



Is Prostitution as a Caste Occupation in Transition? A Case of Dommaris in Telangana

VIJAY KORRA, SANTHOSH GUGULOTHU & TARUN NAIK

VIJAYKORRA@GMAIL.COM; SANTHOSHGUGULOTH4@GMAIL.COM;
TARUNNOFFICIAL@GMAIL.COM

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Introduction

Caste in India is a socio-hierarchical construct that originates from one's occupation pursued for a living. Its unique and distinct nature plays a pivotal role, although in disguised or unceremonious ways. The Domhari is a caste in Telangana whose occupation was acrobatic performance, singing, rope dancing, and performing circus but later prostitution became their main source of income and livelihood. Besides, the community was into making baskets, mats, and combs. The "Domhari" community can be traced in other parts of the country with varied nomenclature such as Dom, Domra, Domba, Domaka, Dommara, and Dombara (Varalaxmi 2005).

Dommaris were classified as "Criminal Tribes" and brought under the Criminal Tribes Act (CTA) of 1871 by the British colonial state due to the wandering nature of their occupation. Hundreds of communities whose occupations required movements from one place to the other were declared born criminals and kept under British-controlled camps to reform, rehabilitate, and civilize them. However, they were de-notified



of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 in 1952 after India attained independence from British colonial rule. Since then, the ex-criminal tribes have been called De-notified Tribes (DNTs) in India. Consequently, the Dommari community is placed in the list of Other Backward Classes (OBC) category in Telangana (Korra 2019, chapter 4). The Dommari community shares a lifestyle like the Gypsies and is possibly connected to the Doms of North India. However, with time, their traditional occupation lost relevance due to which survival has become difficult hence their women took up prostitution to support the family. This has steadily become their main occupation and girls reaching puberty join the profession after performing certain caste-based rituals (Lalitha 1989).

Dommari is not the only community that is involved in commercial prostitution. Several other communities such as "Nat", "Badia", "Kanjar", and "Banchada" engage in traditional or caste occupation of prostitution as means of support and subsistence. In these communities, women are the main bread-earner while men play the role of pimps. A study on the "Nat" community in Rajasthan whose women earlier used to engage in rope dancing and acrobats but later shifted to commercial prostitution due to lack of demand and insufficient income from the occupation. It further highlighted a ritual for girls who are entering the profession called "Nath Utarna", which means the removal of the nose ring by the client who pays Rs.10,000 to Rs.25,000. Several Nat women migrate to other cities like Mumbai for employment as bar dancers. The status of the women engaging in prostitution is lower than that of married women (Swarankar 2002).

Similarly, the Kanjar community in the Alwar district of Rajasthan is into singing, dancing, and entertaining the public in return for cash and kindness. Later, British administrators and bureaucrats labeled them as criminals but recruited their women to entertain and thereafter forced them for sexual pleasure. This continued for several decades resulting in prostitution as a full-fledged traditional occupation (Dayal 2021). The girl would decide whether to marry or engage in "Dhandha" (business) soon after puberty. If she chooses to enter prostitution, she will be given rigorous training for almost 2 to 3 years, during which she will be taught singing, dancing, communication, bargaining skills with clients, tips for healthy sexual practice, etc. This training is called "three" (ibid.). The other community, named "Bedia" in Madhya Pradesh, had a similar occupation and was notified as a criminal tribe by the British, but the community later opted for prostitution. In this community, only males were allowed to marry from other castes by paying the bride price, whereas females were forced into prostitution (Rana et al. 2020).



In the Bedia community, the whole family, including men, depends on the female's earnings from prostitution. Similarly, the Banchhada community in Madhya Pradesh has been engaging in prostitution for generations. Women are numerically dominant in the community. The news article highlights that most of the community members are purchasing girl children from various cities and forcing them into prostitution. The total population of the Banchhada community which is spread over 75 villages in three districts namely Ratlam, Mandsaur, and Neemuch of Madhya Pradesh is around 23,000, of which about 65 percent are women indicating the importance of women in the community (*Times of India* 2018). A similar incident came up in the Yadadri Bhongir district of Telangana, where the Dommari community people were arrested for running brothel houses and giving hormonal injections to girls imported from other areas. However, 112 families of the Dommari community had accepted to leave the profession, if the government offered them good rehabilitation and resettlement package (Reddy 2016).

The literature shows that de-notified tribal communities who practice prostitution as their traditional or caste occupation have shared their histories. Initially, they used to entertain the landlords, local rulers, and officers under British colonial rule and local Nizam rule (Rana et al. 2020; Dayal 2020). However, post-independence, the practice of prostitution continued among these communities. It is because their former acrobatic occupation lacked demand, and they lacked other skills hence continuing prostitution to earn income, subsistence, and maintenance.

