

# Intergenerational Prostitution in Marginalised Tribes: A Cosmopolitan View of Ruchira Gupta's *I Kick and I Fly*

J. Ajayshia & Sushil Mary Mathews

## Abstract

The paper analyses the serious issue of child trafficking and intergenerational prostitution in the novel, *I Kick and I Fly* written by Ruchira Gupta. The true accounts of the girls at Forbesganj are fictionalized by the author giving the readers a profound insight into the terrors hidden in the ghetto. Ulrich Beck's Global Risk Society is applied to the novel, to identify intergenerational prostitution as a risk and a manufactured uncertainty. Allowing such a practice tramples the dreams of the girls who wish to see a world of freedom. The author suggests that the girls could use the combined force of education and martial arts to thwart this manufactured uncertainty.

**Keywords:** Intergenerational prostitution; Kung fu; Manufactured uncertainty; Risk; Social evil.

The red-light areas of India are considered a necessary evil by many and are justified with a sense that a few women's sacrifices can protect others. This anti-progressive view has allowed the peril of trafficking children and coercing women into prostitution to exist. Those who force women and children into prostitution are legally termed criminals and yet they exist without any fear, working in a system of organised teams and essentially also as effective power gangs. The person who controls women and disables them to act on their own is called a pimp. A pimp also holds financial control which further removes the freedom of women stuck in the cycle. It must be considered that prostitution of women and children, is a social problem as it causes health issues and moral degradation, affecting all those involved in it.

Indian culture portrays women as goddesses, savagely avenging anyone who wrongs them. The brutal punishments and avenging are seen only in most of the myths while the country awaits justice for many women in the courts till date. The very country that has named rivers after women also bears the brunt of disastrous brutality against women. Women's safety is not always guaranteed in violent outbreaks, especially as they become the targets for revenge and anger.

A few centuries ago, the Devadasi system for women was followed because of the Jamdangini sage's myth. The Puranas mention graceful dancing women whose presence is mandatory at every wedding. A devadasi was supposed to give the *mangal sutra* to the bride due to the belief that a devadasi is eternally married, never widowed. The women chosen were deemed holy and sent as virgins to serve the gods. They were the brides of gods. These women were skilled artistically and performed with exemplary talent before kings and distinguished royalties. Devadasis enjoyed an honourable position in the society. Later, when the British rule took over, the position of the Devadasis was brought down along with the Indian kings who lost their position. Soon, the inappropriate male gaze caught them in a web which made the women especially the devadasis of the marginalised communities become a target of exploitation. Women and children of the Dalit communities were pushed to be traded for their bodies, over which the powerful men in charge of the temples had control. They were stripped of the dignity they once had through their artistic skills and as royal beneficiaries. Their bodies became sites of violation, restricting their independence. They were even traded with the British officers. Soon, this temple prostitution became intergenerational with the involvement of taking away the little children and grooming them for exploitation.

The Indian Supreme Court recognized sex work as a profession in 2022 to protect the liberty of women. Social activists claim it to be ironic as the women are subjected to violence and treated as slaves. The landmark judgement in 2011, dealing with the case of *Budhadev Karmaskar v State of West Bengal* reinstated Article 21 and clarified the rights and liberty of sex workers. In 2013, the Justice Verma Commission, in its report discerned those who are trafficked for sexual exploitation and consenting adults. Not all women involved in the "profession", as they call it, are trafficked. Some women are pushed into the zone, generation after generation adapting themselves to man-made fate. The justification for this is subjected to culture and tradition. Some of the lower caste groups owing to history and society, are considered unclean and follow the practice of

intergenerational prostitution. And for the girl who has been denied education and training, it is equally difficult to imagine a brighter future. In this context, the caste system and cultural traditions provide easy justification for a practice driven by poverty, economics, and gender-based discrimination ("New Light" 9).

The Denotified and Nomadic Tribes of India are most commonly addressed as the "Criminal Tribes" even to this day. Law enforcement shows no mercy to these DNTs as they are labelled so. Any crime occurrence in their surrounding areas positions them as immediate suspects to be taken to police stations and to be thrashed without trial. Sometimes they are released and other times, false cases are filed against them to silence the onerous questions. Ramnika Gupta says, "In the British era, they were declared born criminals and were forced to live behind barbed wires. Even 12-year-old children had to mark their attendance in police stations every day." ("Vimukt-Ghumantu Bharat Ke" 9). They still have to abscond or move to other places where they have to start over to avoid being charged. Subsequently, they are identified and targeted to endure the same cycle of torture. "...33 per cent of people belonging to DNT communities in the state report harassment by the police. Another 21 per cent say that a family member has been arrested." (Gowda).

