

# HISTORY OF PROSTITUTION IN CALCUTTA: A REVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

*Prostitution is an oldest stigmatized profession. Poor economy, gender biasedness and patriarchal system push the women of different background into this trade. It has a long history and in every stratified society the prostitution exists. It is till an alive profession when the feminist movements towards equity and justice of women are in action. However, however, the present paper was an attempt to explore the historical base of prostitution in Calcutta, only Metro City of Eastern India. For this purpose, the method used here consists first breaking down the profession as its existed into its different constituent elements, and then resembling it. It was explored through unearthed important repositories of confidential official policy decisions, records in contemporary newspapers, and journals, and travelogues and reminiscences of both British and Bengal observers. An analysis of these records was done to draw the historical base of this profession. The prostitution started its journey from pre-colonial era and it was reshaped during British rule. After independence of India, the profession girls trafficking are till continuing in diverse forms. It is an alternative economy for the women/girls dominated by backward and Muslim who are victims of poor economy, gender biasedness and patriarchal system.*

**KEYWORDS :** Calcutta, Colonial India, History of prostitution, Women of backward community.

The prostitute has been commonly defined as any woman, who for the sake of monetary consideration or any other gainful remuneration, sells her body is regarded as such. Throughout the history of human society, the much reviled whore has been criticized as a sinner, immoral, a repository of diseases, a profaner of religion, whose companionship should be shunned by the civilised, moral, virtuous and married man. Her synonyms are varied: harlot, whore, kerb-walker, stew, strumpet, escort woman, and in India there were the 'Ganikas' in ancient times whose equivalent in modern times came to be the tawaifs or courtesans who maintained vast establishments under the patronage of the nawabs, men of the nobility (Mukherjee 1935, 34-38).

Historically prostitution is an old age profession. The systems of prostitution - a social

construction invented by males –provide scope to males to inflict their masculinity on female sexuality. It is a multi-layered diversified stigmatized profession existed in every stratified society. It is a gender specific phenomenon; the overwhelming majority of the victims are women and girls, while perpetrators are invariably 'men' (Howard 2003). The root cause of demand of prostitution is 'men'. The male maintains the power over women (Dworkin 1994). So in their various stages of development the women are victims of gender biasedness, inequality and injustice. The poor economy, unstable marriage, high rate of illiteracy and their distressed family life are consequently the crucial factor to push them into low skilled and well paid profession of sex trade in spite of the stigma and danger attached to the work from their ordinary life. It is a way of economic

alternative to the women of distressed and backward society (Lewis 1965, 123-135).

However modern prostitution is also a paid form of reproductive labour, performed under conditions of ever increasing commodification of all goods and services, within the currently expanding system of global capitalism. Throughout history the various modes of production, reproduction, distribution, consumption, pleasure, and recreations have contested with one another, within the overarching norms of patriarchy. It is in the context of these contestations that marriages develop into commoditized prostitution and, relatively stable prostitute-client relations develop into marriage-like bondage. Our familial-religious ideologies are engaged in justifying, perpetuating and maintaining various myths and lies around these modes of management of human sexuality. This is the universal story, but the history of each civilization has its own specificities (Chunder 1970. 56-58).

In India prostitution is also the oldest one profession. The mythology and old Hindu scriptures of India (i.e. Ramayana, Mahabharata, Vedas, Upanishad, etc) had been given a glimpse of its existence variously in then society. For instance, prostitutes were entertaining a gathering when Rama (the Hero of the epic Ramayana and Bharat (younger brother of Rama) were in discussion of some issues of their kingdom. In Indian canonical literature—Hindu, Buddhist or Jain—she has been depicted in colours which make her particularly repulsive. The Buddhist religious texts—comprising of the Pitakas, the Avadanas and the Jatakas—are replete with these ‘Hetaerae’ (Bandopadhyay 2002, 12-13).

From the Indus Valley Civilization (c. 3000-1750 B.c.), the oldest evidence of urbanization hitherto discovered in Indian subcontinent, we find that people had contacts with ancient Mesopotamia. They had governments, religion, ports, dry docks, ship building yards, and planned towns with paved

roads. So there must have been people with surplus income, migrant workers, traders, sailors and soldiers - all of them potential customers of prostitutes. The first reference of women practicing sex with several men, not belonging to any individual could be traced back to Indus Valley Civilization (Kosambi 1972, 45-50).