Dommari of Telangana

Dommaris are sparsely spread across Medchal-Malkajgiri, Hyderabad, Jangaon, Nalgonda, Warangal, Karimnagar, and other major temple towns of Telangana. The conservative population of the community ranges between 13000 and 15000 wherein females are outnumbered by their male counterparts. They speak Dommera Bhasha which blends with Marathi, Hindi, and Urdu, and are fluent in Telugu. They together celebrate Hindu and community festivals with goat sacrifice, non-veg food, and alcohol consumption. However, the community is backward in terms of education, employment, and socio-economic conditions and therefore placed under the OBC-A reservation category in the state. The community claims that earlier they were listed under the ST category but later on they were shifted to OBC-A for unknown reasons when Late Shri. Neleem Sanjeeva Reddy was the Chief Minister of the combined Andhra Pradesh. The Dommara women in Telangana have been traditionally engaged in prostitution since long ago. Prostitution is practiced



along with acrobatic performances, but later one completely vanished these days (Lalitha 1989).

Today there are more than 90 percent of women from the community in Telangana engage in the traditional occupation of prostitution for their survival and livelihood. But sporadic instances of shifting from prostitution to other occupations like agriculture, casual labour, auto-taxi driving, street vendors, petty trade, etc., are taking place. The educated youth are getting into different jobs like software engineers, managers, etc. in the private sector but there seem to be few government employees among them. This transition is to escape the ill-treatment and humiliation associated with the practice of prostitution as a traditional occupation. This shift indicates the evolving dynamics within the community and underlying factors that influence individuals' decisions to leave their traditional means of livelihood. Against this backdrop, this research piece explores the practice of prostitution as a traditional occupation, its associated challenges, living standards, reasons for abandoning the profession, and the subsequent changes in social dynamics within the community and perceptions of others in particular, and society in general, towards the Dommari community.

Data and methodology

This paper is based on primary data collected from the Dommari households residing in Vangapahad and Siddapur villages in Hasanparthy Mandal of Warangal-Urban district in Telangana. The villages were purposively selected due to the significant concentration of Dommari households engaged in prostitution as their traditional occupation. A total of 75 households 50 from Vangapahad and 25 from Siddapur were randomly selected for collecting household data that range from demographic particulars to occupation, education, employment, economic conditions, occupational challenges encountered by them, stigma, and perceptions of their villagers and nearby villages about their traditional occupation of prostitution. To collect data a comprehensive household questionnaire was deployed. The final survey was executed in March and April 2024. The household data was randomly collected from the women members of the family who are active in pursuing the profession.

This apart, Focused Group Discussions and in-depth interviews have been conducted with the community leaders, women involved in prostitution, and the youth of the community. The interviews were also conducted with members belonging to other communities to understand their perception of the Dommari. The interviewees include elderly women who are retired now from their occupations, women currently



involved in prostitution, those who are not in the profession, and lastly community leaders and youth. Consent of the elders and women was taken in advance and multiple visits to the villages based on the respondent's availability and convenient time were made. This article is divided into six sections including the introduction. The second section is about a brief history of the Dommaris of Telangana. The third section regards the demographic, socio-economic, and occupational status of the community. The fourth section presents case studies. The fifth section brings about health, discrimination, perceptions, and changing scenarios of the Dommari community. The final section is the concluding remarks.

A brief history of the community

The selected villages, Vangapahad and Siddapur, are located at distances of 10km and 16km respectively from the main town of Warangal district. Vangapahad village has a Zilla Parishad Secondary School, while Siddapur has a primary school. According to village Panchayat records, Vangapahad comprises around 1400 families and 5700 population. Of them, 150 families belong to the Dommari community with a population of 600 where the females outnumber their male counterparts. The second village Siddapur consists of around 1200 households. Of them, around 70 households belong to the Dommari community. According to the census of 2011, the literacy rate in these two villages is 60 percent, with male literacy at around 72 percent and female literacy at 49 percent. The sex ratio in Vangapahad village is 1053 females per 1000 males, while in Siddapur village, it is 990 females per 1000 males.

The community elders and leaders, while interviewing, narrated to the authors about how their community had entered the profession of prostitution. As the narrative goes, their ancestors were into acrobatics, rope walking, dancing, circus, and other entertainment forms. This occupation is similar to that of Bedia, Nat, Kanjar, and other nomadic communities spread across North India. It is meant to entertain the public and seek alms, both in cash and kind form, for their survival. It requires traveling from one village to another to showcase various traditional acrobatic skills to the public and seek alms from them.