Most of these communities were nomadic and like gypsies, they move from place-to-place entertaining people. In the long run, the tribes and communities tried settling but were pushed away as outcasts. When they tried to stay on any land as squatters, the landlords made sure to collect the rent by taking the women away and keeping them as mistresses or sex slaves to gratify the needs of lecherous men. For this purpose, the family or pimps of these prostituted women were paid. Thereafter, the painful journey of survival soon became a mode of business for the men who let their own women be in this undignified position generation after generation. "At the school, fathers regularly put pressure on the girls to do their "family duty" and start working as prostitutes. Some fathers have tried to snatch the girls back [from school]" (Davidson).

The trouble of young girls being targeted in India is most commonly seen among the denotified tribes and communities. This is shown elaborately on various platforms through media. Social activists and journalists have strived to help the communities by educating them and equipping them. Multiple schemes that advocate the rights of children are implemented by the government. Some laws enforced by the government are sometimes ineffective, and there is a need for non-governmental organisations to step

in and ensure the safety of women and children.

Ruchira Gupta is an Emmy award-winning journalist, author, social justice activist and feminist campaigner. She is the founder-president of Apne Aap Women Worldwide and Apne Aap International. Gupta is also a professor at New York University and a scholar at the University of Berkeley. She has worked for around three decades against trafficking amongst the marginalised communities that specifically participate in hereditary prostitution. She has been the precursor to running a boarding school at a low cost to the Nat girls on the Indo-Nepal border. Barbara Davidson reports to Los Angeles Times about the school and gives us the following details.

For most of the 100 girls at the school, it's the first time any member of their family has been offered access to education. A few graduates of the school are even heading off to college – with ambitions of becoming lawyers and doctors. But many struggle to achieve a much smaller ambition: avoiding being caught up in systemic prostitution (Davidson).

The novel, *I Kick and I Fly* marks the debut of Gupta as an author. In the book, she has traced the fictional life, which is not far from the truth, of young girls who are caught in the sex trade. Ruchira Gupta's writing is based on the true story of a Forbesganj girl, a gold medalist in karate, who was groomed for prostitution.

The young protagonist of the novel is a fourteen-year-old girl, Heera from the Nat community. Heera is destined to face the same tortures that women of her tribe have undergone. The young girls above the age of twelve are taken away and robbed of their childhood. Their education is stopped halfway and the girls become machines to earn money for their families. The girls' bodies become sites of violation and the men of the house become pimps. Fighting against them is a great rebellious act involving further abuse of these girls. The pimps are under the scrutiny of their big boss who profits maximum from the blood money. Ravi Lala is that greasy boss who handles the transactions of girls. Suraj Sharma, a police officer who is supposed to enforce law and order, is an accomplice to Ravi Lala. Even then, his own daughter, Rosy is not protected from the clutches of these vile men. She is trafficked to the United States. Ravi Lala uses his evidence on Sharma's illegal affairs to grab Rosy. Blackmail, threats, lies, violence and drugs constantly revolve in the Girls Bazaar of Forbesganj.

Marginalised people continue to be labelled as not civil, despite the at-

tempts of many acts and bills passed in India. As a secular country with great accomplishments and achievements on the global front, it is saddening to see that only a few from the marginalised community in India are recognized as achievers. At the same time, most are not given the opportunity in the first place, as for the Nat community in Bihar, the Indo-Nepal border, used to be a nomadic tribe. They now live in slums that seem like normal houses in the morning but become brothels in the evenings. Even the children belonging to the slums witness the horrors going on in the shacks. Every girl in the slum lives with the unspoken fact that she is next in line. Heera represents those girls who wish to escape the torments one day.

Heera's place of solace is school because it is where she gets her food. Despite being bullied by her former friend, Manish, Heera is determined to not let him win. She fights back and attributes this passion to her ancestral blood. The nomadic Nats were not only known as street entertainers but were also well-known for their wrestling warriors. Heera's uncles are wrestlers who win many awards but are determined to keep the women away from the sport. The only supportive man in the household is Salman, Heera's older brother. Along with Salman and Heera, the family consists of an alcoholic and disabled father, a hardworking mother and two sisters Chotu and Sania.