The Rig Veda (c. 1200-900 RC.) , the first ancient Indian sacred text noted about sexual desire , marriage , polygyny, extra marital affairs, incest, polyandry, The earliest mention of prostitution in Vedic period occurs in the Rigveda. Between eighth and fifth century R C., extra-marital or illicit love affairs might or might not have been paid, but there was a probability on the part of the male-counterpart to regard it as a payable service. But as long as it was limited to a particular partner it was likely to be considered more of a temporary contract than of prostitution. Sukumari Bhattacharji studied that gradually there arose a section of women who, either because they could not find suitable husbands, or because of early widowhood, unsatisfactory married life or other social pressures, especially if they had been violated, abducted or forcibly enjoyed and so denied an honorable status in society, or had been given away as gift in religious or secular events – such women were frequently forced to take up prostitution as a profession. And when they did so, they found themselves in a unique position: they constituted the only section of women who had to be their own breadwinners and guardians (Bhattacharya 1988, 79; Sur 1995, 23).

History also tells that during the Mauryan period, there appears to be a systematic control of the prostitution business under a superintendant called the ‘Ganikaadyaksha’. Kautilya, the chief minister of Chandragupta Maurya, had enumerated a wide range of prostitutes comprising the Ganika, Pratiganika, Rupajiva, Pumshali, Kaushikastris, Dasi, Rupdasi, Shilpkaria and several others. Of them the first two were the highest ranked and recipient of the highest salary by the state. The

Ganikas were the accomplished and most beautiful women meant for the king's court and paid a fixed salary by the state. The second category was a courtesan who substituted in place of the official courtesan during the latter's absence but was paid only half of her salary. Besides these, some texts mentioned the prostitutes as the 'Kulatas' who were married women who secretly would leave their home to meet with their lover or lovers, and the Soarini who was such a shameless creature that she openly engaged in extra-marital affairs despite the disapproval of her husband and family (Basak 1992, 119-123)

In pre-colonial Bengal, the prostitute suddenly emerged into full glare of Publicity in Calcutta, the capital of colonial Bengal and its suburbs. It was also an evident that prostitution was functioned in Calcutta from 18<sup>th</sup> Century. The colonial administrative responses and the indigenous socio-cultural reactions were indicative of a pathological society that spread prostitution in 18<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> century (Banerjee 1998, 4). The historical records indicated that the villain of the great Palssey battle named Mirjafar married prostitutes named Moni Baiji and Babbu Baiji (Bandopadyaya 2002, 12).

However, the present paper was an attempt to explore the historical base of prostitution in Calcutta. For this purpose, the method used here consists first breaking down the profession as it existed into its different constituent elements, and then reassembling it. It was explored through unearthed important repositories of confidential official policy decisions, records in contemporary newspapers, and journals, and travelogues and reminiscences of both British and Bengal observers. An analysis of these records was done to draw the historical base of this profession.

### **PROSTITUTION IN CALCUTTA**

Generally the sex sector emerged in the city of Calcutta, under the control of the English East India Company, since the 1690s. Though Reformation in Europe brought in stricter control of brothels, even their-closure, some of the early

colonial administrators-.realized that the life of a Professional courtesan in India was not the same as that of a prostitute in England, nor was prostitutes here looked down upon as a community, by all the other sections of the society. They had a special domain, relation with the rest of the society and terms of exchange recognized even by the new colonial courts. With the arrival of British colonialism and introduction of capitalist economy a radical shift could be gradually seen in the socio-political, economic and cultural scenario of India and 'prostitution' was not left out (Kincaid 1973, 98).

The growth of prostitution in the 19<sup>th</sup> century Calcutta was intrinsically related to the development of Calcutta as the capital of British India. To review some of the historical events-after the Industrial Revolution England needed colonial expansion primarily to extract the raw materials as well as to sell the finished products. Calcutta, one of the earliest colonial settlements of the British was used as a center to organize the linkages to extract the resources from the vast territory of the Indian Subcontinent for the economic growth in England. Therefore, it was left on Job Charnock, the then British East India Company's Chief in Bengal to establish the settlement in 1690 that was originally a conglomeration of three villages-Sutanuti, Dihi. Kolkata and Gobindapur. The city began to take shape from 1698 (Ray 1982, 23-26).