However, a significant shift occurred when the community members performed and entertained the officers during the rule of the Nizam of Hyderabad until 1949. Upon observing them, the officers, zamindars, landlords, and influential individuals invited them to stay in the village for an extended period and hired their women for sexual pleasure. This expansion of Dommari women's services to a wide range of higher social



groups eventually resulted in the adoption of prostitution as an easy source of earning money. Second, the shift was also caused by worsening financial conditions of the community whose earnings from the entertaining occupation dwindled.

The takers for their mode of entertainment have drastically come down hence women shifted permanently towards prostitution. This shift has taken place steadily over the decades, as a result, many women continued to engage in prostitution and made it their caste occupation. Thus, prostitution replaced their initial occupation of acrobatics. Now many of the families in the community still rely upon and derive their prime income from the profession. Currently, in the study villages i.e. Vangapahad and Siddapur, there are around 60.4 percent and 70.0 percent of the households engage in prostitution respectively. They relate themselves to the Doms in North India and Reddy Dommara of Andhra Pradesh, the elders concluded by narrating their history.

Present situation

The emergence of prostitution as a full-fledged profession has resulted in the elimination of the traditional marriage system, especially for women. Women who engage in prostitution prefer not to get married but instead opt for consensual relationships with men they like, mostly their clients. They may have children with these men, but no formal marriage is involved, and no commitments or promises are made. In contrast, men get married to women from their community, sometimes from other caste women and act as pimps. As discussed in the previous section, the communities such as Nat, Kanjar, and Banchhada send their girl to other cities as bar dancers and for prostitution. However, in these villages, the women who engage in prostitution would practice at home, where a separate room is dedicated to provide the service.

It is their conviction that sending their girls to cities or other areas is not safe, instead, home gives them a secure feeling and evades a lot many abuses associated with the profession. The community celebrates the birth of a girl child since she is seen as a source of income and could be involved in the occupation. For this very reason, they prefer girl children over a boy. These women usually get up in the morning, and by 10 to 11 a.m., they get ready by wearing attractive clothes and decent make-up to attract clients. Usually, they sit outside their homes, mainly on the roadside. The clients are local individuals, lorry drivers, and people from surrounding towns and villages. They charge 300 to 1000 per client, depending on the woman's prettiness and age.



Socio-economic and occupational status of the Dommari

The household data collected from the field villages reveals that the Dommari community has more of a female (63.6 percent) population than their male (36.4 percent) counterparts. The gap is too far and wide when compared with other social groups in the state because girl preference prevails over boys in the community. Most of them consider females to be the main breadwinners or source of income via prostitution for their livelihood and economic betterment. The occupation itself demands more female members which leads to favoritism towards having a girl child or female family member. Strikingly, below 14 years of age group population among the sample households is just 21 percent while 79 percent are above 15 years indicating that not many in the community enter the traditional marriage system and therefore prefer to have fewer children. For instance, about 30 percent of the sample population is married, an equal percentage of them (30 percent) are unmarried, and close to 34 percent were never entered into wedlock or the traditional marriage system. Further, 6.5 percent of the households account for widowers which is slightly higher than expected (Table 1). Unlike “Kanjars” where the girl must choose whether she wants to join prostitution or get married, in the Dommara community girl is only encouraged to enter prostitution (Dayal 2020).

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Gender	Percentage
Male	36.4%
Female	63.6%
Age	
0-14	21.0%
15-50	79.0%
Marital status	
Married	29.9%
Unmarried	29.9%
Never married	33.8%
Widow	6.5%

Table 1: Basic demographic particulars of the sample population from the study villages; source: Field survey data, 2024.

Every household we surveyed in the study villages resides in their own pucca house. The housing quality appears to be much better as compared with other households in the villages. As 64.4 percent of the sample households reside in pucca houses while 36.6 percent abode in semi-pucca houses in the study villages. The other facilities or amenities like toilets, electricity, television, refrigerators, and liquified gas for cooking display greater access to modern amenities. Better housing and amenities are critical in attracting customers and taking forward their business which in turn assures them a stable, regular, and higher daily



income. A woman called Aruna (name changed) informs the researchers that,

If we do not have better facilities and environment at our home then the customers may not drop at our door, therefore, we are forced to have all the necessary services, which assures us a minimum guaranteed income per day, removes uncertainty and anxiety about meeting our daily needs such as daily consumption, health needs, cosmetics, clothing, and other expenses.

