

**GEOGRAPHIES OF CARE AND INTIMACY:
EARLY INSIGHTS FROM ORAL HISTORIES OF INFORMAL SECTOR MIGRANTS IN DELHI AND
HYDERABAD**

Priti Ramamurthy (University of Washington),

This presentation is based on collaborative research with Vinay Gidwani (University of
Minnesota) & Sunil Kumar & Lokesh (labor activists and researchers)

ABSTRACT

A key insight of recent social science scholarship on India is the paucity of reliable formal sector employment, compelling a very large portion of India's workforce to find uncertain livelihoods in an assortment of rural and urban informal sector work, the latter consisting of construction, street vending, petty retail, transportation, waste picking, sex work, and domestic service labor to name but a few venues. This vast population has been variously characterized as a "wasteland of the dispossessed" (Sanyal 2007), a state of "wageless life" (Denning 2010), a "surplus population" (Smith 2011), a "precariat" (Standing 2011), and a "floating reserve army" (Bremans 2013). Possibly because the employment challenge that confronts countries like India with its vast youth demographic is so humbling, the existing scholarship in fields like labor studies, urban geography, rural sociology, and feminist studies has been resolutely economic. With few exceptions, it has had little to say on the experiences, life-making activities and desires of the men and women, who toil in India's cities even as they remain enmeshed with ongoing lives in their villages. While there is every reason to be perturbed by the looming employment challenge that confronts nations like India what is conspicuously scarce in this litany of gloom are humanizing accounts that plumb how denizens of the informal economy experience and narrate their life-worlds: their longings, desires, and indignities; their practices of care and violence; their loneliness, friendships, and found intimacies; and their conflicted attitudes to love, marriage, kinship, sex, and patriarchy.

In this seminar, I will present preliminary insights on the intimate lives of first- and second-generation rural-to-urban migrants in Delhi and Hyderabad, based on the first phase of ongoing oral historical research by our research team. Our research strives to bring humanistic insights to existing political economy scholarship on migration and employment; while it is not policy-oriented, we hope it can indirectly inform policy initiatives on informal sector work and urbanization.

** This presentation is based on our ongoing project, "The City and Country: Towards a Poetics of Informal Economies in Contemporary India," funded by an American Council for Learned Societies Research Collaboration Fellowship and an American Institute of Indian Studies Senior Fellowship. We thank Centre for Policy Research and Hyderabad Urban Lab for their advice and logistical support, which have been vital in shaping this project.*

Short Bio:

Priti Ramamurthy is Professor and Chair of the Department of Gender, Women and Sexuality Studies at the University of Washington, Seattle. Her research is on feminist analyses of commodity chains, agrarian change in India; social reproduction and agricultural biotechnologies; gender, modernity and commodity cultures, and the life-worlds of denizens of informal economies. Her interdisciplinary publications appear in the journals *World Development*, *Cultural Anthropology*, *Feminist Studies*, *SIGNS*, and *Environment and Planning A*. She is a co-editor and

co-author of *The Modern Girl Around the World: Modernity, Consumption, Globalization* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008).

Other members of the Research Team:

Vinay Gidwani studies the entanglements of labor and ecology in agrarian and urban settings, and capitalist transformations of these. He is particularly interested in the cultural politics and geographies of work. Gidwani is presently Professor of Geography and Global Studies at University of Minnesota. His most recent book is *Capital, Interrupted: Agrarian Development and the Politics of Work in India* (Minnesota, 2008).

Sunil Kumar is a Delhi-based social-political activist, and an independent writer and researcher.

Lokesh, a researcher, was awarded an M.Phil. for her thesis, *Global Mobility and Emergence of New Relations: Social Characteristics of Paid Domestic Workers*, from the Department of Sociology, University of Delhi. She has contributed a chapter, 'Making the Personal Political: The First Domestic Workers' Strike in Pune, Maharashtra', in *Towards a Global History of Domestic and Caregiving Workers*, Dirk Hoerder, Elise Van Nederveen Meerkerk and Silk Neunsinger (editors). She has worked in a variety of research positions, and is actively engaged with issues of gender, labour, urbanism, violence and sexuality. Lokesh is associated with Stree Mukti Sangathan, a women's organization, and the New Socialist Initiative.