Therefore, the development of prostitution was closely associated with the roads development and expansion history of Calcutta. There were mainly two roads connected the Calcutta. First road was considered as pilgrim road which was stretched from Chitpur to Kalighat Temple via Bentick street and Chowranghee. The connection of second road was started from eastern bank of river Ganges and it was stretched upto southern side of Sealdah Railway station (Baithakkhana Market) via Koylaghata, North Laldighi, Lal Bazar and Bowbazar. It was a busy road because of its commercial importance. The prostitution was developed by the side of these roads. They

were mainly settled at Sidheswaritala, Sonagachi, Rambagan, Sethbagan, Jorabagan, Sindurpatti, Teritibagar, Janbazar-Dhukuribazar, Kalighat and Bow Bazar (Harkatha Lane)(Bandopadyaya 2002, 26).

The women of depressed and backward community generally engaged as prostitutes for their survival. There was relation between government and prostitution during this period. We find that they used to pay tax to the government for their profession. In an unpublished Records of Government by Revd, J. Long stated "... in 1752..... the property of prostitute was confiscated to the Government Revenue" (58). Admiral John Saplinton Stavoniras had given a description about the life of prostitute of Calcutta during 1768-1771 in his 'Voyages to the East Indies'. He wrote, "Prostitution is not thought a disgrace: there are everywhere licensed places, where a great number of loose women are kept; it is a livelihood that is allowed by law, upon payment to the faujdar, or sheriff, of the place, of a certain duty imposed upon the persons of the females who adopt this mode of life; they are generally assured at half a rupee or fifteen stivers per month"( Nair 1986, 160-61).

During this period, the Bengali novelists, journalists and so forth pictured the culture of prostitute and their clientele's behaviour in their writing very critically. They described that rich and educated people used to visit prostitution on different occasion at Calcutta and it was thereafter turned as a '*babu culture*'- keeping prostitute is considered to be a status symbol and many babus' one and only creditable achievements in life were the two storied or the three storied houses that they had built for their kepts and concubines, after which they could be remembered. Such were many rich and socially well known men at Calcutta who did not bother to see the face of their wife at night and the 'responsibility' was passed on to an employee who looked after the property or to a servant. Some babus used to keep his wife under lock and key at night at the fear of her having

liaison with the employees and then had fun at the drawing room with whores throughout the night. .. Another category of babus asks the servant to sleep in the bedroom at the fear of their absence being discovered by their parents. After midnight the babu would get back and hearing the babu knock on the bedroom door, the servant would get up and open the bedroom door and leave the room ... nobody in the house would have a clue about it. .. Hutom comments, Kolkata has become a city of prostitutes due to the great men like these. There is no neighbourhood without at least ten whorehouses and it is even on increase . As per Hutom the insatiable sexual desire of the rich people would neither leave the neighbourhood women (married or not) nor spare the women of their own household, irrespective of the social relationship they might be having with the particular lady. And this libertine behaviour by the male members of family had eventually either led to committing suicide by the female members or getting into work like prostitution. Hutom tells us that certain abortion-causing herbs used to be taken on a monthly basis by some rich households (Nag 1992, 169).

An idea of the behavior of the British soldiers in Calcutta can be had from the observation made by a Bengali newspaper in the 1820s. Referring to the arrival of fresh British troops and their initial stay in Fort William in Calcutta, the paper commented: "Since the Fort was very near to the city of Calcutta, the newly arrived soldiers took leave and went to the city, moved around in the sun, boozed and indulged in debarichery and similar acts." (Barleycorn 1943, 100).

The Census Report, 1806 of Calcutta recorded the statistic of population as prostitutes. It described that prostitutes owned 655 houses, out of 7433 houses and it was located by the side of 44 main roads of then Calcutta. It also mentioned that a brothel in 235 and 236 Bow Bazar street owned by a member of Dwarakanath Tagore's family. It had 43 rooms

for prostitutes and its rental value was Rs,140/- (Mukherjee 1974, 101).

It was also observed that due to some social customary rules, wife of a Civil Servants, Lawyer or Doctors did not accompany with their husband when they were posted to outside their native place. So, they kept a prostitute as their step wife who accompanied him at their work place(Nag 1992, 172).