Illiterate	25.7%
Below Primary	25.7%
Primary	15.8%
Upper Primary	13.2%
Secondary	5.3%
Higher Secondary	8.6%
Graduation	4.6%
Post-Graduation	1.3%

Table 2: Educational Status of the Dommari Sample Population.

Most of the members are well-versed in modern lifestyles and have access to gadgets and other modern tech-savvy tools in their day-to-day usage. This does not imply that they are all well-educated but their profession requires them to some extent. For instance, the literacy among the Dommari community is around 74 percent where most of them studied below primary and up to primary levels indicating that the community members have much lower levels of formal education. There are only around 7 percent who studied up to graduation and post-graduation and the rest of them studied up to a higher secondary level.

Poorer levels of education in the community could be attributed to the fact that the profession they pursue forces their children into their traditional caste-based occupation at an early age where immediately after puberty girls enters the profession and boys will begin as pimps. This early-age involvement in the profession gives them the chance to earn more so that they can acquire whatever they want in their life, like houses, cars, etc. However, the centuries-old practice of prostitution has been slowly changing these days thanks to the increased awareness and societal disrespect towards their profession (Table 2).

Occupation	Percentage
Prostitution	53.4%
Own cultivation	26.0%
Agri-labour	13.7%
Govt employee	4.1%
Private employee	2.7%

Table 3: Occupational patterns among the Dommaries in the study villages.



The data with regards to Dommari's occupation demonstrates that not all the households from the community are into the traditional occupation of prostitution thanks to the disinclination towards pursuing or remaining in the profession by the educated new generation. This educated young generation moving away from prostitution and is entering into other dignified occupations and economic activities such as regular employees in the government and private sectors, auto drivers, cab drivers, receptionists, and other urban-centric jobs. The occupational pattern of the sample households in the study villages explains that there are only 53.4 percent of the families engage in and practice their caste-based occupation which is prostitution. In comparison, 26 percent of the households hold land and practice agriculture.

Another 13 percent of them work as daily labourers in and around the study villages, 4 percent work as government employees, and close to 3 percent work in the private sector as regular salaried employees (Table 3). There are officers, managers, bank employees, software employees, teachers, police, and office staff from the community who work in various offices within and outside Telangana. This trend has been picking up slowly and steadily owing to access to school and college education. Parent's determination to educate and settle their children away from their profession is far high and strong which is giving desired results these days.

10-15 day	16.0%
16-20 days	38.0%
21-30 days	46.0%

Table 4: Number of days per month engaged in caste occupation by the sample households.

Among the households that practice the profession (prostitution), a majority of them seem to be engaging in it at least 21 to 30 days a month (46%), 38 percent of them participate in the activity between 16 to 20 days, and the rest of them (16 percent) practice in the traditional occupation between 10 to 15 days (Table 4). It is learned that certain factors influence the number of working days and one such significant aspect is the customer demand on any given day, which is volatile. In other words, uncertainty in getting or attracting customers impacts their number of working days, although different aspects do play a role but in a limited way. Preethi, a woman aged 35 years, who is in the profession, informed the researchers that,

if I do not look good, if I am not in good attire, if I am not maintaining my age, then I may not get customers regularly, unlike those who look beautiful. Second, she continues that as I grow older there will be a decline in customers therefore, I try to work



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every day but sometimes end up with little or no work. My today's earnings ensure my family's tomorrow's future, so I try to work a maximum number of days in any given month.

Annual income	Percentage
<50000	5.4%
50000-1 lakh	11.5%
1-2 lakh	16.2%
2-3 lakh	28.7%
3-4 lakh	28.3%
4-5 lakh	5.4%
>5 lakh	4.5%

Table 5: Annual income earned from caste occupation by the sample households.

The income earned from their traditional profession suggests that there was not much but moderate earnings made by the respondent households. For instance, nearly 29 percent of the sample households earned between Rs. 200,000 to Rs. 300,000 lakhs, 28.3 percent earned between Rs. 300,000 to Rs. 400,000 lakhs, 5.4 percent earned Rs. 400,000 to 500,000 lakhs, and 11.5 percent earned from Rs. 50,000 to Rs. 100,000 per annum. Interestingly, a little over 5 percent of the families earned a meager income from their occupation i.e. less than Rs. 50,000. The occupation doesn't guarantee them a continuous flow of income because it is a business that is driven by the beauty and attractive looks of the service providers that attract customers. The service seekers invariably chose to go with the beautiful women more than others (Table 5).

