CHAPTER TWO

The Social History of Prostitution and Syphilis in Bengal: From the Mid Nineteenth to the Early Twentieth Centuries
"If sex is so rigorously repressed, this is because it is compatible with a general and intensive work imperative. At a time when labor capacity was being systematically exploited how could this capacity be allowed to dissipate itself in pleasurable pursuits except in those reduced to a minimum that enabled it to reproduce itself."

Michel Faucault

In this chapter the history of prostitution in the colonial Bengal vis-à-vis the then contemporary socio-cultural and political-economic orders has been discussed. The chapter has made an attempt to analyze how syphilis had played a role in shaping the discourse of prostitution and the status of the prostitutes at that point of time in Bengal. In this context, the importance of public health as an exploiter or liberator of the women in prostitution is debated on. The era witnessed a political economic and societal transformation through a rise in moneyed class, economic discrepancies; a gradual emergence of an aggressive foreign culture, trade and commerce that in turn had its' influence on society and culture and especially on health and sexual health.

Mention worthy, irrespective of the sexual space provided within the socio-cultural, or religious norms, there has always been a market ready to cater to the male sexual needs that has to be primarily satisfied by women in the form of prostitution. What is important is the change in the nature and intensity of that market. Along with the commercial market of sex and its relationship with the prevalent sexual culture and social norms, it is to be noted that the manifestation of sexual culture and the sexual space have changed itself vis-à-vis prostitution with emerging commodification of human relationships. It is a transformation from sin to crime.

Since the colonial period a political-economic situation was created where the steady supply of women for the ready payment could be available. Accompanied by

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emerging capitalism commoditization of prostitutes was attempted by equating them with the landmark disease, syphilis since the nineteenth century as manifested through public health measures and regulations.

I would try to search for a response to these issues in the transformation of sexual space provided within the socio-cultural norms and the commodification as well as criminalization of prostitution through an apparent attempt to control syphilis by imposition of public health laws from the mid nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries.

The Historical Context of Sexuality and Prostitution in Bengal

With the rise of property and status differentiation (like class in central and Western Europe and caste, that also has a component of class, in India) there appeared unpaid labour and also sporadically, wage labour. In the absence of archaeological evidence it has been conjectured on the basis of literary evidence and ethnological data that simultaneously there rose a professional prostitution of free women, side by side with unpaid sexual services. Here it may be mentioned in passing, that among the Romans, the word famulus meant a household slave and, the word familia, from which the word family is derived, signified the totality of slaves belonging to an individual. “The modern family”, wrote Marx, “contains in embryo not only slavery, but also serfdom... It contains within itself in miniature all the antagonisms which later developed on a wide scale within society and its state”. Modern prostitution is a paid form of reproductive labour, performed under conditions of ever increasing commodification of all goods and services, within the currently expanding system of

2 Engels, Friedrich.. Der Ursprung der familia des privateigenthums und des staats.Germany. 1884/1990.

3 Ibid.

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.

The history of sexuality, sexually transmitted diseases and prostitution has unfolded within the larger history of continuous articulation of our civil and political societies that straddle several social time zones – from that of the pre-agricultural hunter-gatherers to that of the netizens – here and now, in the Republic of India.

It is common knowledge that the present system of capitalism and its civil society emerged in Central and Western Europe. This system and its individual rights oriented civil society was imposed upon the people of India, mainly by the British imperialism. Prior to that, our tribal and caste divided civilizations had several type of civil societies of their own. The Arthashastra and, the Kamsutra bear testimony to the existence of rule governed contractual relations, including commoditized sexual relations, in ancient India. Subsequently, the ancient Indian civil and political societies were crossed with several Central Asian and peripheral Iranian strains of the same. Finally, some European colonial powers – Portugal, France and, mainly England – crossbred some colonial Eurasian civil societies and states in India.

The story of the people of Indus Valley Civilization (c. 3000-1750 B.C.), the oldest evidence of urbanization hitherto discovered in our subcontinent, continues to be reconstructed. These 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. Besides consecration of Indian kings and priests and usage as a pilgrimage, the ‘Great Bath’ of Mohenjodaro, had a third purpose – “These lotus ponds were generally the resort of a special class of water-deities or water witches, the APSARAS. The APSARAS are described as irresistibly beautiful women who would entice men to consort with them and eventually led the heroes to destruction. These bathing beauties were also accomplished in song and dance. The demigoddesses had individual names and each was associated with some particular locality. Several ancient Indian dynasties were supposed to have descended from the temporary union of some particular APSARAS with a hero. The APSARA could not marry a husband and settle down to permanent, normal family life. This would explain the use of the peculiarly constructed rooms at the ‘Great Bath’. “It was part of the ritual for men not only to bathe in the sacred water but also to cohabit with the female attendant representatives of the Mother goddess to whom the citadel complex belonged”

The Rig Veda (c. 1200-900 B.C.) is the first ancient Indian sacred text that contains references to sexual desire (10/129/45), marriage (19/85), polygyny (1/62/1, 10/145, 10/160), extra marital affairs (1/117/18), incest (10/10, 10/61/5-7), polyandry (9/5/27, 5/17/8-9). The earliest mention of prostitution in Vedic period occurs in the Rigveda. Between eighth and fifth century B.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. In Sukumari Bhattacharji’s words, “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".\textsuperscript{10}

It is indeed hard to trace the root of professional prostitution. As per Sukumari Bhattacharji professional prostitution could flourish in an economic society that envisages a picture of prosperity through trade and commerce and generation of surplus. It also supposes breaking down of tribal society and rise of joint family in a settled agrarian society with a rise of private property. All these curtail the freedom and mobility of the women folk that they used to enjoy. To Bhattacharji, “with the accumulation of private property, the wife was more jealously guarded and jealously watched over... Whether as an unmarried girl, a wife or a widow, she belonged to some man; so other men could not approach her without trespassing on the owner's property rights. Pleasure, outside the home, therefore had to be paid for, hence prostitution had to be institutionalized so that there was an assurance of a steady supply for ready payment”. \textsuperscript{11}

This textual evidence shows that the various familial and marketized forms of management of human sexuality were already in vogue at that time. Some of the first prostitutes operated from temples. They were called Devadasis (Bayaderes). The Yogimara Cave (Ramgarh hills, Madhya Pradesh) Inscriptions (c.34\textsuperscript{th} century B.C.), indicating the existence of Devadasi Sutanuka, happen to be the earliest archaeological evidence about the existence of prostitution in India.

There are some major religions in the world wherein sex was/is considered to be a sin. In the ancient Indian sacred and secular texts, however, pleasure – including sexual pleasure (Kama) – was considered to be one of the three main aims of human life; the other two being Dharma and, Artha, roughly translatable as religion/basic principles that hold life together and, power in conjunction with wealth, respectively (Manusmriti: 2\textsuperscript{224}, 7\textsuperscript{151-152}; The Ramayana: 1\textsuperscript{65}; the Mahabharata: 14\textsuperscript{37\textbackslash}15; Kumarsambhava: 5\textsuperscript{38}; Arthashastra: 1\textsuperscript{7}; and kamastura: 1/1; 1\textsuperscript{2}). The Shatapatha Brahmana (10\textsuperscript{1\textbackslash}8; 11\textsuperscript{3\textbackslash}2\textbackslash1) and, the brihadaryanyaaka Upanishad(1\textsuperscript{4\textbackslash}6\textbackslash4) contain

\textsuperscript{10} Bhattacharji, Sukumari. ‘Women and Society in Ancient India’. Calcutta: Basumati, 1987

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.
detailed description and discussion of the various aspects of human contact, touch, penetration, sexual intercourse and related issues. What about the fourth, Moksha???

Apart from the Vedic discourse on sexuality, we have the Tantric discourse that venerated female sexuality. These were parallel traditions that influenced one another. Both the traditions had numerous sects. There were even non Hindu – Buddhist and Jain – Tantric sects. A Tantric text, the Kularnabtantra, defined sexual intercourse as the meeting of supreme energy with supreme consciousness(5/112) and, compared the Vedas the Puranas (Hindu mythicallores) with the ordinary prostitutes – who are accessible for all and, the secrets of the Kaula Tantric lores with the housewives- who remain hidden, beyond public gaze (11/84-85). The Tantric tradition, though patriarchal, shows greater respect toward female sexuality. Even when high Brahminical Hinduism became more hypocritical, as it came in contact with Victorian England, various Tantric sects secretly continued their worship of female sexuality.

In the Arthashastra (c. 300 B.C. – 150 C.E.), the oldest extant Indian text on power and wealth, prostitution has been treated as a well-established form of service sector, the topmost layer of which was not only approved, but even organized by the state. Regularized prostitution was recognized as a social institution by the later Vedic age, i.e., around the eighth or seventh century B.C. Kautilya in Arthasastra says, prostitutes were recruits mainly from four sources - namely, born as prostitute’s daughters, caught for adultery, purchased or captured as war booty. Other sources were temples or royal houses. Donors of a girl to a temple were said to enjoy a prosperous life and reach heaven after death. Arthasastra has mentioned the rules on how a prostitute should deal with her

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14 Ibid.
customers as well as punitive measures for the customers who cheat or harm a prostitute.\textsuperscript{15} It is also known that the tax (two days' earnings) that the prostitutes used to pay was a great source of revenue for the state's exchequer. Prostitution was neither a crime nor a sin, but a profession that should abide by the rules and regulations of the state\textsuperscript{16} What is more, services of the courtesan deluxe were considered to be paradigmatic for the entire entertainment sector; the officer in charge of the sex sector looked after the wellbeing of the entire entertainment sector. However, it would be altogether wrong to assume that in Ancient India and later, the profession was free from stigmatization. Some parts of Europe came slightly closer to this ancient Indian attitude to prostitution for a short period, only in the Middle Ages, when at Toulouse the profits from brothels were shared between the City and the University and when in England the bordellos were first licensed by the bishops of Winchester and later on by the Parliament.\textsuperscript{17}

The Kamasutra (c. 3\textsuperscript{rd} century C.E.) of Vatsyayana Mallanaga is the oldest extant Indian text on pleasure and, on erotic love. In Vatsyayana's own words: "Pleasure, in general, consists in engaging the ear, skin, eye, tongue and nose each in its own appropriate sensation, all under the control of the mind and heart driven by the conscious self. Pleasure in its primary form, however, is a direct experience of an object of the senses, which bears fruit and is permeated by the sensual pleasure of erotic arousal that results from the particular sensation of touch."\textsuperscript{18} Scholars opine, that this text was composed sometime after 225 C.E. It is one of the main sources of our knowledge about the social conditions in India at that time. Hence, the text is, in a sense, its own context. The cultural context here is urbane and cosmopolitan, with a real consciousness of the possible regions of Bharatvarsha (India). It is a kind of pre-imperial consciousness, setting the stage for the Gupta Empire that would dominate Aryavarta (North India) from the fourth century to the sixth.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{16} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
Vatsyayana argued that, since a man and a woman depend upon one another in sex, it requires a method, and this method may be learned from the Kamasutra.\textsuperscript{20} The Kamasutra was based on the works of many authors who preceded Vatsyayana, authors whose texts have not come down to us: Auddalaki, Babhravya, Charayan, Dattaka, Ghotakamukha, Gonardiya, Gonikaputra and Suvarnabaha. Vatsyayana cites them often, sometimes in agreement, at others in disagreement. In Vatsyan’s ‘Kamasutra’ instructions are given to men on how to seduce a chaste girl and when she was abandoned she was forced to adopt prostitution.\textsuperscript{21} Payment and social status depended on looks, age and accomplishments. The common prostitutes had no guarantee of meal or shelter against old age, poverty or disease. However, institutionalized prostitution gave some amount of social security for retired and old courtesans. Sukumari Bhattacharji referring to Kautilya, says, Caninhas, Rupajivas, Vesyas, Dasis, Devadasis, Pumiscalis, Silpakarikas, Kansikastri were given pension by the state at old age. An average, ordinary prostitute was hardly married back and their bodies, accomplishments were to be enjoyed by the community with an uncertainty regarding payment, fear of molestation, torture and death while socially considered as untouchables.\textsuperscript{22} This signifies a marked shift in the attitude of the people from matriarchal Indus Valley to patriarchal Vedic civilization that still continues today.

The Kamasutra was neither the first, nor the last Indian text that is, in defiance of Michel Foucault’s taxonomy, at once an ars erotica and a scientia sexualis. It has been followed by the Kuttanimata of Damodar Gupta (8th century), the Kalavilasa of Kshemendra (11th century), the Nagarasarvasva of Bhikshu Padmashri, the Panchasyaka of Jyotirishvara (11th – 13th century), the Ratirahasya of Kokka (prior to 13th century), the Kamasamuha of Ananta (1457), the Ratiratna-Pradeepika of Devaraja (15th century), the Shringaradeepika of Harihara (15th century), the Anangaranga of Kalyanamalla (15th century) and, the Shringaramanjari of Ali Akbar Shah (17th century). A few Sanskrit glosses and commentaries on the Kamasutra, like the Kandarpachudamani of Veerbhadra (1577) and, the Praudhapriya of Bhaskara Brismha (1788), are known to exist in libraries, in the manuscript form. The Jayamangala gloss of Yashodhara Indrapada (13th century) is, however, the only one that has been published. There are several published commentaries on the Kamasutra

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid.
in modern Indian languages too. These include a Tamil (1924), a Telugu (1924), a Bengali (1927), and, a Hindi (1964) commentary. For a comprehensive bibliography in English, see: Vatsyayana 2002.23

The above bibliographical account traces the chronological evolution of the classical theoretical attitude to sexuality, as it found expression in texts on erotic love and in commentaries on them. What is the end product of this evolution? Let us take a look at one example. According to Devadatta Shastri, a 20th century Hindi commentator on Yashodhara’s Jayamangala gloss on Vatsyayana’s kamasutra: On reflection, it appears that all of human life is permeated by sexuality. That is why the Vedas and the Upanishads too give examples of sex between man and woman. The ten sections on sleeping together in the Rig Veda correspond to various types of sex discussed in the kamasutra. The text does not deal with an improper subject or science. From a spiritual viewpoint, too, the universe in all its variety is essentially sexual. There is a strong relationship between sexuality and attraction toward respected elders appears in the form of faith, devotion and other similar sentiments. Among equals, the same attraction appears as friendship and comradeship. Toward inferiors, attraction takes the form of compassion and kindness; toward children – that of affection. The same sexuality is manifested as maternal sentiment in the mother’s heart, as lust in the lover’s embrace and, as compassion toward the poor and the suffering. On the question of sexuality, the Kamasutra is singularly sublime. It contains an entire Book of six chapters on the courtesans (reportedly written at the request of the courtesans of Pataliputra), where we find descriptions and prescriptions about: deciding on a friend, an eligible and an ineligible lover, getting a lover; giving the beloved what he wants; ways of getting money from him, signs indicating his cooling passion, ways of getting rid of him; getting back together with an ex-lover; weighing different kinds of profits; calculating the gains and losses, consequences and doubts and, the types of courtesans. Vatsyayana was of the opinion that kings and prostitutes were people with identical life goals. He wrote: “When the three aims – Dharma, Artha and Kama – compete in human life, each is more important than the one that follows. But Artha is

23 Ibid.
the most important goal for king – because it is the basis of social life – and for a courtesan. Artha is the means of achieving the three aims of life. 24

Ancient India accepted many forms of erotic love. Wendy Doniger and Sudhir Kakar, are of the opinion that the Kamasutra can be viewed as an account of a psychological war of liberation that took place in India about two thousand years ago. The first aim of this war was to rescue erotic pleasure from the hegemony of reproduction while the second aim was to civilize raw and explosive sexuality, to teach that pleasure like production needs to be cultivated, that in the realm of human sexual pleasure nature requires culture. 25 He also noted the existence of male and female homoeroticism and, of transgender sexuality (5/6/1-4; 2/6/46-47; 2/9/25-41) in India of his time. 26

Despite its awareness of the interrelationships of violence and sexuality, the erotic tone of the Kamasutra happens to be one of lightness. The text belongs to the literary climate of the first six centuries of the Common Era in India, when the erotic was associated with all that was bright, shining and beautiful in the world. The Sanskrit dramas and poems of that period are also characterized by an eroticism that is more hedonist than impassioned. The Kamasutra both reflects and fosters woman’s enjoyment of her sexuality. It may not be a mere coincidence that the first Sanskrit text in praise of the Goddess, the Devimahatmya was also composed around that time. Vatsyayana and the later authors of the Kamasutra genre may be viewed as champions of sexual pleasure in an era when the Buddhist view that equated the god of love with Mara or Death was still influential. They may also be viewed as the inheritors of that materialist aesthetics of the epics Ramayana and Mahabharata, wherein sexual love is usually a down to earth affair of desire and its gratification.