Bengal Almanek's Street Directory of 1856 recorded that number 3-94 houses of Harkata Lane of Bow Bazar (now at central Calcutta) were occupied by 'Banglee Dancing Girls'. It also noted in the 'History of Kashimbazar Raj' that 'tenants (of Bow Bazar) were from a different community consisting of Anglo-Indians, Jews, Armenians and Baijis (nautch girl, generally Muslim) of mixed and uncertain birth who settled here from Lucknow and other places in upper India. This was also a closed society, none from outside could penetrate into the tenancy except those who were there from the beginning.... the names of several dancing girls are given as Bibi Neki, Bibi Rosenia....) (Ghosh1901, 27).

The Census 1901 of Calcutta recorded that total population of Calcutta was 847796, out of which 285200 was female population. The females of above 10 years of age were 199072 and among them, 14370 females were prostitutes. The statistics also recorded that out of 14 females of Calcutta, one was prostitute. Further, it was remarked that there were huge number of females secretly involved in this profession and they were basically maid servants, daily labour and so forth(Bandopadyaya 2002, 72).

The history tells that the number of prostitutes was increasing at alarming threat because of violence against women and poor economy and unstable marriage. For the control of entry of women into this profession, the enactment of the Contagious Diseases Act, 1868 was important. The aim of this was to register

the prostitutes and to undertake health check up to prevent and control sexual diseases. In this connection, 'The English Man Newspaper on 27<sup>th</sup> July, 1884 made an appeal, 'In Calcutta the effrontery of vice is becoming more and more insufferable. A few years ago the police authorities were empowered to shut up any house of ill-repute at will, and all the leading streets were free from these pest-houses. Since the repeat of the C D Act, however this authority seems to have been withdrawn, and now these shameless places are found in Wellesly Street, Dhurrumtollah, Elliot road, Marquis street, and other thoroughfares. Collinga Bazar street is unseakably shamless, and the whole neighbourhood of that street is infested with the most detestable characters. North of Bow Bazar the case is even worse, although it must be said that the European vermin who import women from the Danubi, and the wretched victims of their hideous traffic, are much more shameless than the lowest specimens of native humanity found in the northern end of the city(Ray Chowdhury, 1987, 91).

The officially reformist agenda of the new Indian elite, in respect of the sex sector, came dramatically to the fore in 1921. In that year some 350 prostitutes of Barishal (now in Bangladesh) approached Gandhiji and, expressed their desire to work further for the cause of India's liberation from the British rule. They were already registered with the Indian National Congress in some capacity. Even Gandhiji told them that they have no place in the society of the householders. They must leave their profession, renounce the world, and become nuns and, only then will they be able to serve the country(Sharma 2002, 82-85). It was a matter of regret that in India neither the rulers, nor the local elite aspiring for political power, was concerned about the prostitutes. Their concern was to prevent women from their own groups being channeled into the sex sector. The desire to raid brothels grew stronger, especially after enactment of the Calcutta Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act of 1923. The League of

Nations Committee on Trafficking in Women and Children said that in 1926 there were 20,000 Indian prostitutes in Kolkata. The League demanded of all governments that they gather the data regarding various aspects of prostitution in their respective countries. The Government of India asked the Provincial Governments to report on the matter, especially on the methods of rehabilitation being used, heralding the birth of state-sponsored rehabilitation in India. As a part of this exercise, the commissioner of police, Kolkata, collected the life histories of 50 prostitutes in 1935. Sixty six percent of them were married and, of them 42% was either driven out of their husband's home or had left it for some reason. Marriage did not give them any 'protection'. When a married woman is in love with another man she falls through the familial 'safety net'. It was and is an equally grave misdemeanour for a widow to be in lovewith someone. Sometimes a family friend or an acquaintance brings a woman to the market of part time or full time sexual services (Chatterjee 1990, 28-36) .

The reformist attempts to get rid of the prostitutes of Kolkata often cloaked some economic reasons as 'civic' or 'moral' reasons. The city improvement trust was set up in 1911. The roads and tramways were expanded and extended. This drove up the value of real estates in the College Street, Cornwallis Street, Lower Circular Road and Shovabazar Street. The police received numerous petitions at that time stating that these streets needed "cleaning up". The attempt was partly successful. However, a larger portion of the women rescued stated that they had no desire to retrace their steps. The 19th and 20th century Kolkata experience with police and non-police survey and rescue revealed a close nexus between familial oppression of women, their resultant desire to break free and, the sex sector(Chatterjee 1990, 28-36) .