However, the fact should not be forgotten that the profession they are into invariably receives disrespect, humiliation, and isolation from their villagers, nearby villagers, and other general public. For example, if you ask the general public about the Vangapahad and Siddapur villages, then they evade answering and move away. They feel ashamed of talking about the village and the traditional profession of the Dommari community. In this regard 60 percent of the respondents mentioned that they were disrespected by others and only 30 percent of them who have not into the flesh trade informed that they are not facing any disrespect and discrimination from others, including from their fellow villagers. Prostitution attracts a lot of negative impressions from society and that sometimes leads to verbal and physical assault by others in extreme scenarios.

On the other side, the community has no option but to pursue the trade for their sustenance and the future of their family members. The temperament of the members of the community is such that they don't take such humiliations seriously and are accustomed to such ill-



treatment from others. Note that, 46 percent of the respondent households have encountered discrimination from various quarters. However, 54 percent of them described that they did not face any form of discrimination from others either in or around their villages. If the family members stay far from their village, then the likelihood of facing various forms of discrimination comes down drastically. The looks given by others at these people, their houses, and their surroundings hurt them a lot but move on without complaints. Such discriminatory treatment affects their children's upbringing, confidence, socialization, outlook, etc.

Case study 1

Laxmi, a 55-year-old woman, has been practicing the profession since she was a teenager. She is into the business despite several societal oppositions and legal hurdles against their caste-based profession, as it is the only means of survival she knows. Admitting that she could not continue to engage in the profession for long due to her growing age, she brought her two daughters into the profession to support the family. She built another room in her home for her daughters to engage in sex work. She stated that her daughters earn Rs.1000 to Rs.2000 per day, depending on the socio-economic status of the clients that visit them. For each client, they charge somewhere between Rs.300 and Rs.500. Laxmi's two daughters have two daughters each with a client on mutual consent, and says that she will never allow her granddaughters into the profession of sex work, instead they should remain away from our caste profession.

Further, she informed the researchers that she would join them in residential or boarding schools, provide all the support they needed to study well, and see them getting officer jobs, get married, and lead a normal and dignified life away from our profession (prostitution). She uttered that my granddaughters should not live the lives we lived but should lead different and better lives than ours. It is enough that we suffered and I need to put a full stop to prostitution because I cannot allow my granddaughters to suffer like us; they should not be like us but be better off for the rest of their lives, she asserts.

Laxmi further says it is her story and many of her fellow women from the community. They involve their daughters in the family-run prostitution business. In case a sex worker does not have any daughters then she brings the girls from other places and puts them into her home to practice the business on a mutual agreement of sharing income on a 50-50 basis. Laxmi says these girls some of our women accommodated in their homes are attractive, educated, and are from various social groups. They can be from any community, she says, we never ask about



their caste and other background.

Secondly, our women also rent out rooms in our homes to couples who want to spend time together. The couples come to our home because they feel our homes are safe. Thirdly, college girls from Warangal and nearby towns and villages have tied up with some of us and engaged in sex work whenever they need money or pleasure. Some of them work for several years and some work for several times. After earning enough money, they get married to others and settle in life. This is done in secret i.e. neither parents nor bridegroom family are aware that these girls were engaged in sex work.

Laxmi's life advocates that the practice of prostitution as a caste occupation is not only confined to the Dommari community but its spillover effects are seen on girls/women from other social backgrounds who want to get involved in it, although temporarily. The network between Dommari women and girls from near and far was well-known in the local areas. This has been happening for a while but an informal understanding between the Dommari women and girls prevails. These girls are not entering prostitution but take shelter under Dommari women and engage in sex work for a short time. Dommari women treat them as their daughters and thus girls feel safe and secure in their homes. This is not an open prostitution but an extension and imbibing into the caste-based profession. Dommari women protect the girl's identity and do not share their contact or information with anyone after girls get married. This integrity paved the way for some girls/couples to approach the Dommari women for engaging in sex work for money, pleasure, etc.

Case study 2

A respondent called Siri (name changed to protect her identity), aged 26 years old narrated her story and has been in the profession for the last eight years. Her mother was also in the same profession, and when she fell sick, she (Siri) took up the responsibility of running the family. Though she was not interested in entering the prostitution profession however financial problems and the burden of taking care of her family members made her join the profession. Such was the family situation that forced her into the profession. This apart, from the absence of alternative employment and livelihood opportunities for Dommari women who were labeled as prostitutes was also compelling women like Siri to take up sex work.

In 2020 she rented a room near the highway to get more clients. Siri has two kids from her clients who initially sent money to her but for the last two years, he stopped sending money to take care of their children.



It was mainly due to the fear of knowing the person's informal/oral or secret marriage with a sex worker. Siri informed the authors that she liked one of her clients and decided to bear children with him after he also agreed to help her while raising the kids. This is despite knowing the fact that he is already married to another woman. She stated that he does not stay with me but visits whenever he wants to avail of my services, and it is a pre-agreed mutual understanding we have.