Heera witnesses her own cousin Mira, being physically abused by the clients. She has no option but to endure the torture daily, drowning her physical pain by consuming alcohol but yet recounting the pain. Heera's mother is a stubborn woman who is compassionate and is very adamant about not sending Heera away just as many girls were sent away. Mira Di also does not want Heera to become a toy in the hands of men. She is inspired by Rini Di, who is a teacher as well as an activist, part of the NGO that helps women and the downtrodden. She is also an instructor of Kung Fu, one of the ancient Chinese martial arts, and trains young girls to defend themselves and also participate in events internationally. This martial art plays a vital role in the novel, *I Kick and I Fly*.

The commodification of female bodies has led to an outrageous general belief about marginalised women deserving to be prostitutes by the mercilessly terrorizing humans. Manish, a former friend of Heera sneers and mocks at her whenever they cross paths. It is either the culture of silence or the constant mocking which is given as a treatment for their survival. The negative conditioning of the young minds despite receiving education shows how far the influence of parents and society unconsciously

compels them to wallow in such backward thinking.

Cosmopolitanism always alludes to cultural openness. Due to globalization, people are exposed to multiple cultures and make even novices, experts. With all the positive attention cosmopolitanism brings, there are also negative occurrences that are brought to the notice of the people. Important issues like global warming and climate change are made known to all. These issues are considered to affect the community as a whole and hence individual importance for a person is sidelined. This gives rise to individuals at risk and ultimately, a risk society. Associating the denotified tribes and the marginalised communities with cosmopolitanism, the segregated society becomes a part of the risk society. They are easy targets, to be viewed as individuals, but each has a risk to evade. The development of interpersonal openness is very much important just as the cultural openness concept.

The Global Risk Society was put forward by a German Sociologist, Ulrich Beck. According to Beck, risk is inherent in a modern society. As the modern society undergoes technological advancements, there is a production of a new set of risks. These risks, therefore need modern solutions. A constant necessity to respond and adjust is required. In the novel, *I Kick and I Fly*, the foremost risk is that of the young girls living in fear that they would be prostituted and undergo the same horrors as many girls before them. The risk society here is taken to be the small village of Forbesganj, Bihar which is just 12 km away from the border of Nepal. The Global Risk Society theory helps in understanding the dynamics of the social and political standings on the whole. He firmly believes that there are three possible reactions to risks, namely, denial, apathy, and transformation. Applying the same reactions to the Indian Society, in the view of inter-generational prostitution seen in the novel, it is undeniable how the risk society can be allotted to a smaller group too.

Heera is faced with the risk of bullying and is in constant fear about what would happen at school, her only place of solace. When Manish bullies Heera, she is reminded about Rosy, Manish's sister and her best friend who went away to Nepal with her mother. His behaviour towards Heera changed after Rosy left for Nepal. The taunting and the slow turn of events proved to be a lessened horrifying state. Heera fought back and Manish lost his teeth in the fight. This incident does not go without consequences. She is expelled and Manish is permitted to return to class.

Manish returns to class as I walk into the principal's chamber.

"I'm sorry," I mumble, my head still down as I slowly enter.

"I'm afraid I can't keep you in school any longer. Your father can come and take all your certificates. But you will have to find admission in some other school," the principal says in a firm voice as I stand in front of his desk.

"Please, sir ..." I attempt to explain what happened, but he pulls out a file and begins to make notes as if I'm not there.

"No explanations necessary. There's no room for discussion under the circumstances. Just leave," the principal repeats in a voice that brooks no ifs, ands, or buts. (Gupta 13)

Heera is in denial at the initial stage that she is expelled and she painfully comes to terms with it and realizes that every Nat girl was destined to be pushed into prostitution just as her Baba insisted. She feared she would soon be left with Ravi Lala.

Ravi Lala's involvement in coercing young girls brings rage to the readers. He is not bothered about trafficking, as it is implied in the novel, he has political influence. He shows no interest in the plights of the young girls. His interest lies in grabbing more girls and pushing them to become prostitutes and their family men into pimps. This is apathy, one of the possible reactions according to Ulrich Beck. He is also an enabler in this case. Another apathetic reaction is exhibited by Heera's own father. As stated above, the men push their women to sell their bodies and earn measly amounts. Heera's reality struck hard when she was often threatened to be given away. "But perhaps, now that I am not in school, it will be easier for Baba to sell me. I can quell the pangs of hunger, but I cannot quell the fear of what awaits me if Baba and Ravi Lala push aside Mai's wishes." (14). Heera was tormented by the thought that she would be given up to the mela just like Mira Di at any moment.

The third reaction of transformation to the same risk evolves from within the same community against the same risk. Heera's mother makes every effort to keep her first daughter from becoming like the other Nat girls who are caught in the web. She comes up with various temporary solutions, but her constant resolve to fight against those who try to push her daughter is stronger. Mai, as Heera calls her, sets an example to her daughters to work hard and stand for change. She transforms to become the embodiment of empowerment to Heera. Even with a sick daughter,

Chotu, she marks each day with perseverance, working in the fields and breaking stones on the highways. After the death of Chotu, Mai is blamed by Chacha for bringing the wrath of gods.

