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Mobile Bodies: Practicing Cell Phone-Based Transactional Sex in India

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In this ethnographic project I focus on iterations of transactional sex, as it exists, both perceptually and actually, in two cities in Gujarat. However, the nature of sex work as a well-worn discursive subject puts it automatically in conversation with the multitude of interpretations throughout India, transnationally, and across disciplines. My project is equally an analysis of how different terminologies and discourses operate in defining sex work, as it is on cell phones' impacts on everyday conduct of sexuality and sex work. The transformative and transgressive power of cell phones makes transactional sex an elastic practice, a departure from normative definitions of prostitution. When the governing discourses on Indian sex work frame it in polemics of violence and exploitation (the spectacle of trafficking) or edicts of disease control (the specter of AIDS), "the prostitute body" is produced as an object to be policed, written upon, and elided from imagined citizenship. I will discuss how cell phones change these traditional definitions as the hypervisible performative acts of cell phone use enable women to traverse physical space through speech and stance, and therefore evade public stigmatization, create "normal" lives, and maximize business management for lifestyle shifts benefiting themselves and their families.

Mitali Thakor graduated from Stanford University's Department of Anthropology and Feminist Studies. She researched mobile phone usage dynamics of Indian sex workers for her thesis, and has worked with local organizations of the Gujarat State AIDS Control Society. In 2008 she worked at the International Labor Organization based at the UN-Bangkok, studying mobile strategies for trafficking prevention and sex workers' rights in the Southeast Asia region. Currently, Mitali is a research assistant for a Johns Hopkins project in the Philippines on mobile data collection of adolescent sex, contraception, and mood.