However, for the last two years, he stopped giving Siri money because his legally married wife grew suspicious of him having affairs with another woman and he did not want to ruin his marriage, therefore, he stopped sending not only money but also visiting Siri as a client. As a result, she takes care of her children with the money she earns from her profession. She keeps her children away from the home when she is engaged in sex work because she wants to raise her kids away from their caste occupation and lead a life away from prostitution. This is not a respectable occupation as she gets no respect from clients and others. The cheap treatment given made me keep her kids away from the profession.

These unofficially married Dommari women wear traditional ornaments like legally married women. The men with whom they have children usually send money to support their children's education, healthcare, and upbringing. Siri further adds that her children with a client/husband who sends some amount of money every month to support them. However, since they are not legally recognised as his children hence do not have any rights to claim his property or acknowledge them as his children. Initially, such so-called husbands supported the women financially but later stopped sending money and eventually abandoned them, which burdened the women and made their children's future uncertain, says Siri.

In short, women from the Dommari community with already fragile socio-economic conditions enter unofficial marriages with their loved clients and bear children but later these women face a lot of economic hardship and struggle to raise their children. This complex relationship between the sex worker from the Dommari community and a client cum husband complicates their lives and makes children's futures uncertain.

Case study 3

Another young woman called Swathi (name changed), aged 21, who was unwilling to reveal her name, had shared her experience as a service provider. Swathi is not from the Dommari community but comes from another social group/caste from a different area precisely to engage in prostitution to earn money. She is a graduate of science and worked as



a receptionist in Hyderabad, Telangana before engaging in the prostitution business in the Vangapahad village in Warangal district. She typically stays for eight to ten days a month in the village, partnering with a local Dommari woman. Once she earns a certain amount, she returns home.

When asked why she chose prostitution, she explained that she could earn a significant amount of easy money without struggling to get a job. She charges clients between Rs. 1000 and Rs. 1500 rupees each and shares Rs. 500 daily with the local Dommari woman she partners with. She said that only time will tell, how long she will continue doing this, but as of now, she is earning sufficient money, supporting her family, and therefore comfortable doing it in the future too. But if her parents bring a marriage match and if the life partner is financially well settled then she may quit engaging in sex work. Her parents do not know what she is doing, they only know that she is working as a receptionist in Hyderabad city.

The case of Swathi implies that financially weak and vulnerable girls are partnering with sex workers from the Dommari community for easy money and to support their financially troubled families. Second, girls from mainstream society and social groups are becoming part of sex work to earn money. In the process, some economically poor girls remain in the profession and become part of the Dommari community in the long run. This is how the community can continue to practice and sustain their profession in the state of Telangana. Some Dommari families conduct marriage to their girl child and send them away from the village and profession forever. In their absence, girls from other social backgrounds from other regions of the state are partnered with the Dommari women filling the gap created by Dommari girls after their marriage. This is how the profession and the community can remain relevant in today's scenario.

Living standards among the Dommaries

Most households in the community have a nuclear family size of 3 to 5 members, and only few families exceeding five and above. The profession gives them a considerable amount of income, which results in owning modern housing and possession of contemporary appliances, including refrigerators, televisions, washing machines, etc. However, they stated that the present generation of children are attending schools and colleges and, therefore parents strive to provide basic things at home. On the contrary, the educational attainment is higher among those who abandoned the profession but reside in the village.

One of the significant issues the community faces these days is



getting basic statutory documents for their children, for instance obtaining an Aadhar card, which is a citizen identity card used for accessing several government welfare benefits. Obtaining such statutory citizenry cards for sex worker's children is a challenging task as it needs the father's name, which in many cases will not be known or disclosed for several reasons. When love blossoms between her and the client, the woman bears children. However, the clients will not marry the Dommari woman officially but on mutual agreement. Therefore, the client will not give consent to Dommari woman to use his name in official documents because the client cum husband is already married, and divulging his relationship with the Dommari woman can ruin his reputation and family and sometimes may put him in jail owing to marrying a woman without giving divorce to his first legally married spouse.

Despite all this, some of the mothers would provide the name of a person who has agreed to be a father to their child but is not accepted by the issuing authorities which results in the rejection of Aadhar cards. This, in turn, leads to the cancellation of school admission due to either a lack of proper documents or proof of the father's name. To address this problem, the government and some private schools in the area have, however, started accepting Dommari children without any proof of documents.

