṭiyā Kī Chīṭhiyān* (Letters from the Daughters), *Jugnū* takes the readers into aspirational world of Chaturbhuj Sthān's children and young adults who dream to pursue quality education and grab respectable work opportunities. Their dream professions variedly range from joining the Indian Administrative Services to becoming a police inspector, a doctor or a tattoo artist. In their notes, the children also mention the difficulties that have faced in their lives and their determination of still going on. While these letters are filled with stories of courage and determination, they also host a series of hurtful circumstance faced by the youngsters of Chaturbhuj Sthān. A segment from one of the letters by a 13-year-old girl Mamta Praveen, published in August 2009 edition of *Jugnū* is mentioned below:

My problem is that I want to pursue further studies but my mother is a sex worker. She does business. She takes care of my and my brother's expenses with the money that she earns from her work. And also runs the house. I don't have father. He has passed away. And after his demise, my mother is our only support. My mother is in jail because of another man and she is not getting bail (Praveen, 2009), (trans. Author).

Mamta Praveen's cry for her mother reaches the society via *Jugnū*. At the age of thirteen, instead of focussing on her studies, she is forced into painful circumstances that are beyond the bounds of disappointment and stigma. She ends her letter with a hope to receive help regarding her mother's release from the prison.

Another recurrent column of the Newsletter is dedicated to poetry and creative writing. This act of self-expression allows the contributors of this Newsletter to practice their rightful empowerment and build a sense of identity and solidarity amongst each other. The poems, in particular, often depict the contrasting life experiences, difficult circumstances and a hope of betterment and salvation. The poem *Phūl Aur Kāñṭā* (Flowers and Thorns), published in July 2005 edition, by a male child named Ali discusses how everyone is born alike but grows out differently. Another poem authored by Mr. Sunil Kumar and published in December 2006 edition, is titled *Mitti Kā Dīp Jalāo* (Light an Earthen Lamp), calls for solidarity and urges the readers to keep their hopes alive. Another poem anonymously published in *Jugnū* in February 2009, highlights the disparities in the society based on one's religion. The beginning and the end of a poem from the September 2021 edition of *Jugnū* titled *Haq* (Rights), reads thus:

The little hands that deserved **pen**  
could only receive the warmth of blisters.  
Those who had dreams of **flying** in the sky,  
landed in the world of cages.  
Those who had to be groomed with the essence of love,  
received cruel treatment.  
...  
No more playing with the lives of these innocents.  
Let's break all those cages together  
where this **world of dreams** is imprisoned.  
(trans. Author).

It is noteworthy that *Jugnū* acts more than a mere Newsletter since it creates the space where all such experiences, expressions and desires unite the community together. The Newsletter is extremely post-modern in its approach which houses all the experiments that the contributors wish to explore with their art. In the poem quoted above, for instance, the anonymous poet takes the creative liberty to highlight certain keywords by underlining them and lettering them in bold font. These terms include, *Haq* (right), *kalam* (pen), *sapno* (dreams), *laqīren* (fate lines) and *sansār milā* (world found). These terms scream out of the pages with their boldness and hit the reader with the urgent demand of attention and efforts so that no further lives could be lost to unfulfilled dreams of children from red-light areas.

As discussed above, different texts published in the Newsletter cover wide range of experiences and expressions. The literary and visual contributions come from people of all ages, genders, castes and classes alike. Unlike the misinformed depiction of red-light areas in mainstream media, *Jugnū* manages to maintain its unprejudiced stance. The articles and stories are often recorded as it is, without being overly edited or romanticized. The rawness of the handmade letters and sketches bring forth the individual's lived experiences in an uncorrupted and unmanipulated form. They provide an insight into the ordinary lives of the people of Chaturbhuj Sthān with utmost simplicity. Unfortunately, these stories remain mostly unacknowledged due to many logistical challenges faced by *Jugnū*.

Though it has almost been two decades since *Jugnū* was first produced, its infrequent publication reflects the difficulties in securing consistent financial support. Insufficient donations have led to delays or gaps in the publication schedule. The resource constraints have also affected the Newsletter's ability to cover operational costs, such as printing, photocopying, distribution, and staff salaries. As a result, there are only a handful of editions of *Jugnū* available today. Furthermore, the volatile financial support has also hampered the accessibility of the Newsletter. As of now, there is a dearth of information regarding *Jugnū* on internet as well as in offline reading sites and spaces. Though some editions have been preserved as softcopies, there is an absence of platform to showcase or monetize them.

*Jugnū* faces an additional challenge since it comes from the community that has been stigmatized and looked down upon for a long time now. Since the publication of each edition requires support and funding, there is little scope of compensating the contributors financially. Amidst dearth of work opportunities, many contributors have also chosen to shift to full time professions that pay them well. It is also important to note that since *Jugnū* was published and distributed manually, there is a limited audience base of the Newsletter. Variability in donations and irregular publishing schedules have further diminished the scope of the Newsletter in the present times by directly affecting the reader engagement and retention.

Though the cost of the Newsletter per copy has risen from single digit to double digits in Indian currency, the overall income barely generates any profits. Insufficient revenue, lack of paid advertisements, high production costs, funding shortages and economic downturns clearly suggest that *Jugnū*'s survival over the past two decades can solely be credited to Nasīma Khatūn's noble intent and commitment to the cause. Amidst logistical challenges

such as difficulties in managing contributors, editorial processes, and distribution networks, the preservation of the remaining editions of *Jugnū* and continuation of publication of further editions require immediate attention from research scholars and concerned authorities.