Women in the Kamasutra are sexual beings with feelings and emotions. Book Three on Virgins instructs the man on a young girl’s need for gentleness. Erotic pleasure demands that the man be pleasing to his partner. In recommending that the man not approach the women sexually for the first three nights after marriage, using this time


25 Ibid.

26 Ibid.
to understand her feelings, aim at her trust, and arouse her love, Vatsyayana took a
great leap forward in the history of sexuality in India, by introducing the notion of
love in sex. He also considered love-marriage to be the best form of marriage
(3/5/30).²⁷

That the prostitutes is a normal human being, capable of love and deserving love, has
been recognized in the descriptive and prescriptive texts like the Kamasutra, and in
‘high’ literature like the Mrichhakatika, kathasaritsagara and, Kalavilasa. The
legendary courtesans of the land – like Amrapali, (a direct disciple of Siddhartha
Gautama the Buddha), Shalabati, Basabdatta, Madhabsena, Vilasbati, Kumudika,
Basantasena and many others right up to Umrao Jaan of Lucknow under British rule –
are remembered even today. Many, if not most, of our classical music and dance
forms owe a great debt to the women in prostitutution-devadasis and courtesans – for
their survival and development. Like every other social transaction in India, the status
of the prostitutes was determined by the caste/class status of their clients. It still is.
The high society courtesans/companions did/ do grace public ceremonies, of the civil
and political societies together with their celebrity clients. The poor and illiterate
prostitute catering to the unskilled, illiterate, ‘low’ caste/class migrant labourer was to
remains an object of scorn and neglect.

Scholars have located about 50 synonyms of the word collocation ‘prostitutes’ in
Sanskrit and Pali literature. Some of these exude respect, even reverence: the Rig
Vedic Agru (4/19/9) – a single woman who moves freely like a river²⁸; Brajayitri
(Shukayajurveda/Bajasaneyi Samhita 30/2) – the woman who provides happiness;
Nagarashovini – the woman who lends grace to a town and, Janapadakalyani - the
women who takes care of the welfare of the settlement (Jataka 1/43). In the epics
Ramayana and Mahabharata (c. 6th-2nd centuries B.C.), as well as in the Puranas (c.
400-1000 C.E.) or the ancient mythical lore such synonyms grew in number. There
we have: Swairini – a fearless housewife who openly entertains her customers at
home; Swatantra – an independent woman; and Swadhinahoubana – a woman who
handles her youth independently. The Sanskrit texts Arthashastra and Kamasutra and,

²⁷ Ibid.
²⁸ The Rig Veda. 1848-51. Rig-Veda ou Livre des hymnes. Tr. And Ed. Collection of Ancient Hindu
Hymns. 6 vols. London

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the Pali texts Majjhimanikaya and Sanjuttanikaya bear testimony to the existence of state funded education and state sector employment for the Ganika – the Coutesan deluxe. The state provided them with some pension on retirement and, strictly controlled their contractual commitments. Below the Ganika, were the Rupajiva – the woman who lived by their beauty. There were either self-taught or their mothers/clients took care of their education. Below them were others, some of them part timers. The poorest among them, hailing from the ‘lowest’ Varna/castes, hardly had any education or security. The Ganika and the Rupajiva paid income tax. They sometimes worked as spies and, could be released if the king so wished or if someone else bought their release from the profession.29

For any observer of the contemporary Indian sexual culture, the world of ancient Indian sexuality and prostitution described above is a world gone long ago in a galaxy far away and has but little relevance in the current and ever changing scenario of the sexual culture and prostitution in the sub continent. Nonetheless, the first European translators of the Kamasutra (French: Isidore Liseux 1883 and, Pierre Eugene Lemaieresse 1891; English: Richard Burton and F.F. Arbuthnot 1893; German: Richard Schmidt 1897; Italian: Anotonio Velini 1945 and, Russian: Alexander Y. Syrkin 1993) found in this text an welcome ally in their campaign for sexual pleasure against the reigning church/state lore that sought to subordinate if not altogether eradicate it in the service of a patriarchal reproductive goal. For them the Kamasutra was the product of a place and a people who had once raised the search for sexual pleasure to the status of a life goal. Paradoxically enough, when the Victorian Puritanism was controlling and curbing Indian cultures, sub cultures and sexual spaces within it through the gradual implementation of the Contagious Diseases Act, the Cantonment Act and so on by the colonizers30, the societal, cultural and sexual norms of the colonized natives of the colonies were also influencing them, the colonizers, in turn by spreading the message of sexual liberation. Like many things about ancient India, the modern Indian re-discovery of the Kamasutra, followed in the


30 See Chapter-II
wake of the European discovery of it. The first modern Indian edition of the text came out in 1891, eight years after its first French edition of 1883.

In the intervening millennium and a half since the days of Vatsyayana, our attitude to sexuality has gone through a transformation, and, prostitutes—once regarded as normal, even respected, human beings capable of and deserving love—became criminal objects of scorn and hostility.

It is noteworthy, that the urban culture that encouraged the write up of Vatsyayana had seen a gradual decline and de-urbanization in the post-Gupta period. This decadence may be partially attributed to northern and central Indian civilisational decline; and yet others may be traced to invasions by and subjugation under some militarily superior but culturally more primitive Central Asian people—like the Sakas, Huns, Turkomans, Pathans and Mogols. The reasons behind the decline of our sexual culture and the contours of the plurality of the present day sexual culture remain almost an un-investigated and less explored area by the social scientists.

At the high noon of India’s sexual multiculturalism, around c. 2nd century C.E., the Manusmriti, with a sort of counter-enlightenment vengeance, argued against the acceptance of gifts from prostitutes (4/209) and, put them in the class of open thieves, together with bribe takers, frauds, shady traders of all sorts, smooth operators and, those great ministers and doctors who behave with impropriety (9/250). Women in general came to be called gateways to hell. Manu was of the opinion that lesbians should be fined, whipped, their head should be shaved, two of their fingers should be chopped off and, they should be made to ride on a donkey; women engaged in extra-marital relations were to be thrown before dogs to be eaten and, their male partners were to be burnt on a red hot iron bed. The cult of monastic celibacy and was in ascendancy. The domains of men and women were strictly segregated. The situation was so unbearable that some dissident Buddhist monks and nuns revolted. They said that if the aim (Avippaya) of Dharma is one (Eka), then men and women should not be segregated. This one aim (Ekavippayi) sect of Buddhism was very small.


However, their influence upon the underground religio-sexual culture of the land was transmitted through the various trend of Tantric Buddhism – Vajrayana, Kalachakrayana and especially Sahajayana.\(^{33}\)

The eastern part of the land in general and Bengal in particular has always been an important centre for the cultivation of the Tantric lore. The authors of the proto-Bengali texts-the Charyachryabinishchayah (10\(^\text{th}\)/11\(^\text{th}\) century C.E.) – Meenanath, Luipada, Kanhapda and others were Buddhist Tantircs. All the Hindu and Buddhist Kings of Bengal patronized various Tantric sects. The Tantric circles of Bengal constantly interacted with the high Brahmanism imported from North and West India during an entire millennium (6\(^\text{th}\) century B.C. – 5\(^\text{th}\) century C.E.) and, continuously reiterated the importance of the Sahajiya (easy/natural) modes of worship, that sought religious experiences through the senses, especially, through human sexual love. The divine romance of Krishna (an incarnation of Vishnu) and his consort Radha was celebrated by Jayadeva, the 12\(^\text{th}\) century author in his Gitagovindam, wherein religiosity is locked in lover’s embrace with human sensual attraction, estrangement, yearning and reconciliation. Songs from the Gitagovindam continue to be sung in the course of daily personal prayers, in temples, during festivals and, at Kirtan ceremonies (communal worship through song and dance). 15\(^\text{th}\) century poets Chandidas and Vidyapati continued this tradition. Shree Chaitanya and his followers (15\(^\text{th}\) – 16\(^\text{th}\) centuries) further explored the parallels between divine and human love. They elevated Parakiya (non-legitimate) love above Svakiya (legitimate/conjugal) love, as the more intense of the two. Parakiya love is felt without any consideration for the conventions of the society or for personal gain and, hence it is considered closer to divine love. Radha (wife of a maternal uncle of Krishna) is conceived by the Vasinava-Sahajiyas to be the ideal of Parakiya woman. Even the male devotees are encouraged to assume the attitude of Radha, while worshipping Krishna and, thus transcend the gendered structure of love in patriarchy. This is a clear echo of the Tantric attitude toward female sexuality: “Streemayanchajagat sarvam swayam tabattatha bhabet” (“Consider the entire universe and your own self to be full of feminity”) (Mundamalatantra 5/38). A male Sahajiya is called upon to ensure the orgasm of his female consort, as a part of his religious duty. The Bauls, Sahebdhanis, 

Balahadis, Kartabhajas and numerous other sects, looked down upon and persecuted by high Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity, continue to cultivate their more female-friendly attitude even today. No wonder rural men and women as described as the “lower order” from whom the migrant labourers and the prostitutes come, are close to these sects. The real sexual culture of our people, especially of our women, has literally gone underground. Expelled by the culture of the “higher order” from ‘high’ literature, art, education and, culture in general, the sexual expressions found a way out through religious Sahajiya songs, keertons, Bauls songs under layers of metaphors and tropes and, in some temple sculptures, murals, paintings, folk songs and ballads. The elite of India, and of Bengal, still consider these texts to be stuff meant for the folklorists and/or historians of art alone and exploit their own women in a subordinate economic, political, cultural and sexual position in the name of enlightenment. Much later, in medieval period courtesans known as Baijis took the place of Ganikas in terms of beauty, charm and accomplishments.

It is with this inherited background and in these contexts that the sex sector emerged in the city of Kolkata, 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 were 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.


Bengal in the Nineteenth Century

"Ajob Shahar Kolketa"

"Randi badi judi gadi michhey kathar ki keta!"

(A strange city is this Calcutta. Whores and houses, carriages and cars abound. And how fashionable it is to lie!)  

The growth of prostitution in the 19th 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. 

In Sumanta Banerjee’s words,

"The development of Calcutta as a city has to be understood in the context of the dominance-dependence relationship that exist between the imperial country and its colony".

The growth of Calcutta as a colonial city created a new economic and social order where previous economic set up as well as caste and class barriers underwent a transformation. Thereby, we see the rise of Zamindars, traders, businessman and professionals or bureaucrats, in simple words a class of nouveau riche, who are being judged no more by their origin or caste, but by their merit and money, e.g. Jayaram

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36 Ibid.

37 Ibid.
Tagore, the ancestor of Rabindranath Tagore was looked down upon as a lower caste- Peerali Brahman-a Brahman contaminated by Muslim. But the position of the Tagore family became incontrovertible after his son Darpanarayan established himself as a dewan to the then governor general (acting) Mr. Wheelar. However, although capitalism was on its wake, but at the same time the age old feudal culture, society and mindset were still very much in existence. By the end of the eighteenth century gradually a trend of investing money in the real estate than in business could be seen among the noveau riche class (Banarjee, 1989). And this development certainly has a link with the emerging prospect of prostitution in the 19th century as far as the various types of clientele are concerned. Some of the descendants of the noveau riche blew off the inheritance on wine, women within a short span. Some of them like Tagore, Debs, Mullicks had been able to continue with their status till the end of nineteenth century and played an important role in the cultural development of the era as well.  

However during the 19th century, clients of the prostitutes as well as the prostitutes themselves are coming from varied socio-economic class composition.

The Clientele

The class composition of the clients were divided into three categories: a landowner class having income from property ranging form fifty thousands pounds or five lacks rupees a year to five thousands pounds or fifty thousands rupees in year. Then comes the class of newly emerging professionals appointed at various level of colonial administration and coming into existence to fulfil the need of colonial economy and society as well as service requirements arising out of that system, and the third category are the people whom Sumanta Banarjee called, the people of 'lower order'.

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 artisans, laborers, domestic servants, non-Bengali migrants form other states and so on.40

The white clientele covered high level administrative officials and high ranking military personnel, but the majority was constituted by Tommies or ordinary soldiers who had 'no option' but to satisfy their 'insatiable sexual needs' by 'native women'. The colonial administration really took care of the fact that the sexual passions of their soldiers were being taken care of. A letter written by a junior English official posted in Andaman and Nicobar Islands for the soldiers under his command during the Wahabi movement and 1857 War of Independence asking his senior officials to supply prostitutes, could be a classic example of that,

"...necessity, which appears...to exist for the provision of some outlet for the passions of men (i.e., personnel of the Port Blair Free Police) hitherto wholly unused to the exercise of any curb upon whom religion or morality exercise no check, principle or restrain (sic), and which, in the absence of their accustomed tributaries, will, there is every cause to fear, find vent in other channels far more perilous."41

This taking care of the sexual needs of the soldier led to the setting up of brothels within the regimental bazaars known as 'Chaklas' and later on the promulgation of the Cantonment Act of 1864 and Indian Contagious Diseases Act of 1868 that are seen by some scholars as the colonizers masculine attempts to tap the sexuality of the colonized women.. 42

The Prostitutes

Prostitutes, like their clientele, were divided along the social class, economic and religious lines depending upon their skills, origin and income.

41 Home Department, Provisions of Public women for the Port Blair Free Place.No.221.Dated Port Blair, 25 August 1773.
A new trend of keeping of single native women as kept evolved during the British rule in the 18th century, which replaced the 'harems' of Muslim nawabs of Bengal. Another class represented the displaced Muslims musicians and dancers of Northern India as a consequence of the decline of the Moghul Empire and loss of patronage from the old aristocrats.

However, the position of rural Bengali women became uncertain due to some historical events—the Marhatta attack in the mid-18th Century accompanied by abduction and rape of women who were considered as polluted by the society. Moreover, after 1770 famine almost a third of the population of Bengal was wiped out and many families were forced to sell their children. Thus, "It was these rootless and displaced women-girls sold away by their famine-stricken parents, singers and dancers fallen on evil days, widows and daughters from Kulin Brahmin families rejected as liabilities by their families, female slaves seeking escape from captivity, victims of seduction and abduction-who formed the first generation of prostitutes in the colonial world of market economy in 19th Century Bengal" (Banerjee, 1998).

However, very much like late 20th century, even then, violence-rape, abduction, enticement and exploitation of minor children and women for prostitution have shown a steady increase between 1866 and 1904. Thus, Mofussil towns and market places became the centers of prostitution while Calcutta remains the 'Flesh-Pot'.

The Popular Culture and its Decline

In the colonial period, especially in the nineteenth century Bengal two major cultural trends could be witnessed- a folk culture or the culture of the 'lower order', and an elite culture of the educated native, representative of the Victorian Puritanism or the

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43 Maharashtra-Puran, composed in 1951 by Gangaram Dutta, gives a graphic account of the invasion of Bengal by Marhattas; - Published in Dangerous Outcast by Sumanta Banarjee, 1998.


