Child-Sex Tourism, HIV/AIDS, and Social Justice in India

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And because I am happy and dance and sing, they think they have done me no injury.

—William Blake, Songs of Experience

Basanti is fourteen years old. But she has probably seen more of the world than most adults—she is the victim of child-sex tourism in India. When the National Human Rights Commission found her, she told them that she had been raped twenty-two times by different men the previous night.

Asha used to sweep the floor under people’s feet on trains in Mumbai. After sweeping, she begged passengers for a tip. She would climb on a train at one station, sweep, beg, and get off at another station. That was Asha’s daily itinerary until her last day a few years later. She was climbing off a train when her clothing got caught. She was dragged to her death. “I don’t want to die like Asha, I am going to Goa where tourists will pay for sex,” said Bina, Asha’s sister.

The vignettes captured above raise a number of significant questions involving child-sex tourism in India: “Why are these children so unlucky?” and “What has the Indian government done so far to stop this menace?” These simple questions obtain ever more complex answers. According to the National Human Rights Commission,

India has the distinction of the largest number of working children in the world today. And, the abuse of both male and female children by tourists has acquired serious dimensions. Unlike Sri Lanka and Thailand, this problem has not been seriously tackled or discussed openly in India and has remained more or less shrouded in secrecy, making the likelihood of child abusers being caught and punished very low. The silence of the community and its unwillingness to speak out and openly discuss the issue has further compounded the problem.

Moreover, the widely held but unsubstantiated claim that Asian people are genetically immune to the disease prevails throughout the population, leading to unprotected sexual encounters. This poses a serious concern as
the nexus between poverty, HIV, and the trafficking of children is creating insecurity that threatens the lives of the victims and further impoverishes the poor. The psychological impacts upon the victims are hard to comprehend as they suffer from a myriad of emotional, physical, and economic problems.

There are many cultural reasons for the persistence of child labor in India. An expectation that children should contribute to the socioeconomic survival of the family and community, as well as the existence of large families, land scarcity, and inadequate enforcement of labor laws are contributing factors to this problem. Basu clarified, in urban areas, following the migration of families to overpopulated cities, the disintegration of such families due to alcoholism and unemployment often results in a proliferation of children living on the street, becoming laborers, and entering into prostitution. Weiner argued that it is not the economic situation but a widely shared belief system based on religion that emphasizes hierarchy and sees education as a tool of maintaining that hierarchy, which is responsible for the ills of child labor in India. In a similar vein, Amartya Sen lamented,

> It is not economic poverty but rather political poverty that is depriving children their rights to education and pushing them to the labor force . . . our actions should aim at attacking this political poverty to bring education to the reach of children and free child domestic workers from the bondage.

Although child labor is an age-old phenomenon, there has been little formal analysis of this issue and as Basu emphasized, “theoretical writings on the subject are relatively few.”

By the year 2010, there will be more people living with HIV in India than the entire continent of Africa. Due to the impoverished socioeconomic conditions that prevail in many parts of India, children are often bought from poor families or kidnapped while begging and forced into sexual activities with tourists for meager amounts. Most of these unfortunate children originate from more than 150 million Indians who continue to live under impoverished conditions, surviving on less than $0.10 a day. A recent study conducted by the Indian Institute of Social Sciences unraveled that “many children had sex with a varied range of foreign tourists for Rs.50 [$1] in Kerala where foreign tourists stay in houseboats making houseboat sex tourism a new and thriving concept.” India’s leading newspaper, the *Times of India*, commented on the sexual exploitation of children more than a decade ago:

> Their playground is the brothel; they are the playthings and toys of lust. India reportedly has the world’s largest concentration of child prostitutes, accounting for 1 in every 4 of the global number. India’s children are no strangers to exploitation, but none of it is as brutish as the terror to which these particularly unfortunate children have been subjected. Raped at 10, tortured and starved into submission at 11, abortion at 12 and sexually violated 10 times a day till AIDS throws them onto the streets.
The so-called sex tourism in countries of the third world repeatedly makes headlines; still it has not, as yet, generated any sustained social science inquiry. Few scholars have acknowledged the significance of sex tourism, much less analyzed the consequences involved. This research note is part of a larger project that uses a multi-disciplinary perspective to understand the relationship between tourism and neocolonialism and the role of child-sex tourism in the transmission of HIV/AIDS. The theoretical perspective of the project is derived from Edward Said’s seminal work, *Orientalism*, and Michel Foucault’s concept of *Power*, keeping in mind that this is an area where the primary reason for theorizing is ultimately to influence policy.

Authors have well documented how the Western media, through a colonial prism, creates fantasies by marketing third world women as “exotic,” “seductive,” and “sensuous,” to be enjoyed by Western tourists. Obviously, dreams are a critical element in the marketing process, and the fabrication of tourist dreams is central to the promotion of the third world as an exotic tourism destination. As a result, Western tourists are attracted to these destinations by tourism promotions, which promise it as a place where fantasies may be fulfilled. Thus, “Western men flock to red-light districts in poor countries and often find themselves surrounded by coquettish girls laughingly tugging them toward the brothels.” Ryan has commented on this aspect—how modern sex tourists seek out experiences in the third world countries in order to fill what they consider to be a deficiency in themselves or their home culture. Cohen argued, “If the culturally sanctioned mode of travel of the modern tourist has been that of the serious quest for authenticity, the mode of the post-modern tourist is that of a playful search for enjoyment.” Recently, Cabezas explored the dynamics of the global sex industry, more specifically how globalization creates the conditions within which sexual acts and sexualized identities develop. Despite all these outstanding studies, research has not focused on yet another vulnerable and silenced population: the children in these developing countries. Child-sex tourism has not been seen as one for serious intellectual investigation. Moreover, scholars have paid little attention to the role of tourism in the transmission of HIV/AIDS.

The tourism industry insistently represents India as the West’s pleasure periphery to rekindle the Western tourists’ “imperialist nostalgia” as “the subalterns cannot speak!” Who better than India to provide Western tourists with their “mythical Utopias”? Thus, during their imperial travel, the tourists make the children sex commodities. This resembles colonial times and emphasizes that colonialism is still invasive in the twenty-first century. As Chomsky claimed, “the conquest continues.” But this is a denial of human dignity. The complex issues emerging from the interface of child-sex tourism and HIV/AIDS clearly deserve a systematic in-depth study. Sexual exploitation of children must be eradicated so that the children will no longer suffer such great injustices. Obviously, the sheer volume of tourist flows and expenditure
associated with sex tourism calls for more serious research and for its recognition, which would mitigate the scourge of child-sex tourism and HIV/AIDS.

RECOMMENDED READINGS