Discrimination and stigma

The community members who are involved in the traditional occupation of prostitution face discrimination in their everyday routine in innumerable ways and forms. Forty-six percent of the respondent families in the study villages faced discrimination attributable to their occupation at different places such as government offices, schools, and other places. For instance, a 26-year-old woman from the profession who does not want her daughter to follow the same path she followed hence sends her daughter to school. However, at the school, the girl faces discrimination because of her mother's occupation and the disrespect associated with the community's name. Second, women involved in the profession avoid attending public events where they might encounter ill-treatment and discrimination from other communities and thus endure social stigma. Even families who have left this occupation still experience discrimination and social stigma. They believe that the disrespect is associated with the name of the community.

Women from non-practicing families cannot sit outside their homes, as others may perceive them to be still involved in the business, and commuters on the road stare with varying opinions. An anonymous respondent who does not want to reveal her name and is not in the



profession expressed that she sent her children to other cities for education and instructed them to hide their caste names. It was found that owing to disrespect, discrimination, and stigma attached to their caste, their counterparts in Andhra Pradesh changed Dommari to Reddy Dommara, Kummu Reddy, etc. Likewise, the Dommari from Vangapahad and Siddapur wanted to change their caste name to Reddy Dommari. It is believed that the change in caste name ensured that they were free from social stigma and societal mistreatment, disrespect, discrimination, and humiliation associated with their community.

Prevalence of HIV/AIDS

While practicing the profession for years there were two a dozen Dommari women infected with Human Immunodeficiency Viruses (HIV) and confirmed Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome (AIDS). Given the ethical issues and reluctance to share their information with the researchers, we could not directly interview the HIV/AIDS patients, instead, collected information from the family members and community leaders who were aware of the patient's status.

Rajeshwari (name changed), aged 48, previously engaged in the profession but now works in a contraceptive manufacturing factory in the nearby city of Warangal. According to her, there are more than 25 women in the village who are living with HIV/AIDS, yet they continue to engage in prostitution while using contraceptive measures, particularly condoms. She further says that they come to me not just to get condoms but also to seek knowledge from me to ensure safer practices during their activities.

According to the community leaders, there are also cases of other Sexually Transmitted Diseases (STDs) which is affecting the health of the women; it may also affect the client's health. The local government officials and NGOs frequently run awareness camps in the villages, and every year, they check the health status of the women engaging in prostitution. This has already resulted in hygienic and safer practices the respondents affirm during the FGD.

Perceptions of the general public on the community

The perceived notion of other community members within the village reveals that the entire village faces social stigma due to the prevalence of the profession. The general public who is unaware of the facts tends to think that the whole village engages in the occupation, which is not true. The study villages Vangapahad and Siddapur contain communities from other social groups including upper strata. Therefore, women from



other communities hesitate to move freely or sit outside their homes. The stigma is so great that people from and outside villages are hesitant even to mention the name of the village/s due to their association with prostitution.

Suresh, aged 48 years says that there are several panchayats with Dommara community leaders in this part of the district, and yet they failed to stop their people from continuing the profession citing it is their traditional occupation from which they derive income and livelihood. They say, 'If we quit it, we would die of starvation because our people do not know other than this occupation.' They have not focused on the other skills to shift their occupation, Suresh concludes.

Of late, the situation is changing increasingly due to the awareness programs carried out by the local government officers and NGOs, several families have moved out of the profession to different occupations, although a majority of their community is still in business. Another respondent mentioned that, though some families have moved out of their occupation, some bring girls from other places like Mumbai and involve them in the business. Villagers have lodged complaints with the police in several instances, but their situation remains the same as these people justifying the act as their traditional occupation.

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The government has organised various awareness camps which resulted in a significant reduction in women practicing prostitution. However, after the camps ended, the practice resumed. Recognising this fact, the government has introduced further initiatives, including training programmes for women in skill development such as mat making and sewing, subsidies for poultry farming and other agricultural products, distribution of sewing machines, and provision of medicines for HIV patients. Despite these efforts, most women from the community continued to engage in the occupation. Rajitha (name changed) from the community said that we are habituated to earning easy money through our traditional occupation of prostitution rather than taking up other dignified works, which may involve hard work.

Changing scenario

Mr. Devender, aged 52 years, is one of the community leaders and a realtor who owns agricultural land as well. He declared that his mother used to engage in the traditional occupation, but he married a woman of another caste and never pursued that path. He has two children, one of them is a software engineer, and the other is studying for a Bachelor's degree in engineering. He always wanted his children to avoid their community's occupation and encouraged them to pursue other careers.