45 Mukharjee, Arun Bengal, K.P. Bagchi, 1995; Published in ‘Dangerous Outcast’, by Sumanta Banarjee, 1998
‘voice of metropolis’ from England that attempts to silence the previous cultural order, trying to make it a 'culture of silence'.

The migrants from rural Bengal to urban Calcutta—whether a prostitute or a non-prostitute—heritage of traditional rural folk culture enriching it with new motifs and various forms of entertainments.

As per an early nineteenth century Bengali poet there were various types of popular entertainments prevalent in Bengal at that time—Panchali (songs, usually devotional, interspersed with rhymes), Sari, (boatmen’s song), Akhdai (a contest of songs), Malashi (Songs about Kali), Bijaya (sung on the last day of the Durga Puja festivities to bid farewell to the goddess Durga), Jatra (dramatic performances), Jhumur (exchange of repartees in the form of songs), Kobi songs and Keertans (songs in praise of Radha and Krishna or Kali and Shiva).

Some of these cultural expressions of the lower order were boisterous and used the rural colloquy of the day that was usually sexually uninhibited. These ways of the expressions became a form of culture whether oral or written, especially when it came down to ridicule the anglicized or non-anglicized elite nouveau riche, their life-style, habits and scandals—a source of endless amusement for the people of the lower order. For example, Dashu Ray in one of his Panchali-Sita-Anweshan compares contemporary social trends with some of the events of Ramayana:

“Satider anno jotey na, beshyader jaroa gahona
Raboner swarnapuri, Sri Ramchandra banachari”

(Meaning, chaste wives do not get food, while whores wear ornaments studded with jewels; similarly people like Ravan stays at golden mansion while Ramchandra roams around at forest).

Or

‘Brandy, rendi, ganja, guli, yaar juty katokguli, Mukhetey Sarboda buli, hoot boley dey ganjaye tan”, {Meaning: they (the Bengali ‘babus’) are immersed in brandy,


whores, hemp and opium along with their cronies. Gambling all the time and puffing away at hemp... 48

A typical example of *Kheud*, a type of *Akhadai* connoting exchanges between a man and a woman in the guise of Radha and Krishna is as follows-

The woman/Radha:
'Orey amar kalo bhramar, modhu lutbi jodi aye!'
(Meaning: come hither, my black bee, if you want to feast on my honey!)

The husband is resenting this invitation of Radha to the black bee Krishna:
'Ami thaktey chaker madhu Panch bhromore kheye jaye!'  
(Meaning: how is it that while I am here, all and sundry come to taste the honeycomb) 49

The following is also reflecting the culture of sexual space in kobis through Radha-Krishna narrative style:

'Goponey jatek sukh, prakashe tato asukh.
Nanadi dekhley pare pronoy ki roy?'  
(Meaning: There is as much happiness in having it in secret as pain in making it public. Will love be possible if the sister in-law comes to know of it?) 50

One of the few works of literature depicting sexual culture of the 19th Century Bengal is 'Hutom Pyanchar Naksa' by Kali Presanna Sinha (ed.) by Arun Nag. It is divided into three categories- social pictures, hype and scandal. While writing the introduction of this book Arun Nag mentions,

"the social morals contemporary of Hutom were different, almost all the scandals were related to sexual malpractices, language was obscene, with hardly any literary qualities and no body used to feel ashamed to publish it." 51

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The only public shame was sexual crime, though, there was no lack of it, neither was there any shame as far as the ways to earn money were concerned.

Prince Dwarakanath Tagore, the grandfather of Rabindranath Tagore could be stated as an example. It could be said that he used to own forty-three such houses where the ‘inhabitants’ only occupation was prostitution.\textsuperscript{52}

Even there was a trend of the same editor publishing two different magazines or journals at the same time, one of which was representative of the elite, educated culture while the other could be called as representative of the lower order, e.g. Gouri Shankar Bhattacharya was the editor of esteemed ‘Sambad Prabhakar’ as well as an obscene magazine like ‘Sambad Rasharaj’ for a period of eighteen years.

To get a glimpse of a sexual culture of Kolkata at late 19th century, few lines are being sited from Hutom Pyanchar Naksa,

"Beshyabajiti ajkal e shohore bahadurir kaj o boro mansher elbat... nun teler moto uthno boraddo achey!"\textsuperscript{53} (translation—‘seeing whores in the city these days is being considered as an act of greatness and a sign of being a great man ....’).

The essence of the sexual practices of the babus of Kolkata could be understood after the above quoted paragraph by Hutom as of one having no boundary. In his satire Hutom says that 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 Kolkata 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 babu 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

\textsuperscript{52}Mukharjee, S.N. Calcutta: Myths and History, Calcutta, 1977.

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 became 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. 54 Thus, it is mention-worthy, that the common belief that prostitutes are needed to maintain the sanity of the mainstream non-prostitute women is highly ambiguous.

The other contemporary literatures like 'Ekei Ki Bole Shovyota' and 'BuD Shaliker GhaDe Roan' by Michael Madhusudan Dutta are also reflective of the society and sexual culture of the late 19th Century Bengal. 'Bahkto', the main character in 'BuD Shaliker GhaDe Roan', is a rich, village landlord whose sole preoccupation (other than exploiting and harassing poor peasants) is lechery after the young village women independent of their social or ethnic background and all these activities were performed through a village middle woman or 'Kutni' named 'Punti'. Even Punti mumbles about Bhakto,

“He is so old, but would never give up. I am working for him for thirty years now—wonder how many girls and wives of good houses...that I have harmed” (ed. Sarkar, 1997). 55

However, whether through rural folk entertainment or satires by the elite, the erotic overtones and dominance of a boisterous sexual practice are unmistakable. Observing this trend Sumanta Banerjee states,

54 Ibid:

"The Khemta dancers in these jatras with their erotic overtones and stress on suggestive movements of the hips...evoked amusement among an audience who were not looking surreptitiously for lewd kicks, but were used, thanks to a virile folk tradition, to watching such spectacles and listening to such bawdy exchanges as innocent entertainment. Uninhibited references to certain parts of the human body and jokes about certain bodily functions were a part of the traditional folk culture".\textsuperscript{56}

Religion and social festivals also provided space for prohibited sexual practices as well as for the prostitutes. Prostitutes were included in certain rituals in Bengal like the custom of collecting clay from the threshold of a prostitute’s house for Durga Puja. It was mandatory for the completion of the image of the goddess (this custom has become widely known – thanks to movies like ‘Devadas’). In fact, prostitutes did and do occupy an important position in ‘Tantrik’ practices and its’ rituals.\textsuperscript{57} In a type of Tantrik sect male devotee needed a female partner or ‘Shakti’. One form of Shakti is described as ‘beshya’ or prostitute who while watching the preparation for prayer should feel the intense desire for lovemaking.

The Vaishnavite Sect along with its’ ‘Akhas’ were also provider of sexual freedom within the fold of religion. These akhas were refuge of the free, deserted, single women, especially from the ‘lower order’. In ‘Hutom P(n)yachar Naksha’ Hotum speaks of certain Vaishnavite saints or ‘g(n)oshais’ who never needed to visit Sonagachi or any other red-light areas of the city because they had ‘prostitutes’ (who were actually the followers of the sect) under their own ‘jurisdiction’. However, acceptance of the disciples among the Vaishnavites did not limit itself to the ‘lower order’ only, but also reached upto the prostitutes of the day.\textsuperscript{58}

The milieu of the late 19\textsuperscript{th} century prostitutes reflect similar cultural, class and ethnic assimilation and variations as well. The difference in the representation, style and emotions-responses or reactions are unmistakable comparing the oral culture of the prostitutes of the lower order and written document of the prostitutes or other forms of


\textsuperscript{57} Sadharani, Agrahayan 21,1281, Eng. era 1874.

cultural representation of prostitutes from different class background. These differences were not only cultural, but cut across the social and religious lines as well, e.g., there was an ‘unwritten law’ that encouraged prostitutes of the same religion to attend the clientele from the same religious group and vice-versa. However, the economic interests many a times led to the breach of the law.

Nonetheless, we gradually see prostitution as well as popular culture loosing its heterogeneity and roots. Criminalization of prostitution and seclusion of prostitutes were mainly being achieved in a two fold manner —by growing influence of educated ‘bhadrolok culture’ and also by equating prostitution with diseases like syphilis.

By the end of the nineteenth century the entertainment of the lower order and the culture of the Bengali elite takes to opposite roads. While explaining these conflict between two distinct cultural streams Sumanta Banerjee emphasizes,

“The urban middle class, which the elite culture represented, reconstituted the lines of deference, patronage and moral authority in Calcutta society by distancing itself from, and suppressing later on, the old popular culture of the lower orders. In its efforts to create a distinct culture of its own based on some commonly affirmed array of values and-morals, it tried to exalt a mythical past and increasingly identified itself with it while dealing in a sedate vein with the social and religious problems that concerned exclusively the educated gentry.

The City’s lower orders, whose beliefs and behaviour were considered by the elite as annoying, wasteful, immoral and even dangerous at times, on the other hand, remained by and large fragmented, bound as they were to their respective caste occupations.

This was possible because in class divided patriarchal societies such as Victorian England and nineteenth century India, the class relationships of women were structured by their sexual relationships to men. Both Brahmanical and Victorian norms defined the inheritance and property relations of males through chastity of wives and stressed the importance of the patrilineal family to social stability. Both

also possessed legal codes and institutions that authorized the state to control and ‘protect’ feminine virtue. However, while Brahmanical writers and priests thought that women possessed active sexual desires which had to be controlled through physical seclusion and early marriages, middle class Victorians idealized passionless wife and mother figure and regulated women’s behaviour largely through psychological repression. ⁶¹ Victorian understanding of sexuality and society had been easily adopted by the upper caste/class educated elite of the nineteenth century Bengal because of these similarities in the understandings. And therefore, both worked together as a mechanism to dominate the culture of the rural poor/lower order that was less inhibited and more vocal in their understandings and expressions of sexuality. Both the dominant cultural traditions equated purity with mental labour, masculinity and specific regimes of bodily control. ⁶²

However, the culture of the lower order though in the face of the rich, elite, urban middle or upper middle class quite suppressed and helpless were not taking the overshadowing dominance very easily. This gets reflected as the culture of the lower order was also taking a different shape since the late nineteenth century. Their discourse was moving from old religion based themes to the satire of contemporary issues and ridiculing nouveau riche babus and elites. Manifestation of this trend could be traced in Swang performances, in Dashu Roy’s Panchali and also in the portrayal of babu and his mistress in Kalighat Pats.

As Sumanta Banerjee continues,

“We must add here that these cultural products and performances of the city’s lower orders were often involuntary, defensive responses to the encroachments of the new market forces of a colonial economy and social structure—the entry of the newly

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educated Bengali babus who replaced their old patrons and had no use for their Panchalis, jatras and pats".63

However as mentioned, a host of farce writers including Kaliprasanna Sinha tried to incorporate the elements and boisterousness of the popular culture into their satires, belle letters and plays, but this trend was discouraged and criticized by contemporary elite-bhadrolok culture.

By the end of the nineteenth century, a Bengali journal observes the plight of the various forms of urban popular culture:

“All the entertainments and festivities of the common people are disappearing one by one. The jatras, the panchalis are no longer there, let alone the kobi[songs]. What will the common people live on? Only country liquor?...” 64

In the eyes of Sumanta Banerjee,

“Divorced from the vibrant buoyancy and robust sense of humour manifested in the dialect and idiom of the lower orders, and from the lusty and sinewy mode of expression of their cultural output, the literature and paintings of the bhadrolok assumed the character of a private, defensive world insulated from the general stream of life in the streets. The language itself, instead of becoming a mode of free and easy communication among all segments of society, was turned into an agent of communication shaped in such a way as to deny the lower order any access to it".65

Nevertheless, we do witness a reemergence of this popular culture in a later period, especially in late and post-colonial eras, when the elite ‘bhadrolok’ turns to reviving the lost popular culture of the bygone era in order to get fresh input of newer ideas and forms that were to be known as ‘ethnic’.

Quoting from Sumanta Banerjee,


64 Basantak, vol.II, no.10, 1874.

65 Ibid.
"The cultural products manufactured by the elite-dominated commercial entertainment industry from the ingredients of folk culture are sold to a captive audience in the form of escapist fantasies.

In the country's economy, the workers have no say in the pattern of production in which they are made to participate. This estrangement that lies between the worker's labour and the finished product he produces is carried a step further in the mass entertainment industry where the lower orders have no role whatsoever to play in the production of what is sold as 'folk' culture".66

Alike the indigenous forms of prostitution are also killed along with the popular culture. By the same mechanism, the capitalism has transformed prostitution into a commodity and prostitute to a 'sex worker', creating a market where and only where she is available that is devoid of all categories of social and religious implications that they used to enjoy previously. Only some of these 'indigenousness' to be revived afterwards to be sold in the market (e.g., sex tourism along with the concept of erotic orient etc).

Metamorphosing Prostitution: From Sin to Crime

It could be said, in the late nineteenth century, colonialism in Bengal was at its' peak. Thus, the concerns of the British administrators were oriented towards production, expansion of the empire and accumulation of the capital. The main instrument to achieve these aims was military power-the soldiers. Especially, after mutiny of 1857, British rule seemed all the more dependent on the British soldiers. Thus, satisfying their virility without endangering their health became all the more important.67 Therefore, the physical and emotional well being of the soldiers became the matters of concern for the Britishers.

On the one hand criminalization of prostitution through the Contagious diseases Act, Lock hospital Act, served the purpose to keep the soldiers in shape by providing for

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their desires and at the same time having a clinical check on the issues of venereal
diseases (VDs), so that the main instrument for production-body of a soldier- remains
as fit and fine as possible.

For the Victorian middle class who provided the bulk of British administrators in
India, sanitary practices were associated with evangelical values of thrift, sobriety and
respectability. In addition, the sanitary environment of the English middle classes,
with wide streets, adequate housing, clean clothing and drinking water, was a moral
ideal. Only a better-off minority could attain this ideal in post-industrial British cities
that were otherwise marked by continuing poverty and industrial pollution throughout
the nineteenth century. Theories of ‘Miasma’ generated from this environment. In
India the British Indian medical Service followed the miasmatic theory championed
by Edwin Chadwick and Florence Nightingale. The Miasmatic theory believed that
toxic concentrations of vaporous products of decay caused disease. In short, diseases
were caused by odorous rotting substances and tropical places were perceived as the
prime breeders of miasmatic contagion because organic decomposition of matters
happens faster in warmer climates than the cold ones. India was pronounced the
‘natural home of cholera’ by international Sanitary Conference at Constantinople in
1866 that was repeated in the subsequent conferences. Unlike in Britain where
working class areas were sanitized through public sewerage and drainage, in India
such reforms were limited to British cantonments and to regulate British and Indian
social interactions. The pervasive portrayal of Indians as traitors following the
rebellion of 1857-58 hardened the division between English and Indian. Miasmatic
theory naturalized these social and cultural boundaries, demonstrating that the laws of
nature were consistent with the social distances characterizing Victorian society and
the sanitary cordons constructed in Indian cities. This was manifested in the
“Chaklas” where prostitutes were kept cordoned and sanitized in the cantonments for
the tummies/British soldiers. In the sanitary policies of Victorian period poor

Hamlin C. Providence and putrefaction: Victorian sanitarians and the natural theology of health and

Whitehead Judy. Bodies Clean and Unclean: Prostitution, Sanitary Legislation, and Respectable
U.K.

Ibid.
outcastes as were symbolically equated with sexuality, contagion, filth, excrements.\textsuperscript{71} And so were the prostitutes. Thus, the Victorian era with its paranoid concern over body (as it is an important mean to capital accumulation) uses two mechanisms to control and criminalize prostitution—syphilis and an elite culture devoid of previous sexual boisterousness (so that sexual outlets, whether cultural or physical, within the social and religious frame work were no more. To get sex, one has to pay a price in a market and buy it against the money paid. In return market would try to assure the standard and safety of the product). Is it ironical that by being puritan, the Victorian era was in reality creating a market for commercial sex, as sexual energy or use or misuse of it became an important factor in the colonial expansion?