“Nat girls are meant to be prostituted. That is what the gods want,” he yells. “Their wrath has descended on our family because of your pride.” He adds that that is why my father has a lame leg, why we lost our home, why Chotu is dead. My mother sits there, taking it all in, and my father does nothing to defend her. All the while, I feel my uncle’s gaze flitting between Salman and me. I can see it in his eyes: Who do they think they are to be coasting along, not doing what everyone does in our Nat community? (34)

Another reaction of transformation to the risk is displayed by Heera herself when she dives into her collective consciousness of her ancient generations to reclaim her hold on martial arts. Rini Di acts as a catalyst for this transformation. She has been working with NGOs to save girls and provide education with the help of government schemes. Rini Di also conducted Kung Fu classes which first attracted Heera to it. Heera’s maternal uncles are pehelwans whom she admires piquing her interest in wrestling motivated her to approach Rini Di. Mira Di also encouraged Heera to be in touch with Rini Di. The motivation and the circumstance of risk allowed Heera to transform herself from a girl who was threatened to be pushed into prostitution to a girl receiving awards and bringing accolades to her family.

“I saw you teach the hostel girls to fight. To kick and punch. I want to fight too and win prize money to look after my family. My mother’s brothers are pehelwans. It’s in my blood.” I look at her questioningly. She responds with an approving nod. “Go on,” she says. “My parents, my brother, and even my pehelwan mamas say girls can’t fight. But I saw you teach girls to fight,” I add in a rush. “I will teach you kung fu, of course, but you have to also find your inner strength. Self-esteem is essential to any battle. You have to know you are worth fighting for.” I turn this thought over in my head a few times. (44)

It must be noted that the risk perpetuates an asymmetrical power structure. Ravi Lala acts as the main antagonist, decision maker and influencer for the others taking his lead. Suraj Sharma is a police officer who can enforce the law and put Ravi Lala behind bars but is seen as a subordinate



and even as an agent to help with the trafficking. He could not even save his daughter Rosy from Ravi Lala. "Risk presupposes a decision, hence a decision-maker, and produces a radical asymmetry between those who take, define, and profit from risks, and those who are their targets, those who must experience directly the 'unseen side-effects'" (Beck 140).

Ulrich Beck opines that risk and catastrophe are different. Risk is the anticipation of a catastrophe. In the case of Heera, she is anticipating her drastic imprisonment to transform into a prostitute. This risk produces a compulsion to act and needs additional forces to cease the risk from becoming a catastrophe. The social construction of "real" anticipation requires force to thwart it. Beck distinguishes future uncertainties into three types, threats, risks and manufactured uncertainties. The manufactured uncertainty exhibits characteristics as follows, (i) It depends on human decisions. (ii) It is created by the society itself. (iii) It is immanent to the society and cannot be externalizable. (iv) It is collectively imposed and therefore is unavoidable individually. (v) Its perceptions break with the past, break with experienced risk and institutionalized routines. (vi) It is incalculable, uncontrollable and not insurable.

Intergenerational prostitution is a manufactured uncertainty. This can be proved in the novel *I Kick and I Fly*. Just as the reactions to risks are brought in Gupta's novel, it cannot be denied that the women representing the thousands of victims from the marginalised communities and tribes undergo, can allude to the characteristics of this manufactured uncertainty.

The first characteristic is that it depends on human decisions. Heera's life is revolved around decisions taken by people around her. For every woman and child put into intergenerational prostitution, the humans who started the tradition are to be held accountable. The second characteristic showcases how it is created by the society itself. The Nat community girls are expected by the society to stop their education and continue the generational job of being dancers and then go on to become sex workers either by choice or force. This is the reason for Heera to be forced by her uncle, father and even her classmates to choose to quit her education and be a sex worker just like her cousin. The third characteristic brings along how the manufactured uncertainty is immanent to the society. The intrinsic nature of considering all women of the Nat community to pursue the dreaded road is not extended to the women of another community living in the same area. The status of one particular community is celebrated with freedom and the Nat girls are imprisoned in their fate. Since, the risk is imposed collectively, which is the fourth characteristic, Heera is deterred

by the unavoidable nature of her destiny. Ravi Lala's experience in planning and executing things in the past provides a foothold for him and his cronies to run the business without a break and thereby installing the fifth characteristic. The final characteristic of manufactured uncertainty determines the incalculable and unpredictable lives of the children entering as dancers. When the girls are sold in the mela, they are separated from their families and their whereabouts are not known for years. They are passed down to different pimps and finally some return, only to continue as sex workers and provide for their family just as Mira Di.