Similarly, another respondent named Srikanth is actively involved in local politics says his daughter is working as a software engineer in Bengaluru. He conducts awareness programmes and motivates people to leave their traditional occupations. Srikanth hopes that in a few years, everything will change, and his community will be free from prostitution and thus become like any other community in the state. He wants to eliminate the disregard, discrimination, and stigma associated with his community by ensuring that the next generation pursues higher education and attains higher positions in government and private sectors in the coming years.

Srikanth urges the government to support the community, particularly those engaged in prostitution, by creating employment opportunities at the local level, providing financial support, alternative livelihood options, rehabilitation programmes, and framing and offering special schemes for Dommaris upliftment. He also urges the government to bestow ST status to ensure they can get maximum benefit from the government schemes and initiatives. Currently, they are under the BC-A category and do not receive any benefits from the government on all fronts on account of the absence of a caste certificate, low level of educational qualifications, poor skilling, and the inability to compete with other OBCs.

Concluding remarks

The Dommari community is known for its traditional involvement in prostitution, which is considered a caste-based profession/occupation by them. The community knows no other profession and there are no avenues for them to avail alternative livelihood options for their sustenance. The reliance on the profession might give respite from financial woes but affects their dignity, self-esteem, and isolation from mainstream society. Damaris is one of the most disrespected communities among the de-notified tribes due to sex work. Most of them are landless and lack fixed assets and financial resources. First, the government's time-to-time monitoring of community activities may curb trafficking and deter women from other areas from entering their villages and pursuing the profession. The abolition of the centuries-old practice of prostitution as a caste-based occupation can change their lives for the better. The government should support the community, particularly those engaged in prostitution, by creating employment opportunities at the local level, providing financial support, alternative livelihood options, rehabilitation programs, and framing and offering special schemes for the Dommari community's upliftment.



Second, most of the Dommari women earn meager income from sex work/prostitution which largely goes to daily consumption, children's education, health needs, and cosmetic expenditure, hence, not solving their core problems like poverty, substandard living, economic backwardness, uplifting and moving them out of the age-old practice of prostitution. The case of Laxmi suggests that she was illiterate and her family was poor therefore had no option but to enter the profession. Later, through meager income from sex work, she could not educate and get married off her two daughters.

In such a situation Laxmi allowed her daughters to enter the profession, and the cycle of the new generation entering prostitution continued. When the three of them started earning, their financial condition and living standards were improved. Her two daughters had children with their respective clients but did not want their children to associate with the profession of the community and their village. They simply wanted their children to lead a normal but dignified life away from their homes.

Siri's case implies that when she bore the children with a client who promised to support her but abruptly discontinued the same. This increased the burden of raising children, school expenses, health expenditures, and daily consumption. Had she remained unmarried she could have led a financially solid life. Because of her mistake, she is suffering and other women can learn from her life that bearing children with clients is not at all advisable and sustainable in the long run. Swathi's case infers that not only Dommari women are engaged in sex work but girls and women from other castes also partner with women from the Dommari community and make money thus helping the traditional occupation to flourish. It also implies that owing to poverty, financial hardships, and easy money from prostitution, many educated girls and women from other castes conveniently chose to engage in sex work wherein some unfortunate women permanently continue to engage, and the rest of them engage for a short period. In all, prostitution as a caste occupation in Telangana is going through subtle changes, but mostly in a clandestine way.

Lastly, in this modern world, Dommaries are continuing their age-old caste occupation of prostitution which garners disrespect, mistreatment, social exclusion, and sexual and mental exploitation by others that ultimately degrades them. The practice of sex work is not by choice but by the absence of alternative employment and livelihood opportunities. If Dommaries are rehabilitated well, they would quit the profession, but there is no hope coming from any quarters. Dommaries continue their caste-based occupation as part of their survival strategy, although few



have moved away from sex work in recent times.

The policies should aim at eradicating prostitution as a caste or traditional occupation because of its inherent degrading and dehumanising character. The community is not paid enough attention by the government hence except for basic benefits like free ration, Aadhar cards, and voter identity cards they do not get any other benefits. They are neglected, suppressed, excluded, and discriminated. There are no or very few research studies to know their socio-economic conditions. Therefore, no efforts were made to identify problems to resolve their decades-old socio-economic vulnerabilities.

As a result, the Dommaris of Telangana lead poor, substandard, and undignified lives. Their presence is visibly invisible. On social and humanitarian grounds, the occupation of prostitution should be eradicated forever. This not only helps the Dommari community but also makes Telangana a more socially responsible, mature, civilised, and developed society. Equality, brotherhood, and egalitarianism are missing in the case of Dommaris which requires immediate course correction.

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