It is to be remembered we are talking about a time when labour capacity was being systematically exploited and cannot be wasted in pleasure, unless and until it reproduces itself\textsuperscript{72} (Foucault, 1998) and the pleasure itself becomes a product in the market; we are also talking about a time when there is a surplus of wealth & greater role of private ownership on the one hand. On the other hand there is also an unsettled money market/inflation, especially in the colonies.\textsuperscript{73}

Greater the role of private ownership leading to the clear-cut succession, more the emphasis laid on the chastity of the wives and thus organization of the prostitution at the same time. Does that mean lesser the role of private ownership, lesser the emphasis on the chastity of women & therefore decrease in prostitution (as the sex might be available more freely)?

Historically, whenever and wherever the basis or value of private property is undermined, the foundation of fidelity is shaken and free love is on increase, e.g., rise of fornication during and after the wars, sexual license during the black death; more sexual freedom among the ‘lower order’ or poorer classes etc. As Khalid Kishtainy argues, the present outburst of sexual license in the developed countries may have something to do with the unsettled money market, inflation and lack of interest in saving. But, we see with inflation & unsettled money market as well as socio-

\textsuperscript{71} Ibid.


economic order, prostitution or supply of women & demand of women in prostitution are on increase! Thus, sexual laxity may or may not mean the decrease in prostitution as long as there is an inequality and “a certain surplus of wealth and energy among at least one class of the population and to be favoured by an unequal distribution of wealth”. And that is why “As inequality was the rule in practically all societies, there was hardly any nation which lived without its whores”. And the society as well as economy in the nineteenth century fulfills almost all the conditions that intensify these inequalities.

Here, I would like to site an example from the post-revolution, communist china where the previous forms of prostitution have stopped existing as the society reached a stage where some forms of equality existed.

To Quote from Simon de Beauvoir, “Hereabouts, until 1911, there were even houses of male prostitution legally tolerated and frequented by the Manchu nobility. As for the brothels, they numbered 377 in 1920, contained 3,130 girls divided into four classes according to their youth and beauty; they were bought while still very young from needy families, or they were simply kidnapped...in return for gratuities, newspapers publicized them openly, painting their photographs, names, and phone numbers as if advertising a brand of laundry soap. Recounting their adventures, tourists of the period were cheerfully wont to extol the charm and gracious manners of those to whom they referred as “the Singsong Girls. Today there are no more prostitutes, no more smell of opium in these streets,...”

A similar anecdote comes from Felix Greene’s account of post-revolution China, “At the Research Institute in Peking, most graduates during the past five years have never seen an active case of syphilis or gonorrhoea...he attributed these seemingly extraordinary results to the following: the end of Kuomintang armies with their camp-followers and bevies of officers’ concubines, and the closing down in 1950 of all houses of prostitution. Organized prostitution is today non-existent.”

74 Ibid.
76 Ibid.
As Kishtainy explains, "The only difference in prostitution between one property society and another has been one of quality, form and attitude". It is only in the societies where private property had a very small role to play in the economic life of the community, e.g., Eskimos, Muria of India, some Arabic tribes, where a communistic form of life was followed, as in Sparta, women became equal to men, & sexual taboos were hardly known. "Prostitution in such communities made no sense and played no part, a discovery which became the basis of Marxist thought on the problem of prostitution."77

As the Colonial Empire was reaching its maturity with the increase in the inequality between the colonizer and the colonized, even the previous interactions among the colonizers and the native women that had the elements of eroticism, fantasy and 'relationship' were all gone:

"By the mid-19th century, therefore, inter-racial relationships in Bengal had undergone a sea change. Within the new framework of colonial administration, where the type of bonhomie with 'natives' that marked British social life in 18th century Calcutta had no place, the new generation of upper-and middle-class 'sahibs'-the civilians and commercial agents, the barristers and solicitors, the doctors and teachers-could have no dealings with 'native' women. The freewheeling days of the era of Job Charnock and William Hickey were over. The new 'sahibs' had to be protected from contamination by 'native' women," and 'damsel-errantry' (i.e. the cluster of unmarried European women coming to India in look out for husbands) "from their homeland took care of this problem by bringing the wayward 'boys' into the fold of marriage."78

"... Thus, even whore-mongering among the ranks had to be organized in accordance with the code of British Army discipline! Like military drill, or maintenance of knife-edge creases on their uniform, or honouring of ranks in order of precedence, fornication, also, had to conform strictly to a new set of rules from the mid-19th century. While the administration took pains to train the Tommies...it simultaneously


began to groom a special class of Indian prostitutes who would feed the needs of the British soldiers according to the new norms".79

Under Cantonment Act prostitutes were divided into two categories—for the British soldiers and those outside that. The first category was subjected to the regulation under the Act and was available at regimental brothels or ‘Chaklas’. These chaklas were again classified into three categories depending upon the rank and colour of the soldiers—gora chakla, lalkurti chakla and kala chakla. While analyzing the Cantonment Act Sumanta Banerjee comments:

"The Cantonment Act reflected the 19th century capitalist concern about how to keep the body (of the labourer) fit for its optimal functioning and productivity. English Victorian society was obsessed with hygiene, longevity and physical exercises. In this framework of thinking, the body (of the mercenary soldier) could not be allowed to be dissipated in promiscuous whoring and reckless drinking—which used to be the norms among soldiers and officers in 18th century India."

... The prostitutes covered by the Cantonment Act—captives under direct administrative supervision and control—could be described as belonging to what we today term as the ‘organized sector’. Beyond this sector, which was confined to the regimental bazaars and cantonments, there existed the vast majority of women who practiced the trade in Calcutta and other major cities in the nineteenth century. They had always remained outside any centrally-run organization. The Contagious Diseases Act of 1868 was an administrative intervention in the practice of their occupation. While allowing them to pursue their occupation and retain their unorganized structure, the Act sought to curb their free movement by imposing regulations like compulsory registration at police stations, medical examination at certified clinics, segregation and confinement to specified areas of the cities and towns, and heavy penalties for violation of these regulations".80

In the hierarchically stratified pre-colonial Bengalee Society with each unit having its own locus standi, the prostitutes, like many other branded sinners (e.g. doms and

79 Ibid.

chandals-needed to burn the dead bodies in cremation ground) were though stigmatized, yet accepted as a part of the society. However, prostitution becomes a crime under the British Colonial rule. The colonial concept of crime combined with the religious concept of sin that clashed with the indigenous concepts killed the space that was perhaps allowed previously to the prostitutes. This clash was not only socio-cultural or economic in nature, but also depicts the differences of the ways in which Christianity and Hinduism understand prostitution.

"In the course of this clash between the pre-colonial value systems, on the one hand, and the British administration's formal attempts to introduce institutionalized mechanisms of control, along with informal attempts to reform indigenous social networks along contemporary British moral notions, on the other, the practice of prostitution in Bengal underwent a reconstruction in terms of definition-from its earlier socio-religious interpretation as a 'sin' to the colonial socio-legal codification as a 'crime'. "81

However, somehow the Britishers managed to overlook the fact that the growing dens of opium, gambling chambers and prostitutes' houses were the fallout of colonialism.

"The close association of prostitution with the new dens-of-crime in an urban metropolis like Calcutta reflected the economic changes that were altering land relations in the countryside, driving thousands of unemployed villagers to the metropolis and other towns, many among whom found means of survival through new, non-traditional channels like running distilleries or gambling dens." 82

Thus, colonial political economy not only transforms an old sin like prostitution to crime, but also creates and associates new sets of criminal activities to prostitution.

Nevertheless, the criminalization and 'de-aestheitisation/ dehumanisation' of prostitution and prostitutes threw lime light on them in a radical manner. Different forms of art-both old and new--popular and elite--that were emerging to cater to the demands and tastes of the time found the expression through prostitutes as they could

\[81\text{Ibid.}\]
\[82\text{Ibid.}\]
be seen as the professional and upcoming women, in short ‘leading ladies’ of the era, which to some extent replaced the old popular cultural forms.

Talking of the leading ladies of the era, most renowned and talented of them was Nati Binodini Dasi. Commenting on Binodini, late Shambhu Nath Mukhopadhyay, remarked, “But last not least shall we say of Binodini? She is not only the Moon of Star company, but absolutely at the head of her profession in India. She must be a woman of considerable culture to be able to show such unaffected sympathy with so many and various characters and such capacity of reproducing them. She is certainly a lady of much refinement of feeling as she shows herself to be one of inimitable grace. On Wednesday she played two vary distinct and widely divergent roles, and did perfect justice to both. Her Mrs. Bilasini Karforma, the girl graduate, exhibited so to say an iron grip of the queer phenomenon, the Girl of the period as she appears in Bengal society. Her Chaitanya showed a wonderful mastery of the suitable forces dominating one of the greatest religious characters who was taken to be the Lord himself and is to this day worshipped as such by millions. For a young Miss to enter into such a being so as to give it perfect expression, is a miracle. All we can say is that genius like faith can remove mountains.”

Reflecting on this phenomenon of the leading ladies of nineteenth century coming from the class of women in prostitution Sumanta Banerjee comments, “What was peculiar to the 19th century Bengal situation was that prostitutes, for the first time, occupied center stage in society, drawing upon themselves the spotlight from a wide variety of sources—successive generations of new clients from all classes, popular versifiers and farce-writers, producers and playwrights of the Bengali stage, Bengali bhadralok reformers as well as hostile orthodox puritans, English administrators caught between pressures and pulls from their minions in India, on the one hand, and social reformers in their own country, on the other. Judging from contemporary accounts in news paper reports and reminiscences in the early part of 19th century, it seems that in those years, the emergence of prostitution from its precocious rural form of a marginal occupation to a widespread and better organized profession in the market of colonial economy, roused Bengali society to recognize it as a force to

reckon with...The high profile presence of prostitutes in Bengali social life-and in the new center of socio-economic development, Calcutta in particular-made prostitution an axis around which Bengali society revolved\textsuperscript{84}

Thus, capitalism in its wake creates a situation where previous economic means of survival work no more, leading to a situation where sex could be commodified in a larger market. Thus, there is a necessity to create a new culture and mechanism of function according to the demands and norms of the larger market and its populace. The transformation of prostitution along with the socio-cultural and political-economic changes in Bengal in the nineteenth century could be a classical example of this phenomenon, while the instruments used to bring about this change were partly cultural (i.e., death of the ‘culture of the lower order’ along with the emergence of an ‘elite culture’) and partly clinical (i.e., syphilis and other VDs).

Syphilis: A Disease to be Feared

The history of syphilis is a mixture of myth and medicine-it is a colourful and horrifying history of five centuries. At the very end of the fifteenth century, there was appearance of a new disease in Europe that was more horrifying than leprosy and the plague because of its novelty, its profusion of symptoms, its extreme contagiousness, the suffering it caused, and the fact that it was often fatal. From this time onwards, the absence of medical writings, hospital archives, and the autobiographical accounts of sufferers gives a good understanding of the symptoms and epidemiology of the disease, which went under various names, but whose sexual character was immediately perceived by its contemporaries.

In the sixteenth century the ‘great pox’ took a firm hold in Europe becoming more widespread as it decreased in virulence. Then also began a rather hesitant controversy, which was to continue into the twentieth century, as to whether or not syphilis had been imported from Americas in Christopher Columbus’s caravels. Reactions to ‘the

venereal disease' that meant both syphilis and Gonorrhea were different in each of the two centuries followed.

In the seventeenth century a moralizing approach was adopted; the temptations of the flesh are to be shunned. During the course of the eighteenth century, however, medical ones gradually supplanted moral considerations. Morality and disease are two different issues. 'Pox' is a disease and therefore to be treated. Mercury reigned supreme at the time. This was also the time of intense theoretical endeavour—a time of great controversy between the proponents and detractors of the parasitic theory, a theory that replaced the chemical theory of humours. The eighteenth century was a time rich in contradictions—a time when licentiousness and the pox went hand in hand, but also a time when venereal disease in new-born children became a problem on a national scale.

The nineteenth century was a century of medicine. Syphilis made substantial inroads initially, but the treatment reached a deadlock. Mercury began to fall from favour because of doubts as to its efficacy and the fact that it was shamelessly exploited by charlatans. However, there was a single line of defense; the male contraceptive has come into existence in England.

In the late nineteenth century progress was made in basic research. Fournier identified the syphilitic origin of tabes, & subsequently of general paralysis—and also in fulfilling the demand of the doctors since sixteenth century by setting up prophylactic measures of the sort. “A new subject, Syphology, was born, with university chairs, national and (soon) international societies; & conferences. From this point onward a whole department of medicine began to open up”. In 1905, the major event in syphilis was the fact that Schaudinn and Hoffmann drew attention to the pathogenic agent of syphilis—a pale coloured treponema. Quetel states, “Five years later Ehrlich created Salvarsan, also known as ‘606’, thus inaugurating the era in which syphilis was treated with arsphenamines and putting an end to the increasingly disputed reign of mercury”.

From this turning point onwards numbers of questions merited separate treatments, e.g., connection between syphilis and madness or between syphilis and imbecility. The other favourite relationship was between syphilis and prostitution (not to mention

the impact of the relationship between prostitutes and armies on the state of public health & related measures). The first of the nineteenth century witnessed a flood of regulatory measures in Europe-Quetel analyzes “each country reacted according to its own temperament; the sacrosanct ideal of individual liberty led the English to abolish their rather mild measures, whereas the French moved towards a complex, rule-governed system. After the second world war, the liberalization of moral codes and the emergence of new high-risk groups...led to the abandonment of all discriminatory prophylactic measures—a move which the spread of AIDS is now calling into question.”

Fear of syphilis reached a peak particularly during the interwar period in the twentieth century and syphilis seemed to be everywhere! To defend it propaganda campaigns and dispensaries were set up. “Never before had medicine and moralizing been so closely entwined”. The newly invented serological tests proved that syphilis can lie dormant for years and the apparent recovery is always dubious.