However, after years of piecemeal legislation under British Rule, Independent India brought in unifonn laws applicable across the country. The Suppression of Trafficking in

Women and Children Act, (SITA) was passed in 1956. It used UN Conventions as it's template of human rights. SITA was designed to punish those who coerce and/ or benefit from prostitutes' labour. It criminalized procuring, trafficking, brothel keeping, pimping, and living off the proceeds of prostitution. It was not actually designed to punish prostitutes per se, although, SITA has become the Prevention of Immoral Trafficking act of 1986, it has not led to the prosecution of procurers, pimps, brothel keepers. Instead, prostitutes have been prosecuted under the section that prohibited soliciting, indecent behavior or the carrying on of prostitution in the vicinity of a public place. Other provisions in which sex workers are implicated are also found in the Indian Penal Code (IPC), 1860 which contains general sections against trafficking and slavery of women and children. The Constitution of India (Art. 23, 39. 42) also contains certain provisions that address the trafficking in human beings. It is widely acknowledged in the last two decades the discourse on the issues of women in prostitution has undergone a shift through the efforts of groups working with women in prostitution and growing prostitutes' movements in many parts of the world.

At present roughly 60000 women are in this profession and they were the children of prostitute, trafficked from backward districts West Bengal and neighbouring countries, Bangladesh and Nepal. These brothels based female sex workers occupied eight red-light area of Kolkata. They set up their household and living their new generation with almost in inhuman condition.

## CONCLUSION

Prostitution has rightly been called the oldest profession in the world. It is also one which is nearly universally prevalent in all nations, communities and societies for as long as the masculine libido remained insatiate, the male's unrestrained sexual energy shall always find ways and means to perpetuate a system

which in today's parlance is equated as sex-slavery. Outright kidnapping, extreme poverty, misfortunes such as divorce/widowhood, social customs were some of the reasons compelling women to take to prostitution. In pre-colonial history of India, we find a vicious social-customs considered as Devdaasi in which families would dedicate their daughter or daughters to the local deity—be it Basava in Karnataka, Khandoba in Maharashtra. Such girls were prevented from marrying as they were regarded as the God's bride, and they were in reality, the common mistress of the principal functionaries of the temple to whom they had been dedicated. The prostitute in British Calcutta like today cannot be characterised as constituting a distinctive class of their own. They ranged from the economically well-off Baijis and Tawaifs to the lowly, despised 'randis' living on the miserly pittances eked out by their village patrons. An activity which had hitherto been spatially dispersed now began to be agglomerated within a specified part of the city which came to be called as the red-light area. It is not clear whether this was due to a deliberate design of the British administrators, for whom the proliferation of this activity within a well-demarcated area could have meant a greater ease in implementing legislations such as the Contagious Disease Act.

The British administration never viewed prostitution from a moral angle, or if they did, their concern was about preserving the dignity of the Christian and European women than the Indian. They viewed the Indian harlot as a medical or hygiene problem, and they were concerned only to the extent that the native women could be precluded from spreading venereal diseases to their soldiers and officers. Thus, the Imperial Government did not look into the supply-side forces which forced ill-circumstanced women into a profession from which the victim or practitioner had no escape, and which branded her progenies to come with a taint as demeaning, and social ostracism as

severe as a leper. The British could only apply legislations borrowed from their home country which reflected the gender-bias and double-standards of the Victorian Age. Instead of applying the retributive action of the state on punishing those who pushed the hapless women to this trade, they made the life of the Indian prostitute more miserable by initiating the system of 'Lock Hospitals' and 'Registered Prostitutes', the intention of which was to fully meet the lascivious needs of the English Tommy without impairing his bodily vigour and, thus, maintain the British Army, an important pillar of British hegemony around the globe, as an active fighting force capable of warding off challenges to this 'Jewel in the Crown' both internally and externally.

In post independence India, we find that there were some acts only enforced to control the act of prostitution. There was neither such initiative to trap the entry of women/girls into this profession or any rehabilitation measures taken for them. But the spread of endemic diseases- HIV/AIDS alerted the government of India for which it took initiative for control and prevent of the spread of the diseases as prostitutes were the highly intermediary risk group. When we are publicizing the women's empowerment through equity and justice for better society, the prostitutes are in same corner to deprive as sex slave. The research studies show that they are victim of extreme poverty and patriarchy. But there is no step to stop the entry of women into this profession. It would be run as alive profession. There is no remedy at all willfully!

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