All these characteristics in reality are exposed in mild manners by society, media and not discussed in public but cautiously discussed in private. Heera's fear that she will become Ravi Lala's prey is not empathized with by most of her classmates. They mock her and are eagerly waiting for her to leave. The resistance and aversion shown by Heera towards her assumed fate becomes the necessary force that will enable the transformation. Sensitising the people around them about child trafficking and the struggles faced by the girls is not directly influenced. Rini Di acts as an agent of enlightenment and a source of inspiration for many. Rini Di's empathetic heart has brought her into the world of saving the girls legally and giving them hope to conquer. She gives Heera the confidence, "No one decides your fate but you. In the meantime, you must make other friends. Ones who will stand by you." (45). The importance of standing up for oneself is a pivotal choice even though there are multiple influences surrounding a person. Heera was surrounded by those who wanted to escape the doom that awaited her: Mai, Mira Di, Salman and Rini Di. Still, it was her choice and decision that brought her to the school hostel.

The girls who are rescued and seeking refuge from dangerously disputed homes are made to realise that they are not mere objects to be exploited and fantasized about by predatory men but an embodiment of force and power. They form friendships and come out of their moulds. "The girls overcome caste stigma by forming friendships that take away the boundaries of caste and class" (Davidson). By teaching them kung fu in the hostel, the girls learn to channel their energy and focus on their inner strength. The girls do not envy each other and are supportive of everyone. When Heera goes to the hostel, the girls do not bond together just by sharing stories. No one asks or is eager to learn the backstory of Heera. Each one has a scar to carry and kung fu has made those painful reminders a thing of the past as the girls know they can defend themselves.

The importance of martial arts as a shield for victims and to the girls

who are threatened to be harmed is undeniable. Ruchira Gupta has meticulously brought the need for education for every girl child. Mai, Mira Di and Rini Di become spokespersons advocating education and its vital role. The headmen under the influence of Ravi Lala are unbothered about the impact of education that can transform their living conditions. "Many people think: 'Oh, enroll a child in school,'" Gupta said. "But keeping that child in school is even harder." (Davidson).

The results of education and taking a new step by staying in the hostel have changed Heera's life for the better. Though she feels selfish for getting all the basic needs while her family suffers under the leaking roof, Heera is determined to excel. She derives more motivation from the book, *Bruce Lee: Artist of Life*. Enhancing her already built-in nature to fight, this book becomes another tutor for life as she learns not only the kung fu moves but also valuable lessons for life. Knowing the book by heart, Heera remembers the quotes and acts according to them when showing her skill, in a threatening situation or at times to ponder.

"I bury my doubts beneath my excitement. There will be no astrologer visit today. No marriage to a tree. For now, I am free. I think of Bruce Lee. There would be no bright stars without dim stars and without the surrounding darkness no stars at all" (72).

The following instance sheds light on the event of Heera's participation in the kung fu championship.

As I hold the pose in front of the judges in perfect balance, I get a sudden flash of realization—that every part of my body is equally valuable and linked to the other. I don't feel ashamed of it anymore because I value every cell and know I will keep it safe.

I finally understand another one of Bruce Lee's wisdoms: You must accept the fact that there is no help but self-help. I cannot tell you how to gain freedom since freedom exists within you. (116)

When Heera receives accolades by winning a silver medal in the very first competition, her father is astonished that a Nat girl and his very own daughter whom he was about to sell, has the capability to attain great heights. This marks the renewed heart of Heera's father who later in the novel fights tooth and nail to protect his daughter when she was kidnapped once by Ravi Lala's men. The continuous threats from Ravi Lala to somehow put Heera for sale in the *mela* looms over her constantly. This

is an illustration of how in reality the men hover over the Nat girls and force them to continue their family business.

Heera was introduced in the novel as a girl who feared being expelled but by the end of the novel, she proves that Nat girls need not go into prostitution. They deserve an education, they can travel abroad, participate in competitions, win medals and most importantly they can fight the predators with their martial arts training. Implementing strict laws and weeding out Ravi Lalas step by step will cause a ripple that would minimize the threat, ultimately eliminating it on the global front just as Gupta mentions, "to make change contagious and succeed[s]" (258). The changes brought step by step would soon travel across the whole world to take pertinent steps to eradicate intergenerational prostitution radically.

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