Considering the previous historical and epidemiological contexts, the sudden evaporation of syphilis-terror quite immediately after the Second World War (thanks to the miraculously new antibiotics?) is a socio-historical and epidemiological phenomenon. How is this instantaneous shift from frenzy of fear to a complete lack of concern being understood? Could it just be the antibiotics? Could it be that syphilis has been so interlinked with and focused on the relationship between the prostitutes and the soldiers that the manifestation and importance of the disease reached a peak during the war time when the need for the utilization of the power of the soldiers were highly required and therefore, the focus on the disease shifted when the war got over? Whatever it was, from “this point onwards all that was required to destroy this fragile treponema (so fragile, that it is impossible to produce a laboratory culture of it and, therefore, a vaccine) was a few hefty doses of penicillin...”. This lack of concern led to the upsurge of syphilis in the sixties and therefore, “syphilis cannot be relegated to some museum of outlandish diseases.” Today, syphilis does not kill, but it has

86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
88 Ibid.
successfully “lulled us into a state in which we no longer fear it, a state in which we even overlook it. It endures”\textsuperscript{89}

“In many cases, as in India, the necessity of controlling disease led to criminalization of the profession of prostitution, where the prevention of disease became synonymous with retribution. It meant a tight control over the movement of prostitutes, involved hygienic verification of their ‘bodies’ under the direct gaze of the state, and being sick meant confinement in hospitals for a longer period of time. These measures created a break in the traditional identities of the prostitute, redefined her individuality and the profession, and brought her within the purview of the state on newer terms wherein she came to be looked at and defined through the categories of imperial hygiene. They brought about a radical shift in the very perception of the prostitute as an individual and a professional. She now emerged as a criminal at the center stage of the colonial rule—as one who infected colonizer and de-masculinized him. This identity of the prostitute as a criminal was an important transformation brought about by the British rule in India, and was typically colonial in nature. It also had an important bearing upon the treatment of prostitutes as subjects in the preventive discourses of the state. Unlike in England, where initially prevention of disease through control over prostitutes was closely associated with their rehabilitation in the mainstream society, in India, the entire discourse on the prevention of venereal disease precluded any such responsibility of the state towards rehabilitation of these classes. In its attempt to rescue the soldier from the evil effects of his sexual indulgences, the state, despite recognizing him as equally responsible, spared him, and held the prostitute—the colonized subject and an unequal partner—as solely guilty, and made her pay for it.\textsuperscript{90}

**Syphilis, the Prostitutes and the Soldiers**

VD (venereal diseases) in India was known as ‘firungi rog’. It was believed that Portuguese were the people who brought the disease on Indian soil. Nevertheless,

\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.

along with the expansion of British imperialism, from the late eighteenth century onwards, the British officials recognized VD as an outcome of the sexual indulgences between the prostitutes and the soldiers—an area that was 'most troubling' and 'embarrassing' to the authorities.\(^91\)

However, the mutiny opened up the eyes of the Britishers even further as they found at least one-third of European troops perpetually in hospitals due to this disease. To deal with the situation a Royal Commission for enquiry into the sanitary conditions of the army was constituted by the Govt. Stringent legislative measures to deal with the disease was prescribed. Thus, came the Act XXII of 1864 and the Indian Contagious Diseases Act, creating a legal way to deal with the disease\(^92\)

Thus and therefore, the interaction between syphilis and prostitution in the colonial India was largely shaped by the impact of VDs on the soldiers. Apart from 'corrupting British blood and morals', syphilis was also responsible for drain of manpower and wastage of capital as far as the backbone of British Empire, i.e., the army is of concern. Therefore, syphilis was perceived by the then contemporary officials as a threat to the existence of the colonial empire in itself. Women, particularly prostitutes were seen as sole carriers of the syphilitic contagion, and the prevention of the disease was to be done through their direct control. The soldier in these discourses was portrayed as a victim of his natural desires, and this necessitated the need for protecting him from the evil effect of his indulgence.

While talking of the impact of the VD on soldiers Mark Harrison argues,

"those who are admitted into hospital with primary symptoms, are for a length of time rendered unfit for the performance of any duty, and that the greater number of them after having been discharged from hospital in due course, return with secondary symptoms, which in almost every instance renders them unfit for the service".\(^93\)


The drain of European Army in India due to ‘ill health’ was considerable and alarming. The report ‘Notes on the question of state interference with “Contagious” diseases in Calcutta’ Home (Sanitary), Oct.1887.nos.180-197, Part-A, states the state of the disease in Bengal,.

“This means that every soldier went into hospital one and a half times, 1.1 men out of every hundred men died, and more than three men in every hundred men were sent home invalid. In Madras the admission to hospital and the deaths are less, but the invaliding is the same. Bombay stands half way between Bengal and Madras for admissions, is very much worse than either in mortality, or slightly better in invaliding”.

The report while asserting the expenses of VD adds’

“the cost of every European soldier put down in an Indian cantonment is reckoned at 145 pounds, and his annual upkeep involves a very heavy expenditure; he is an expensive machine; he is infact one of the costly British products,...it becomes, accordingly , a financial question of great importance to enquire how far this costly article is economically used: and attention is specially drawn to the unnecessary waste of health and strength involved in the amount of venereal diseases which is at present allowed to exist in the European army.”

Syphilis had been divided into three categories: primary, secondary and tertiary and essentially had been seen the root cause of almost all physiological diseases: “In short disease of most internal organs has been fully traced to those degeneration and formations which result from venereal”, states W.J. Moore, Surgeon General with Govt. of India. Writing on the disease, Moore also suggested,  

“Ballhatchet has shown that the methods of treatment were hazardous, especially for syphilis: mercury and biochloride of mercury were of doubtful efficacy and had unpleasant side effects; iodide of potassium, which was also in general use by the 1850s, was only a little more effective”.  

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94 Notes on the question of state interference with “Contagious” diseases in Calcutta’Home (Sanitary), Oct.1887.nos.180-197, Part-A,  

95 Moore W.J. Health in the Tropics or Sanitary Art applied to European in India.London.1862.
The Report of a Departmental Committee on the Prevalence of Venereal Disease among the British Troops in India, 1897 reports a great increase in the prevalence of the venereal disease in the years immediately following the outbreak of the Mutiny, 1858-1861. This increase has been attributed to the large influx of new and inexperienced troops into India during those years, the extent to which may be gathered from the fact that between the outbreak of the Mutiny in 1857 and the summer of 1859 the strength of the British troops in Bengal was nearly trebled, i.e., it rose from 21,288 to 60,977. In April 1858, more than 16% of the troops were estimated to be under 20 years of age. By 1864 the % had fallen to 2.42. The subject was considered by the Royal Commission on the sanitary state of the Army in India; and their recommendations led to the establishment of the lock hospital system. Lock hospitals began to be opened in 1865; the system was gradually extended down to 1872, remained in full force down to 1884, was partially suspended from 1st Jan 1885 to the spring of 1887, and totally abolished in the latter half of 1888; so that 1884 was the last year in which it was in full operation.

From 1861 there was a steady and marked decline in the admission rate for venereal diseases until 1867, when it reached the lowest figure (160.2 per 1000) recorded in the period under review. From 1867 it moved irregularly, but with an upward tendency, until 1873 (181.7 per 1000), afterwards more rapidly upwards until 1884 (293.5 per 1000). Between 1867 and 1884, however, secondary syphilis, the worst form of venereal disease, showed practically no increase. The admission rate for this, which was 23.7 per 1000 in 1857, and 24.4 in 1884, fluctuated in the interval between a maximum of 25.4 in 1868 and a minimum of 20.4 in 1873, with a mean of 23.5 for the whole period. In the years 1885 and 1886 there was a general and serious increase in all forms of venereal disease, followed by some diminution in 1887. From the year 1888 to 1890 the rise was alarming, the admission rate in 1890 exceeding 50 per cent of the strength.
Table 2.1 Cases of Primary and Secondary Syphilis and other Venereal Diseases

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>YEAR</th>
<th>PRIMARY SYPHILIS</th>
<th>SECONDARY SYPHILIS</th>
<th>ALL VENEREAL DISEASES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>29.4</td>
<td>361.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>72.1</td>
<td>32.4</td>
<td>372.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>134.3</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>481.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>135.6</td>
<td>66.3</td>
<td>503.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


It was chiefly in the years 1873 to 1886, and especially after 1876, that the influences commonly associated with the short service system were making themselves felt. There were (1) an increase in the annual arrivals of new troops, fresh to the country and peculiarly exposed to the dangers associated with the native women; (2) greater youthfulness of the troops; (3) larger proportion of unmarried men. The change for the worse in all these respects really dated from the outbreak of the Mutiny. It has been shown, how the enormous influx of new troops following that event influenced the composition of the Army of Bengal, as regards age and length of service, and what a marked increase of venereal disease followed these changes. The suppression of the Mutiny was followed by a return to a more normal state of things; but the conditions previously existing under the East India Company’s rule, when service in the Queen’s troops was exceedingly long, and in the Company’s troops, forming 2/5ths of the whole garrison, was practically life long, with 30% married, were never entirely restored; and the introduction of the short service system completed the changes which the events of the mutiny and the transfer of India to the Crown had partly initiated. The influences traceable to the short service system appear, however, to have almost reached their full development by the year 1887.

Nonetheless, the abolition of Lock Hospital System: Cantonment Act of 1889 and 1895.- On the 5th June 1888, a Resolution was passed by the House of Commons “that, in the opinion of this House, any mere suspension of measures for the compulsory
examination of women, and for licensing and regulating prostitution in India, is insufficient, and legislation which enjoins, authorizes, or permits such measures ought to be repealed, “and on 26th July following explicit orders were issued by the Govt. of India, under instructions from the Secretary of State, with a view to putting an end to all such practices.

However, it is important to take a few steps backward to see what really inspired the repeal of the regulations related to STDs since the issue was far from being sorted out. Here comes the role played by Josephine Butler and her prostitution campaign, as it was one of the most remarkable phases in the history of the women’s movement. Butler saw that implicit in the CD acts was a belief that male promiscuity is natural, and that a slave class of ‘clean women required to serve male sexual appetites. As Butler points out, “Their system is to obtain prostitution plus slavery for women, and vice minus disease for men!”

Butler, therefore describes women in prostitution regulated by the state as henceforth, “no longer women, but only bits of numbered, inspected, and ticketed human flesh, flung by Government into the public market!” The National Association for the Repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts was founded in October 1869, and Butler received pressing invitations to take a leading role in the repeal campaign and by the end of the year Butler became the Hon. Secretary of the newly formed Ladies’ National Association (LNA). To her the sexual double standard was embodied in the Acts. It was a “permitted evil”, “for it was permitted before it was legalized by the Acts; it was more than permitted; it was encouraged, consciously fostered, and influentially patronised”. One of Butler’s chief moral objections to the CD Acts was the incongruity she observed between provisions made for the sanitary treatment of prostitutes (that enabled cured women to return to prostitution) and the provisions made for their reclamation. In fact, she objected to the requirement of any legislation regarding sexual matters, unless those are to protect week and young. Butler argued, “that the male client, “the purchaser” is “thrice guilty, beyond the seller; because he is seeking for carnal pleasure only; she


97 Ibid.

can have no pleasure, but much rather misery, and is in quest for money only; nay, of
the poorer women we may say, they are in quest of a bare livelihood only".99

In fact, Butler directed the LNA to reject any legislation offered by the Govt. that
compromised their original demand for the unconditional and complete repeal of the
CD Act. She used her paper the Dawn to publicize investigations into state regulated
prostitution in India and also recent developments on behalf of women in England.
Butler was able to see the analogy between the violation of women’s bodies and the
violation of civil rights in the context of compulsory examination. She taught women
through her prostitution related campaign that it was their right to speak on behalf of
their sex, be they in Britain, Europe or in India. Women’s participation in repeal
movement acted to break down the boundaries of separate spheres between men and
women and established women as social, intellectual and political counterparts. The
repeal campaign across these two continents won significant legislative victories, yet,
ironically, those only served to demonstrate to Butler the striking anomaly of
women’s questions being debated, voted on, legislated and enforced, exclusively by
men.100

On the other hand, British morality has always been hyper, pseudo and prudish to
consider sex as a natural outcome and a mean of communication between individuals
and that kind of suppression usually leads to a better, commodified market for sex and
maladjustments associated with it. As Ronald Hyam analyses, Britain had “an ultra-
squeamishness and hyper-prudery peculiar to itself”... “... narrow, blinkered,
defective and intolerant attitudes towards sex which it all too successfully imposed on
the rest of the world. One of the worst results of the expansion of Britain was the
introduction of its guilty inhibitions about sex into societies previously much better
sexually adjusted than perhaps any in the West.101 Especially the way white men took
advantage of black women and her sexuality in the imperialist and colonial
contexts.W.E.B.DU Bois states while writing for an American Audience “I shall

forgive the white South much in its final judgment day: I shall forgive its slavery, for slavery is a world-old habit...I shall forgive its so called 'pride of race', the passion of its hot blood...but one thing I shall never forgive, neither in this world nor the world to come: its wanton and continued and persistent insulting of the black womanhood which it sought and seeks to prostitute to its lust.”

Both gender and racial discrimination was reflected in the Government’s regulation of prostitution through C.D.Act. The fear of rape and subjugation of the nation was often expressed through the metaphor of the rape of Indian women, especially mothers. Respectable and innocent women, especially widows were seen as the true victims of the Act. A 1872 surveys in Bengal noted a large influx of rural women in to the brothels of Calcutta. A category that caused embarrassment to the upper caste elites were the upper caste Hindu widows. Child widowhood and bans on widow remarriage were seen to be factors contributing to the increases in urban prostitution by most reformers in the late nineteenth century. In 1869, the Amrita Bazaar Patrika shocked middle class of Bengal by reporting that ninety percent of Calcutta’s twenty thousand prostitutes were young widows. Newspapers reported the illegitimate use of force in the implementation of the Act as vulnerable women were coerced into medical examination and then into Government brothels. Thus, understanding the situation, reformers like Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar promoted the cause of widow remarriage through the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. An administrative report on jails in Bengal in the 1890s revealed that an average of twelve women per day were arrested for ‘breaches’ of the Act and a number of prostitutes were said to have committed suicide because of police harassment.


104 Amrita Bazaar Patrika. 11th march, 1869.

105 The Bengalee. 16th march,1886 and 10th June 1888.

And that indicates why prostitution during colonial period is different from the prostitution previously existing in the same society. This unequal power relation is at a psychosocial level perverts the occupation by the incorporation on the new element of sadism that largely expresses itself through criminalisation.

To explain perversion, Ronald Hyam continues, "...it is the sexual urge reduced to impersonal terms, becoming in the process indifferent to evoking a pleasurable response in a partner. Intention is all-important...but first let us agree that an act is perverted if its primary aim is domination rather than mutual enjoyment; if it becomes an expression of power rather than sensuality, and is thus so to speak pondering rather than worshipping."

What we see about sexual practices in the context of prostitution in the late colonial period is about exercising a power relation or domination of imperialist male sexuality to dominate the female colonial sexuality, i.e., to say sex being used symbolically and physically as well as deliberately as a mechanism of control and domination. But unfortunately, the same mechanism of control backfires against the colonial imperialists by 'de-vitalizing' and 'de-masculinizing' them, especially making the class of soldiers totally unfit for empire building. In the words of Mishra, "The patriarchal order of the society produced a specific discourse on the disease. Essentially gendered in nature, the discourse portrayed syphilis as a typically feminine disease. Women, particularly prostitutes were seen as sole carriers of the syphilitic contagion, and the prevention of the disease got directly associated with their control. This deliberate gendering proved especially fruitful in colonial situation as it gave a free hand to the authorities to put the blame of the disease on the colonized other. It also provided a tool for the extension of the colonizing space through a control of the state over female privacy...They brought about a radical shift in the very perception the prostitute as belonging to a marginalized class, staying at the periphery out of necessity...she now emerged as a criminal at the center stage of the colonial rule-as one who infected the colonizer and demasculinized him...It also had an important bearing upon the treatment of prostitutes as subjects in the preventive discourses of the state. Unlike in England, where prevention of disease through control over prostitutes was closely associated with their rehabilitation in the mainstream society, in India, the entire discourse on the prevention of venereal

diseases precluded any such responsibility of the state towards rehabilitation of theses classes. In its attempt to rescue the soldier from the evil effects of his sexual indulgences, the state, despite recognizing him as equally responsible, spared him, and held the prostitute—the colonized subject and an unequal partner—as sole guilty, and made her pay for it.  

Another psychosocial aspect that we may presume attributed to the perversion of prostitution in India; especially during the late colonial period could be the absence of sexual sublimation in prostitution. Freud, from 1905, thought that apparently non-sexual activities (and especially artistic creation and intellectual enquiry) could be an expression of sexual instinct, by a deflection from sexuality. Sublimation, he argued, is not a scientific concept. We cannot switch or divert sexual energy as if it were an electrical current. Those who are revolted by sex or seek to repress it are not truly sublimating their desires. The principal operation of Freudian sublimation must be seen as involving a change into a higher cultural or spiritual realm.