## CONCLUSION

Chaturbhuj Sthān is a historically significant area that embodies the cultural heritage of *tawaifs* while also highlighting the social and economic challenges faced by marginalized communities in India. Ongoing efforts aim to support and uplift the residents, preserving their cultural identity and providing better opportunities for future generations. Nasīma Khatūn's initiatives have significantly improved the quality of life for sex workers and have shifted societal perceptions. Via her organization 'Parcham' and the Newsletter *Jugnū*, her legacy continues to impact sex workers in India, embodying courage, compassion, and the pursuit of equality and justice for marginalized individuals.

*Jugnū* features stories and personal experiences of individuals from marginalized communities, offering them a platform to share their narratives in their own words. The Newsletter covers a wide range of topics, including legal rights, social justice, health, and education. It aims to provide comprehensive information and resources that can help readers navigate their challenges. *Jugnū* also includes cultural and artistic content such as poetry, artwork, and essays, celebrating the creativity and resilience of its contributors. By providing a space for dialogue and exchange, *Jugnū* helps to build a supportive community among its readers. It encourages collective action and mutual support. The Newsletter plays a crucial role in raising the visibility of marginalized voices and issues, helping to challenge stereotypes and misconceptions.

As a Newsletter by the marginalized and of the marginalized, *Jugnū* creates emotional connections between readers and the subjects of the writing. By fostering empathy, the contributors of the Newsletter have made an attempt to bridge the cultural and social divides, encouraging readers to understand and support causes they might otherwise overlook. Through storytelling, sketches, poetry, and other forms, *Jugnū* raised awareness about social issues, injustices, and human rights violations. When the act of writing itself becomes a form of rebellion, there emerges fair possibilities to mobilize public opinion and inspire collective action for change. An accessible medium like *Jugnū* carries the potential to serve as a historical record of oppression and injustice, preserving the experiences and voices of marginalized groups. This documentation can be used to educate future generations and prevent the erasure of these experiences. It counters the dominant narratives that perpetuate stereotypes and misinformation. By presenting alternative perspectives and truths, the contributors of *Jugnū* hold the capacity to challenge and deconstruct oppressive and biased ideologies. *Jugnū* has the potential to galvanize community action by exposing injustices and mobilizing public opinion, thereby exerting pressure on policymakers and institutions to address these issues.



## Notes

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- चतुर्भुज स्थान की महिलाओं ने यह मेरा शौक नहीं मजबूरी है मुजफ्फरपुर के बदनाम गलियों का सच्चाई क्या (youtube.com)
- आज भी मुझे बचपन का वो दिन याद है जब मेरे गाँव में एक नर्तकी हुआ करती थीं- मीना। हम लोग उन्हें मौसी कहकर बुलाया करते थे। तब उनकी कला की पूछ होती थी, ना कि जिस्म की। 'शोले' नाटक में 'बसंती' का अभिनय आज भी याद है मुझे। एक सम्मानित महिला की तरह वह हम लोगों के घर आया करती थी तथा सुख दुख भी बाँटती थी। उनकी मृत्यु के साथ ही एक अध्याय का अंत हो गया। उनकी दोनों बेटियों को रोजगार की तलाश में बाहर जाना पड़ा, वहीं जहाँ कला की नहीं बल्कि जिस्म के नुमाइशों उनकी मजबूरियों की बाट जो रहे थे (Kumar, 2005).
- कहता है “ऐसा भी नहीं है कि लोग यह नहीं जानते कि इस बस्ती में रहता हूँ लेकिन गोल मोल सी रहती है मेरे पते की बाता एक बोझ लेकर जीता हूँ कि सच बोलकर नहीं जी रहा लेकिन हिम्मत नहीं होती कहने की कि हाँ, मैं रेडलाइट एरिया कि संतान हूँ। लोग हिकारत से देखेंगे, नौकरी चली जाएगी...कितनी बार मेरे साथ ही लोग इस बस्ती के बारे में जब घृणा-अपमान से भरी, गन्दी बातें बोलते हैं तो मन चीखकर विरोध करने को करता है। पूछना चाहता हूँ कि बताओ क्या कमी है, तुमसे बेहतर तरीके से डॉक्टर से बात करता हूँ कि नहीं! लेकिन यह चीख गले में अटक कर रह जाती है” (Dev, 2009: 8).
- मेरी समस्या है कि मैं और पढ़ना चाहती हूँ लेकिन मेरी माँ एक पेशावरक औरत है। वो धंधा करती है। उससे जो पैसा आता है वो उससे मेरा और मेरे भाई का खर्च उठाती है। और घर भी चलाती है। मेरे अब्बा नहीं है। वो गुजर चुके हैं। और अब्बा के गुजरने के बाद माँ ही हम लोगों का सहारा है। मेरी माँ एक दूसरे आदमी के कारण जेल में हैं और उसका बेल नहीं हो रहा है। (Praveen, 2009).
- जिन नन्हे हाथों का हक था कलम  
उन्हें छालों का बस प्यार मिला  
जिन सपनों को था आसमान में उड़ना  
उन्हें पिंजड़े का संसार मिला  
जिनको सींचना था प्यार के जल से  
उन्हें क्रूरता का व्यवहार मिला  
...  
अब और न इस मासूमों की जिंदगी से खिलवाड़ हो  
तोड़ दे मिलकर हर वो पिंजड़ा  
जिसमें कैद इन सपनों का संसार मिला

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