Throughout the history of prostitution in India—we could see these artistic expressions of sexual instinct going side by side with the physical expression of sexuality only coming into a standstill in the late colonial period. These socio-cultural modes of expression led to relationships between the prostitutes and colonizers that were beyond mere sexual exchange. The usual part and parcel of the entertainment of the European guests at the houses of Indian aristocrats including the Nawab Of Bengal were Nautch Dances—“Dancing—girls ordered from Lucknow and Delhi—surely Rahema Bibi with her incredibly graceful gestures, surely Zebunissa with her delightful wit and the wonderful memory that enabled her to cap appropriately any Persian quotation”. The initial pattern in all early European empires tended towards intermarriages with local women. The keeping of mistress was not uncommon in eighteenth century Britain itself. Thus, keeping mistress(s) in British

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India became a well-established norm by the late eighteenth century and the pattern was set at the highest level. As Ronald Hyam goes on describing, "Job Charnock (d.1693), founder of Calcutta, had three children by the Hindu mistress he had rescued from a suttee funeral pyre. George Dick (Governor of Bombay in the 1970s) kept a Maratha woman, allowing her to parade about the streets ostentiously; she was accused of tyranny, corruption and even of spying on behalf of Maratha pirates. Sir David Ochterlony (the Resident of Delhi, 1803-25) apparently had thirteen mistresses among Indian ladies. Even so respectable figure as Lord Teignmouth, Governor - General (1793-98) and a British and Foreign Bible Society founder, had such a liaison. Col. James Skinner (1778-1841), founder of the crack regiment 'Skinner's Horse', was said to have had a harem of fourteen wives, though the family hotly denied there were ever more than seven; eighty children claimed him as their father." Many of the Britshers in India formally married Hindu women or half-Indians, known as Anglo-Indians or Eurasians. It is estimated that approximately ninety percent of British staying in India made such marriages by the mid-eighteenth century. Anglo-Indians were a vital power behind the empire building in the early years of colonial expansion and a deliberate policy to encourage intermarriages was followed by the company. The Governor-General Warren Hastings (1774-85) headed essentially a cosmopolitan society. Hastings' interest in Indian culture led him to an affectionate respect of many Indians of whom the most esteemed one was Ali Ibrahim Khan, Chief Judge of Benares. It was perhaps from his readings in Hindu literature that he caught an almost Hindu feeling for cows. He himself made translations from Indian epics. In the words of Dennis Kincaid, "...he (Hastings) would take up a book of extracts from the Mahabharata and the lean disdainful face of the Governor-General would soften with emotion a she read of the chivalrous heroes of the Hindus, of Arjun the charioteer and Prince Yudhishtira who would not entire heaven unless his dog accompanied him."

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113 Ibid.
However, in the 1790s the racial policies of the empire went through a reversal. Governor-General Wellesly stopped entertaining Indians at the Governor House. Distant with Europeans, Wellesley was contemptuous of Indians. As General Palmer wrote to Hastings, “little or no attention is paid to the Vakils of the Native Courts by Lord Wellesly. They are not permitted to pay their respects to him oftener that two or three times a year, which I think is as impolitic as it is ungracious...I observe with great concern the system of depressing them adopted by the present government and imitated in the manners of almost every European...In fact they (Indians) have hardly any social intercourse with us.”

It was no longer fashionable in Government House circles to profess an interest in Persian poetry or Hindu metaphysics. The deterioration between the two races was very rapid. Cornwallis purged the administration and widened the social gulf. Anglo-Indians were prohibited from holding civil or military office with the company in 1791. There were several reasons that contributed to the shift in the reversal of the attitude of the British Empire since 1790s. The ‘Christian invasion’ of India By protestant and Evangelical missionaries contributed to a ‘tighter morality’ in the European community at Calcutta. Moreover, Lord Wellesley was looking at the Empire building at a long-term basis also increased the distance between the ruler and the ruled. In order to prepare the well-trained administrators for the future empire building, he disapproved of open concubinage with Indian women and founded Fort William College as antidote for moral, spiritual and professional reforms. Moreover, the uprising in the Caribbean island of Santo Domingo after 1791 shook the world against the white rule there. The independent republic of Haiti—the first ex-European colonial successor state in the Third World was declared in 1804. Dessalines, the founder in 1805 ordered the massacre of all whites except priests and doctors. And in India too the fear was British might be driven out by Indians officered by Anglo-Indian, then known as half-caste or Eurasians (nonetheless, their apprehensions were to come true in the coming fifty years through the outbreak of the Mutiny in 1857 that is also known as the First War of Independence). The uneasy disfavour caused by the Eurasians were more due to the fact that they seemed to be a threat to bridge the social distance between the ruling class and the ruled native. They were excluded from the civil services and the

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114 Ibid.
commissioned ranks in the army, though that got compensated as they later found their place in railways.

Nevertheless, it is mention worthy that despite the repeated attempt and policies of the Govt. to distance themselves, missionaries played an ambiguous role. Inspite of the fact that they followed a European lifestyle, for professional reasons they were bound to maintain a closer relationship with the native. Many proved to be uncomfortable by criticizing Indians as well as British immorality. “In general, however, the presence of missionaries of the ruling race encouraged the British to see themselves as more moral than Indians and to think that the preservation of social distance was morally justified”. Another concern was that British often felt and suspected Indians to be of a more lascivious nature that they were themselves. Child marriages and polygamy seemed to support such assumptions in their eyes. “Indeed, the British in India were peculiarly prone to the jealousy felt by men of dominant elite at the possibility of sexual relations between women of the elite and men of subordinate groups”. For the time being all these led to the restrictions in the policies of inter-racial exchange—be it sexual or otherwise. Unfortunately, these policies of racism distanced the colonizers and the colonized culturally, socio-politically and moreover in the context of the discussion, psycho-sexually. The new bonding between colonized women and colonizer were to be devoid of emotional, cultural or social bonding and were mainly sexual in nature. In a way, these forms of interactions might have repercussions on the issues of STDs and public health in the colonial period.

Although intermarriages have virtually come to an end by the beginning of the nineteenth century, yet the interaction between Indian or Eurasian women and the Britishers had not come to a halt and took a commercial turn all of a sudden. Anglo-Indian women were frequently of outstanding beauty. A magistrate in the Indian Civil Service in the 1830s, Samuel Sneade Brown observed that many soldiers attached themselves to attractive Indian women that were to him “a great deal more moral than

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116 Ibid.
a destructive round of dissipation". These women were different from “shameless British prostitutes” and were most affectionate as he went on describing, “I have observed that those who have lived with a native woman for any length of time never marry a European...so amusingly playful, so anxious to oblige and please, that a person after being accustomed to their society shrinks from the idea of encountering the whims or yielding to the fancies of an English woman.

From the 1860s onward, it became extremely shameful to consort with an Indian woman for an officer, whether civil or military. The events that made impact in the arena of socio-political life worked as important factors-primarily the mutiny of 1857 and partially the import of damsels from Home, i.e., Britain. However, it is difficult to say whether the racial and discriminatory policies of the Govt. gradually led to the outbreak of the mutiny or the mutiny placed the barriers between British and Indians. The previous seems to be closer to the reality. But could it be assumed that these policies of racial discrimination and exploitation ultimately had their own impact on public health, backfiring on the health of the soldiers by making them unfit for the empire building. Soldiers’ sexuality and marriage remained a debatable issue at the policy level throughout the colonial period. The outcome of the racial policies adopted by the Empire builders meant for a common soldier that he could neither marry nor keep native women as a companion. Thus and therefore, he has to go to the prostitutes sanitized and testified by the authority. These indirectly led and encouraged a culture of voyeurism, a culture that encouraged multiple sexual involvement and discouraged emotional involvement (in the colonial context at the pretext of skin colour). There laid the basic paradox of the British colonial policy that after promoting a vulgar culture on the basis of sexual commercialization they tried controlling STDs and regulate it through various public health laws and policies and consequently all of those measures failed either to stop or to control syphilis.

However, in the post mutiny period there were a massive upsurge on building of railways as a measure to have better access and more control over the regions. These were coupled by the improvements in steamships and the opening of the Suez Canal.

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118 S.Sneade Brown, Home Letters Written from India...1828-41, London, 1878.
in 1869 that revolutionized the communication between Britain and India. As a result of improved communication more young unmarried women came to India in search of husband from Britain. In various ways the larger presence of Englishwomen from mid-century is often held to have widened the distance between the colonized and the colonizer even more. Ballhatchet suggests, "As wives they hastened the disappearance of the Indian mistress. As hostesses they fostered the development of exclusive social groups in every civil station. As women they were thought by Englishmen to be in need of protection from lascivious Indians"\(^\text{119}\)

Thus situation became such that British ensured a physical separation between the life of the official elite and that of the Indian people by planning civil stations adjoining but apart from Indian towns\(^\text{120}\). Similarly seclusion was provided for the soldiers in cantonments or paramilitary camps. As Ballhatchet describes, "The authorities often revealed anxiety at the thought of British soldiers wandering beyond the controlled environment of the cantonment into mysterious places where they might be infected with dangerous diseases and tempted into Oriental vices. The typical cantonment contained regimental bazaars as well as a central bazaar, and the soldiers were expected to satisfy their needs there."\(^\text{121}\) Especially, in post-mutiny period British rule seemed all the more dependent on the British soldier. The authorities redoubled their efforts to enable him to satisfy his virility without endangering his health. Thus and therefore special requirements and rules seemed to be necessary for the British soldiers. On the one hand they were not from the upper crust of the British society and thus thought to be of low moral quality and of below intellect for continence and restraints and on the other, the common soldiers lacked the material resources necessary for marriage, excluding a few who were allowed to marry ‘on the strength’ of a regiment and were allotted married quarters. While the official elites were supposed to reject Indian mistresses and satisfy themselves with British wives. For "rulers should be aloof from the people and so trusted as beyond corruption and


feared as remote from the ways of common men". The racial feeling reached it’s peak during Lord Curzon’s viceroyalty, between 1899 and 1905. The Mutiny of 1857 showed them the inadequacy of their military power while census reports showed them the smallness of their population in front of the Indian mass. As Ballhatchet describes, “According to the 1901 census there were only 170,000 Europeans and members of ‘allied races’ in a total population of 294,000,000. There were also 89,000 Eurasians.” The requirements of ruling the Raj seemed to demand ever more aloofness between ruler and ruled as the nineteenth century wore on. In Viceroy Curzon’s 1890s cosmology the Indian princes formed a peculiar threat to ‘social distance’. Racial and sexual jealousies were involved here. As Hyam points out he failed to stop the marriage of the Maharaja of Patiala to Miss Florry Bryan and the Raja of Jind secretly married a Dutch or German lady. However, he did manage to stop the Raja of Pudukkottai from attending Queen Victoria’s funeral in case he finds to marry a white woman in London. As it is so significantly stated by Ronald Hyam, “within a period of little more than a hundred years the sexual scene for British officials in India had changed radically. If in the eighteenth century this was characterized by an active rate of overt sexual intimacy with Indians, by the twentieth century the predominant atmosphere was one of physical aloofness and suppressed eroticism.”

The most remarkable feature of the sexuality and sexual expressions of the Empire that got manifested by twentieth century was the unreality to which expatriate

122 Ibid.
123 Ibid.
124 Ibid.
126 Ibid.
Colonizers' emotional life became reduced Europeans in India were allowed to flirt outrageously, but they must not fall in love to marry. By the end of the 1850s the taking of mistresses in India and Ceylon was declining and VD was becoming a serious problem. As mentioned in the nineteenth century marriage below the rank in the army was of major exception. A third of the officers seemed to be married by 1871, but fewer than two percent of those under the age of twenty-four were. The say went, "subalterns cannot marry, captain may marry, majors should marry, colonels must marry". For an army full of a lot of young, unmarried men, fitter and better fed than their mates outside the choice was between lying idly in the barrack (for going out under sun or masturbating both considered to have generated madness), drinking silly in the canteen or going to a prostitute (and getting the clap or pox).

The peculiarity of the sex life led by the Indian army had been pointed out by John Masters; "It is useless to point out our life was a normal one. Ours was a one-sexed society, with the women hanging on to the edges...In India there was always an unnatural tension,...and every man who pursued the physical aim of sexual relief was in danger of developing a cynical hardness and lack of sympathy...Of those who tried sublimation, some chased polo balls and some chased patridge, some buried themselves in their work, and all became unmitigated nuisances...And some took up the most unlikely hobbies, and some went to diseased harlots...and some married in haste, only to worry over who was now seducing their wives in the hill stations where they had seduced so many other people's wives. And a few homosexuals followed their secret star with comparative comfort in that large and easy-going country...". These anecdotes very clearly reflect the shift in the sexual life and the impact it produced. As for increasing the marriage quotas authorities were in dilemma as that meant increase in allowances and building married quarters. There were really very few choices left for the authority. To exclude prostitutes might turn cantonments into replicas of Sodom and homosexuality; to allow tommies outside the cantonment into unregulated brothels meant to let them endanger their health and also annoying the locals. And the cornerstone on which the dominant discourse of STDs and public

127 Ibid.

health laid was to preserve the soldier’s health, as he was an enormously costly import.

Thus, between the mid-1850s and 1888 a system was in operation under which regulated prostitution was available in seventy-five cantonments where the Indian army was stationed (inclusive of six in Burma and one in Sri Lanka). The aim was to keep the prostitute free from disease. Under the system Indian prostitutes (the first class secluded for the soldiers) were admitted to the cantonments, to the Lal Bazaar (the red-light area of the regimental lines), after medical examination and registration.

**The Empire and the Public Health Measures**

The Royal Commission on the Sanitary State of the Army in India prepared the way of legislation. A bill was introduced to regularize the administration of civil, and criminal justice in military cantonments to the Governor-General’s legislative council in 1864. One of the clauses was local govts could make rules ‘for inspecting and controlling houses of ill-fame and for preventing the spread of venereal disease’ (Act XXII, 1864, xix, 7). The Bill duly passed into law as Act XXII of 1864. A special committee was appointed to draw up rules under the Cantonments Act. As per the Committee’s recommendation prostitutes were to be divided into two classes: primarily public prostitutes frequented by Europeans; public prostitutes not so frequented by them. Here also a clear cut racial segregation was followed as far the visiting of prostitutes are of concern from the perspectives of the clients’ skin-colour. The rules were applicable only to first-class prostitutes who were supposed to register themselves with the cantonment authorities and each would be given a printed ticket in a prescribed form along with a copy of the rules. She would have to subject herself to medical examination once a month and the results of each examination would be recorded on the ticket and if found infected with VD she would be detained in the lock-hospital until she was certified cured. The term ‘lock hospital’ seems to have been first used of the London lock hospital, which in the early years of the eighteenth century. However, in the Indian context the term “lal bazar” denoted the red light or brothel area of the regimental bazar, superintended by an elderly woman whose duty was to ensure the health of the prostitutes and also to expel the ones who are infected or sent them to the hospital. Cantonment authorities might make rules for the
maintenance and sanitation cum sewerage of the prostitutes' houses. Soliciting in public would not be tolerated in the cantonment-premises.\textsuperscript{129} There was no fixed number of the prostitutes. The number varied from sixty to hundred and ten, while the maximum strength of the soldiers would be about 3,750, which meant on and average one women to forty four men. When the regiment traveled the whole supporting bazaar marched with it that meant cooks, barber, dhobis, ginger-pop market and the prostitutes. Frank Richards a private in the Indian army between 1902 and 1909 had given a picturesque description of the brothel or rag at Agra. The brothel was open from 12.00 noon to 11.00 p.m. There were thirty to forty Indian girls aged twelve to thirty for the garrison of 1,500 white men. It was, he describes was impossible to walk through the barrack without being offered a 'jiggy-jag'. Nevertheless, emphasis was laid on washing afterwards in order to avoid VDs and hot water used to be kept at the lavatory of the barracks.\textsuperscript{130}

To make prostitution less dangerous for the soldiers control of the prostitutes seemed to be most essential and to control prostitution is to legitimize it and to legitimize it means making it respectable. The organization did not seem scandalous to the authorities as they felt they were just mainstreaming and regulating part of an old and honorable establishment. That might be so, but in the process of doing it they turned upside down of this establishment like the way they had transformed, destroyed and recreated many other institutions in India. However, the control had to be exerted without harassing the prostitutes. Thus it felt appropriate to appoint dhais as supervisors. The duties and roles of the doctors of the Lock-hospitals were also instructed-"It should be the special care of the Medical Officer that all arrangements for inspection should be delicately carried out; that the comforts and interests of patients should be carefully looked after; their residence in hospital rendered as little distasteful to them as possible; that all complaints should be investigated and adjudged with kindness and consideration; and that all duties connected with women performed by himself or his subordinates should be carried out with respect and feeling towards sex".\textsuperscript{131} While the previous regulations related to VDs failed it was


\textsuperscript{130} Richards, F., Old-Soldier Sahib, London, 1936.

presumed that it was due to the women outside the periphery of cantonments that they used to visit. Thus, this rule covered places and spaces beyond the cantonment boundaries.

However, a great city and seaport like Calcutta where soldiers as well as sailors were vulnerable to VDs could hardly be treated as an appendage of the military cantonment of Barrackpore. In 1864, the Chairman of the Justices asked for Fabre-Tonnerre’s opinion who was the health officer of Calcutta. The result was a memorandum to the effect that control was imperative as syphilitic disease was spreading among all classes other than sailors and soldiers. He submitted another memorandum in 1867 which states there were upwards of thirty thousand prostitutes in Calcutta. He also submitted a draft Act for the prevention of contagious diseases. The Lieutenant-Governor agreed that Bengal’s ports needed a Contagious Diseases Act on the lines of recent English legislation that was closely followed by Fabre-Tonnerre’s draft. Nonetheless, while in English case the action could be taken after a police officer had laid information against a woman, in this draft it was compulsory for the prostitute to register as the Lieutenant-Governor thought it was better for Calcutta as it was to their standard so full of prostitutes. The Bill was duly passed into law as Act XIV of 1868 known as the Indian Contagious Diseases Act. The provisions under the Act included the compulsory registration of brothels and prostitutes, periodical medical examinations and compulsory treatment of prostitutes found to be infected. Prostitutes could be forbidden to live in specified areas as well. All these provisions could be with the sanction of the Governor-General in Council in places specified by a local government. Nevertheless, such policies could hardly be inaugurated without certain unease. The Indian Contagious Disease Act XIV of 1868 came into operation in Kolkata since 1st of April 1869. It was amended a couple of times. The key element of this act was compulsory registration and medical examination of the prostitutes, especially of those who were visited by the British soldiers in the regimental bazaars and nearby towns. It was through such act of registration that the Indian prostitutes were enrolled as a colonial subject. A number of small booklets, like the ‘Beshya’ Guide (Guide for the prostitutes) in Bengali, were published in the regional languages, for their benefit. In response, many left the city and went to the French colony of Chandernagar.
Whenever a prostitute was reported as an absentee from the periodical medical examination, a warrant for her arrest was immediately sent out. The friends and relatives of the absentee prostitute offered protest through non-cooperation, when chased by the police. Having endured the extremes of medico-police excesses, like disrobing in public and, use of metallic instruments for examining the existence of disease, some prostitutes committed suicide. Through a relentless game of chase and run with the colonial police, the Indian prostitute, once accepted and revered, then scorned yet tolerated, was finally branded as a criminal running away from a 'beneficial' law.

A small part of the local elite became gradually more and more vocal against the excesses around the Act. The remaining greater part of the hypocritical Kolkata elite, the forefathers of our present rulers, took up cudgels in defense of their imperial masters and, vociferously campaigned for ghettoizing prostitutes within the confines of places like Sonagachi. Some of the missionaries from England were horrified too, especially as they witnessed the sufferings of the swelling ranks of white prostitutes. Their very existence was a matter of great embarrassment for the white rulers. The Act itself was not very effective either. In 1868 about 19.2% of the white soldiers in Kolkata were suffering from venereal diseases, in 1870 the percentage was reduced to 13.6%; however, by the next year it was back to the previous level. The demand for the suspension of the Act gained momentum in England. In the missionary discourse against the Act, the prostitute as eased out of her identity as a ‘criminal’, to be held up as a ‘victim’ of official discrimination. The response of the elite among the prostitutes of Kolkata of those days, however, stunned one and all. They submitted petitions against the Act and its enforcement. Between June and December 1869, when the police of Kolkata arrested some 1418 prostitutes for violating the Act, 1527 prostitutes from Kolkata and, 499 of them from the suburbs, petitioned against the Act and the police in the courts of law. Some of the policemen were sacked as the charges of misbehaviour, graft, violence and molestation leveled against them were proved. In 1864 there were about 30,000 prostitutes in Kolkata, according to a report submitted to the government by the then health officer of the city. By 1870 about 6000 from among them were registered. The Act was suspended in Kolkata in 1883 and finally it was scrapped in 1888. Officially these steps curtailed the powers of the police and the army to indiscriminately arrest and punish the prostitutes. The Indian prostitutes
solely reserved for the white soldiers were given the option to walk out. However, they were in a paradoxical situation in this moment of ‘colonial liberation’.

In 1872 the Bench of Justices, refused to contribute any longer to the expenses of the Contagious Diseases Act. The Justices also denied responsibility for the lease of a building for the lock-hospital. As mentioned before Public opinion in England was now preoccupied with the working of the English CD Act. A Royal Commission pondered the matter in 1871 and I the course of their deliberations heard some evidence about the system in India that in turn said to have provoked a protest from the Baptist Missionary Society. They concluded that ‘no considerations of health, economy or expediency can justify or excuse legalized prostitution’, and urged that ‘the present obnoxious system of limitation of marriage in the Army should be repealed’. Despite, the realization that they could not expect much to do with Indian CD Act when it was still enforced in England, they did also realize that in India unlike in England there was no attempt to persuade the prostitutes to change their occupation as it was being ventured and supported by Josephine Butler as discussed earlier. The reason lies in the fundamental difference in the way institution of prostitution was perceived differently in India and in Britain. In India prostitutes were more of a caste or category of people than fallen women or criminals. Prostitution was more of a hereditary occupation as well as socio-cultural institution in India. While religious attitude were less rigid (moreover in some places prostitution was encouraged within the fold of religious practices) in India than in England, though social structures were more rigid, prostitutes could hardly be rehabilitated back in the society and society permitted them no alternative occupation. This fundamental difference in viewing prostitution was one of the reasons that led to the attempts of its regulation and criminalisation in India under British colonialism. Also in satisfying soldiers’ masculine needs prostitutes were seen as playing a positive role. Atleast Indian Lock-hospitals were better of as there was nothing of the punitive regime so characteristic of their European counterparts. For these reasons, i.e., the traditional societal role of the prostitutes combined with the need of the soldiers it was


not either easy to abolish prostitution or to rehabilitate prostitutes in India unlike in Britain. However, the CD Act got suspended in 1872 due to its failure and financial expenses. The Act too was unpopular with the native population as they realized it was to benefit the colonizers. Surgeon-General Cunningham emphasized, it was “altogether insufficient to justify the expenditure of money and the interference with the people in their most intimate social relations”. The expenses went upto Rs.5,000/ a month while the ill effects of VDs were a ‘mere nothing’ in comparison with the ravages of fever, dysentery and other Indian Diseases. The Act if had to work effectively should include the suburban areas of Howrah that would double the number of prostitutes under supervision to eighteen thousands that would mean even more expenses. In the meantime, the Colvin Committee that looked at the figures reported, the average annual incidence of VD among the European troops in the garrison of Fort William had fallen from 328.2 per 1000 in the decade before the Act to 192.7 per 1000 in the decade after it. Three of them concluded the act was successful to some extent and two of them did not. Meanwhile the Bengal Govt. abandoned the attempt to work the Act throughout Calcutta and decided to limit it to prostitutes frequented by Europeans. Venereal disease was described as the scourge of British troops. By 1888 criticism was strong enough for the Indian cantonment arrangements to be officially suspended. However, many of their main features went on unchanged. The following statement dated 5TH June, 1895 from the Enclosure No.10. of ‘Report of a Departmental Committee on the Prevalence of Venereal Disease among the British Troops in India dated February, 1897’ by F.W. Newmarch, Secretary shows the measures taken and orders issued consequent on the resolution of the House of Commons:

“.It may here be remarked that notwithstanding the instructions which were issued from time to time in consonance with the orders of 1888, it was found that the practices which had been condemned by the Resolution of the House of Commons, and which had been prohibited by the orders of the Governor General in Council, had not been wholly discontinued in some cantonments, and in a Despatch dated 1st March 1894, No.26, the Secretary Of State for India intimated that the only effective method

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134 Ibid.
135 Ibid.
of preventing a recurrence of such practices was by means of legislation; accordingly an Act for this purpose was passed by the Governor General in Council on 7th February 1895, providing that no rule made under the Cantonments Act of "1889 shall contain any regulation enjoining or [emitting any compulsory or "periodical examination of any woman by medical officers or others for the purpose "of ascertaining she is or is not suffering from any venereal disease is or "is not fit for prostitution". Similarly, it was provided “that no rule shall contain “any regulation for the licensing or special registration of prostitutes or for giving “legal sanction to the practice of prostitution in any cantonment.” This necessitated a revision of the 1890 cantonment rules, and a fresh set of rules were therefore drawn up and published for General information in G.G.Os”.136

As Mrs.E.W.Andrew and Dr.K.Bushnell the two American lady investigators found out in 1892-93 and in 1899-1900 that Lock hospitals continued under the sanitized name of 'voluntary venereal hospitals'. Although the regulated system had not produced any dramatic reduction in VDs, yet suspension at once made the matter worse. Despite the possibility that VDs might have been loosely defined and there was a tendency to see the symptoms of syphilis in all probable instances, between 1889 and 1892 about half the British soldiers in Bengal were treated for VDs-official rate 522.3 per 1000.137

At all events in 1895 Secretary of State Lord George Hamilton wanted to bring back the old regulations in spite of the warning from Viceroy Elgin. He thus, suggested simply restarting a voluntary VD examination having powers to expel the diseased prostitute from the cantonment and to stop the pay of the infected-soldier. This way, by punishing both the parties he thought that would restrain the soldiers and remove the reproach that authorities only punish the Indian women. However, War Office did not accept these fair means as they thought. This would lead to concealment of the disease on the part of the troops. The new rules that was adopted in 1897 stated no special registration of prostitutes(apart from that required for all inhabitants in the

136 Newmarch, F.W. Statement dated 5th June, 1895 from the Enclosure No.10 in 'Report of a Departmental Committee on the Prevalence of Venereal Disease among the British Troops in India dated February, 1897'

137 India. General Headquarters, Army.Medical Directorate.Venereal Disease: Diagnosis & Treatment.4th Ed., Simla. Govt Of India Press.1941
cantonments), women were only to be allowed to live in main bazaar, VDs to be compulsorily treated like any other contagious disease and improved recreational facilities were also recommended. As a result there was some gratifying decline in the VDs. But regimental brothels persisted even in the twentieth century reception and treatment of persons suffering from any disease. "This Act took effect from 1st January 1890. Rules under it were published 4th July 1890, and cantonment hospitals, as authorized by those rules, were established in the latter part of the year. In the year 1892, instructions were issued by the Govt. of India with a view to securing the strict observance of these Cantonment Rules and of the Resolution of the House of Commons of 5th June 1888. The system maintained under these rules was, however, condemned by the majority report of a Committee presided over by Mr. G. Russel, M.P., and instructions were telegraphed to the Viceroy by the Secretary of State on 20th Sept. 1893, resulting, after considerable correspondence, in the passing of an amending Act which prohibited the compulsory or periodical examination of women, and rules which excluded venereal disease from those diseases sufferers from which if refractory may be removed from cantonments. Powers are conferred on the Govt of India by Section 26(23) of the Cantonment Act, 1889, above referred to, make rules providing for the "removal and exclusion from the cantonment, with or without assigning any reason for excluding them therefrom", but the Secretary of State in a Despatch of 29th Nov. 1894 was unable concur in the view expressed by the Govt. of India that the authorities charged with the health of cantonments should have discretion as to the class of persons allowed to remain in them.

Nonetheless, we visualize a shift in the prevalence of venereal diseases during 1890-95. The great increase in the prevalence of venereal diseases that, as we have seen, occurred in the year 1888 to 1890, was followed in 1891 by the most rapid decline in the admission rate shown in any year of the series. It rose somewhat in 1892, and in the three succeeding years the rise was rapid and continuous, reaching in 1895 the highest figure year recorded, 522.3 per 1,000 strength, or 536.8 per 1,000 of troops in cantonment only, i.e., excluding troops on field service in Chitral and Waziristan. The prevalence of the disease varies greatly in different stations, and at different

138 Elgin Viceroyalty papers, F.84/15, Elgin to Secretary of State Hamilton, 10 May, 1897.
139 See Military Despatch from Govt. of India, No.184, of Nov. 1896, printed in the Appendices.
times; and it was found to decrease materially when, owing to outbreaks of smallpox or cholera, bazaars or cities in the neighborhood of cantonments are temporarily placed out of bounds.

Secondary syphilis as we had seen, showed no very serious increase from the years of its lowest prevalence down to 1884-5. In the two following years it increased rapidly, but it diminished in 1887, as it was not differentiated from the non-syphilitic sore until 1886, and only partially in that year. The figures of secondary syphilis may, however, be taken as a fair measure of the virulence of the disease generally. From 1887 onwards we are able to show clearly the changes which have taken place in the prevalence of syphilis both primary and secondary, with the following truly alarming results:— In the nine years 1887-95, while non-syphilitic venereal affections, *RATIO OF ADMISSION-1887, 256.4 PER 1000; 1895, 263.3 PER 1000., have remained almost stationary in amount (but see paragraph 4, and note I on page 6 as to the effect of a stricter method of classifications on a portion of these figures), the admission rate for primary syphilis has risen 130% (i.e., from 75.5 to 174.1 cases per 1,000 men), and that for secondary syphilis no less than 188%. (i.e., from 29.4 to 84.9 cases per 1000 men). The rise was not indeed continuous, a temporary but marked improvement being shown in 1891 and 1892, but the latest figures are the worst yet recorded. Secondary syphilis was more than four times as prevalent in 1895 as it was in 1873.

Table 2.2: Syphilis load among Hospital Admissions

Bengal Figures

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All India

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<tr>
<td>1884</td>
<td>24.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mean for yrs 1872-84</td>
<td>23.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1885</td>
<td>28.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1886</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


### Table 2.3 Primary and Secondary Syphilis among Hospital Patients

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Primary Syphilis</th>
<th>Secondary Syphilis</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>75.5</td>
<td>29.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>72.1</td>
<td>32.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>134.3</td>
<td>51.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>135.6</td>
<td>66.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>104.</td>
<td>60.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>102.6</td>
<td>57.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>129.3</td>
<td>61.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>173.</td>
<td>74.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>174.1</td>
<td>84.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Greater virulence of the disease is further attested by a longer average duration of treatment, and by an increase in the numbers of invaliding and deaths to venereal disease, as shown in the following table:
Table 2.4 Data Showing Changing Virulence of Syphilis

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Average duration of each case of venereal disease in days.</th>
<th>Number of men finally discharged the service for venereal disease.</th>
<th>Ratio of men discharged for venereal disease to total number discharged.</th>
<th>Number of deaths due to syphilis.</th>
<th>Ratio of deaths due to syphilis to total deaths.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>25.95</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>3.</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>25.68</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>7.7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>28.39</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>29.07</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>29.50</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>29.01</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>9.</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>29.82</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>30.77</td>
<td>111</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>31.49</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>15.8</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


In 1895, an average of 45 men per 1000, or 3,200 in a force of 71,031 British soldiers in India, was constantly in hospital for venereal disease. However, many cases of secondary syphilis had been treated by hypodermic injection of mercury, without admission to hospital, and do not therefore, figure in the returns. A large number of men who are nominally cured are only fit for service under peace conditions, and would break down on field service. Among 5,822 men detailed for field service with the Chitral Relief Force, 462, or nearly 8%, had to be rejected for venereal disease; 279 more, or an additional 4&1/2%, had to be transferred from the field hospitals to the base for the same cause. In the great majority of these cases the disease had been contracted before the men crossed the frontier. On a basis of 8% rejected before starting on field service, and 4& ½% more subsequently invalided for disease contracted before crossing the frontier, 8,880 men out of a total force of 71,041 would have to be put down as useless, from this one cause, for field operations.\textsuperscript{140}

\textsuperscript{140} Great Britain, India Office. Departmental Committee on the prevalence of V.D. among the British troops in India.1896.
Further, a great amount of sickness and inefficiency not coming under the head of venereal disease (e.g., many cases of rheumatism, dysentery, heart-disease etc.), were well known to be attributable to, or aggravated by, the specific disease.

The increase of this latter is the more striking when contrasted with the improvement in the general health of the troops in India which has been progressing ever since the mutiny, and which would assuredly have been greater in recent years but for the growing influence of venereal disease in predisposing to, and aggravating, so many other complaints. Improved sanitation had had the very greatest effect upon every disease other than venereal; this alone had not only been unchecked in recent years, but had increased to an extent that is appalling and disastrous.

Table 2.5 Proportion of Cases of Venereal Diseases among Hospital Admissions

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MEAN ADMISSION RATE FOR NON-VENEREAL DISEASES</th>
<th>RATIO OF VENEREAL TO NON-VENEREAL ADMISSION RATE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1860-64 (BENGAL), 1,606 PER 1,000</td>
<td>18.2 PER CENT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1872-76 (INDIA), 1,177</td>
<td>17.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1887</td>
<td>35.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1888</td>
<td>36.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1889</td>
<td>47.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1890</td>
<td>49.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1891</td>
<td>40.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1892</td>
<td>37.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1893</td>
<td>49.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1894</td>
<td>51.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1895</td>
<td>55.5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


The Committee desire to call attention to the medical Report dated 21st Aug. 1896, by Surgeon-Major H.R. Whitehead, lately in charge of the Surgical Division at Netley, on the cases of syphilis arriving from India.

One of the professors, having a large experience of Continental hospitals, informed us that nowhere on the Continent could such sights be witnessed as are to be seen in the
syphilis wards at Netley, now known among the officers there as the "Inferno". An examination of the medical history of the cases which, for all causes, come to Netley, reveals the fact that the numbers entered as venereal do not by any means exhaust those which find their way to Netley in consequence of having contracted diseases of that class.

Seventy-four per cent of the whole have at some time during their short military career contracted syphilis; and there can be little doubt that most of them would never have been sent to Netley at all had it not been for the previous influence of venereal disease.

Deaths directly attributable to this cause bear but a small relation to the numbers in hospital, but that life is seriously shortened by it, as well as rendered miserable, in numbers of cases, is beyond a doubt.

In British-mind syphilis had a long hand stretched unto 'home' that was influencing the health of the population out there. Some of its victims were completely crippled, while the danger existed, in the case of each of them who might afterwards marry, that he might transmit to his wife and children a loathsome and horrible complaint. This danger was not indeed confined to the invalids at Netley, but extended to a far larger and increasing number of men who annually kept coming home with the seeds of constitutional disease in their system.

More than 13,000 British soldiers annually left India, most of whom, were eventually absorbed among the civil population at Britain. It was ascertained that of 70,642 British soldiers serving in India on the 15th July 1894, 19, 892, or 28%, had been admitted to hospital for syphilis since arrival in India. Only 26,247 men, or 37%, had never suffered, in or out of India, from any form of venereal disease. And all the evidence we had points to the existence of a still worse state of things since that date. Less than 4% of these men were married. It was to be feared that a considerable number who had contracted disease marry afterwards, and were liable to transmit it to their wives and children. Nor was the intercourse between the sexes the only means...
by which syphilis could be communicated. Doctors contracted it in the performance
of their duties. It might be caught through drinking out of a cup, or smoking of a pipe,
which had been touched by diseased lips; nurses could communicate it to infants and
infants to nurse. It was seen altogether as a most easily communicable poison. The
then present condition of Army in India, with the enormous prevalence of venereal
disease that had been shown to exist, yearly sending home thousands of men infected
with constitutional taint, was therefore a great and growing source of danger to the
whole community. The influence, which it was liable to exercise upon the health of
the 'home population', was one of the gravest aspects of the whole question. 143

Thus, it is quite probable that the paranoia combined by the intensity and the lack of
any permanent cure of the disease, left the authority with only possible option:
policing the prostitutes.

The pre-colonial norms were destroyed by the brutal police onslaught of the colonial
rule. Their previous patrons had vanished into the horizons. The new Indian elite
concurred with the English Christian missionaries and officially preferred to set them
up as 'objects of reform'. The English educated young Indian customers demanded
that they show their health tickets. The prostitutes of Kolkata realized that unless
certified healthy, they can not hope to have any white or elite Indian customer. As
colonial rule consolidated itself in India, the prostitutes fearful of losing their only
source of income, by being officially 'deregistered', clung to the alien identities of
either a 'criminal', imposed upon them through the dominant metropolitan and
colonial discourses, by holding up the already useless registration tickets, hoping to be
recognized as colonial subjects. 144

143 Newmarch F.W., Secretary. Report of a Departmental Committee on the Prevalence of Venereal
Disease among the British Troops in India. February, 1897.

144 Chatterjee, Ratnabali. Indian Prostitute as a Colonial Subject: Bengal 1864-1883. Accessed from
http://www.hsph.harvard.edu/Organizations/healthnet/SAsis/repor2/Colonial_Subject.html
At the Dawn of a New Century

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. It was also in 1921 that the League of Nations was persuaded to take up the issue of sale and purchase of women from Europe to the East...It was a rallying cry around which the racial pride of the colonial rulers could be organized. It developed into a full-scale enquiry into the conditions of prostitutes in the empires. In India neither the rulers, nor the local elite aspiring for political power, were 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 the Calcutta Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act of 1923 was passed. 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. 66% 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 love with someone. Sometimes a family friend or an acquaintance brings a woman to the market of part time or full time sexual services.\textsuperscript{146}

From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth centuries, the then contemporary society created a situation where women were gradually coming out of “parda” and opening up to the Western values and cultures. However, the society was not yet open enough to the women who had become “fallen” in the process of social transformation. This created a newly emerging vulnerability of the women. Manoda Debi was one of them. She was from an elite upper caste and class background and lost her mother at an early age. Her father took a second wife and she was not exactly in friendly terms with the new mother who was quite close to her age. The neglect of the family led her to look for emotional support that she found in a married cousin. She finally eloped with this lover who made her pregnant and left her alone. As a result, the door of the society was closed to her for ever and prostitution remained the only way to survive.

In the word of Manoda Debi, in her autobiography, “This book has been written on the memory of the hardship, pain and regrets that I have faced in my life as a prostitute. People who think we lead a happy life and who are eager to come in touch with us; they would understand if there is any hell on Earth then it is in our lives.

I am a fallen, untouchable woman in the society-I have no space in the society and it should not be, but the womanizers in the guise of sage are occupying the higher platforms in the society despite the fact that they are in touch with us. You would also be able to recognize them by knowing their real self as depicted in my autobiography. You would be shocked to see how these hypocrites bring destruction to the lives of innocent girls.”\textsuperscript{147}


\textsuperscript{147} Debi Manoda. Shikshita Patitar Atmochorit. Shonga. Kolkata.1336Bongabdo/1929 A.D. Today, DMSC, an organization of the prostitutes/sex workers, runs a library for the women in Red Light Area of Kalighat, Kolkata that has been named after Manoda Debi.
It is commonplace to treat prostitution as the diametrically opposite of marriage; however, in life the two sectors functioned in a complementary manner. In the dominant discourses they are treated as objects of control, manipulation, protection, banishment, rescue or reform. The post-independence Immoral Traffic (prevention) Act of 1956, passed after the documents of the related international convention for the prevention of ‘immoral’ traffic were signed at New York on the 9th of May 1950, has further consolidated the grip of these dominant discourses.

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.

India gained independence from the British rule in 1947, through harrowing religio-communal riots, leading to a partition of British ruled India into India-that-is-Bharat and Pakistan. In 1971 the eastern wing of Pakistan became Bangladesh. The present Indian state of West Bengal is the Indian part of old Bengal, located at the tip of the East Coast of India. Presently it is one of the poorer states of our country. Its capital Kolkata was once the capital city of British Ruled India and, functioned as the principal gateway for European Enlightenment ideas, as these poured into our land through a distorted colonial filter. It has been indicated earlier that it is here that the first seeds of the modern movement for women’s emancipation fell upon a fertile cultural soil shaped by Bengal Vaisnavism that had fore grounded women’s love in devotee-deity relationship. Throughout the 19th century, the rights of upper caste women remained a veritable battleground for the conservatives and reformers of the Bengal gentry. The names of Raja Rammohun Roy, Pandit Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay are well known all over India as champions of women’s cause. Among the foremost authors of modern Bengali literature
Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Rabindranath Tagore, Sharatchandra Chattopadhyay, Kshirodprasad Vidyabinod, Sharadindu Bandhopadhyaya, Manik Bandopadhyay, Premankur Atarthi, Satinath Bhaduri, Premendra Mitra, Banaphul, Buddhadev Bose, Mahasweta Devi, Sunil Gangopadhyay, Subroto Mukhopadhyaya and many others, have on many occasions based their literary creations on the sufferings, joys, devotion and aspirations of the women in prostitution. It is true that these portrayals carried the marks of their origin in ‘upper’ caste patriarchal consciousness, yet they were instrumental in generating some empathy for prostitutes at least among a part of the Bengali intelligentsia.

The prostitutes of Bengal on their part played a very important role in the development of modern Bengali culture, especially of Bengali theatre, throughout the 19th century and early 20th centuries, and in the development of our film industry in the early 20th century. In those days social norms were against the participation of ‘upper’ caste educated ladies as actresses on the professional and amateur stage and in film. The then illustrious actresses of the Bengali stage, Elokeshi, Golap, Shyama, Jagattarini, Binodini, Teenkari, Manadasundari and Indubala, were all prostitutes. Indubala (1899-1984) acted in 55 dramas, 50 films and, had 280 discs to her credit as a singer. She was also the Founder President of the United Women’s Council, perhaps the first organization of Kolkata prostitutes. The Council headed by Indubala organized the first major conference of women in prostitution on 28 July 1958, at Kolkata, to discuss and, to lodge protests against, the plans of the Government of India to evict prostitutes from their work sites. Eminent educationists and jurists, even state and central cabinet ministers, chaired some of the sessions of the conference. The conference pleaded that the government should protect the inalienable human rights of the “[M]arginalized women living outside the pale of society.” Nothing came of the conference resolutions and appeals. However, the organisation grew and in time became a happy hunting ground for unscrupulous political operators. Indubala and her comrades were distressed. They appealed to the fellow prostitutes to stop petitioning the government and, to come together for constructive work within the community, aimed at making the community self-reliant. In an open letter addressed to the prostitutes they wrote:
“We are living at a time when everybody is trying to stand on their own feet. Why should we not try the same? Since there is no room for us in the society of our country, we must build our own society. One by one we must establish our own schools, charitable hospitals, libraries, shops and, funds for helping the poor. To translate this noble desire into practice we need human power, money power and, strength of mind.”

No follow-up record of the subsequent activities of Indubala and her comrades has been preserved. Indubala died in 1984. Nobody could visualize at that time, that a Sonagachi Project will come up within a decade of her death, in the context of a raging AIDS pandemic, wherein many of the last wishes of Indubala and her comrades and friends will come true, within the next decade or thereabouts.

Swapna Gayen, Secretary of DMSC, at a session of the World Social Forum (Mumbai) 2004, where she said:

“The sex workers come from the society where they were born and raised; the society comes to the sex workers as customers; yet the society remains good and the sex workers are considered to be bad. How come?”

Here one sees the similar expression of the concerned voiced by Manoda Debi at the early twentieth century.

The fact that this poser has been articulated by a prostitutes’ leader from Kolkata merely reflects the rich, complex, at times very bright and, at others very dark heritage of our civilization and of its encounter with other civilizations. This experience offers us a singular lesson: We must not confront the world dogmatically with a new paradigm and say, here is the truth, kneel down before it! We should rather develop for the world new paradigms out of the ground realities of the world itself.

The ever arching principles and values of the “sex workers’ projects”, organization and movement in Kolkata, West Bengal, India are of equal worth, equal liberty, equal political status, equal decision-making power, equal development, respect for diversity, individual agency, human dignity, collective decision making, control and access over services and resources and, of taking sides – are all universal human
values. For more than a decade now the prostitutes of Kolkata, West Bengal, India are to empower themselves in a stubbornly hierarchically ordered society. The overarching values of the prostitutes’ movement enumerated above reflect to some extent the aspirations of equality among the women in general.

The story of sexuality and prostitution are also the story of or laborious, fumbling, groping, frustrating and exhilarating journey of trials-and-errors towards a desired establishment of freedom and equity. At this time some of the capitalist ideologies form the developed west pushed and shoved the women in prostitution along this path of legalisation, at other they become obstacles.

Volumes have been written about the devastating effects of myopic British imperial policies on Indian agricultural and industrial life. However, very little has been written about the de-civilising and dehumanising effects of the Imperialist policies and agendas on the Indian sex sector and sexual culture either in the colonial period or in the era of globalisation.

The colonial system gave birth to ‘Commercial Sex Work’ and set up legal and moral boundaries excluding them from the rest of the society as well as from their predecessors in the ancient and-pre-colonial India. They were degraded to outcasts and criminals. Series of measures to control prostitution (The Cantonment Act, the Contagious Diseases Act and the Lock Hospital Act etc.) transformed it from pre-colonial sin to colonial legal offence. This was done mainly keeping two reasons in mind - on the one hand catering to the sexual needs of the British soldiers allowing prostitution in a controlled manner; on the other hand there was a need to protect the British soldiers from several diseases, especially syphilis. As per Sumanta Banerjee, in his book ‘Dangerous Outcast: The Prostitutes in Nineteenth Century Bengal’, there was a tendency to trace most of the diseases as syphilis. HIV/AIDS is being dealt with similarly today. The reason behind controlling and criminalizing prostitute is not only centering on safeguarding ‘public health’, but also the ‘public morality’. This also signifies the dimensions and dynamics in the relationship between the colonizers and colonized - it is an attempt to control the sexuality of the colonized women to be catered to the


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masculine needs of the colonizer. The land and women have always been equated as properties to be possessed or conquered - leaving one aside, the imperial aggression of the other could not be completed. There was also an impression among the colonial administrators, in the nineteenth century, that there was a basic difference between Oriental and Occidental prostitution. While in Europe, prostitution was more of an exception than the rule; in India it was more of a rule because of the socio-cultural specificities. Prostitutes like the other castes / class, had a definite place in the Indian society.\textsuperscript{150} In a later part, while discussing sex-tourism in the late twentieth and twenty first centuries, we would see the similar attitude still prevailing among white male and female tourists.

However, after years of piecemeal legislation under British Rule, Independent India brought in uniform 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. Jean D'Cunha's investigation in Bombay from 1980 to 1986 reflects, while a few hundred madams and procurers were arrested between 1980-84, over 2000 prostitutes were prosecuted for practicing near a public place and 3000 for soliciting. Between 1980 and 1986 44,000 were arrested for indecent behavior in the police’s estimation. D'Cunha concludes: “Hence contrary to it's declared objectives, these sections of SITA conceived of the prostitutes as offenders”.\textsuperscript{151}( There are acts like The Immoral Traffic Prevention Act,(ITPA)1986, that was initially enacted as the suppression of Immoral Traffick in Girls and women act of 1956. 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

\textsuperscript{150} Ibid.

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.  

Thus, prostitution in India has evolved over a long period, varying from time to time, in various social, cultural and economic set-ups. It was indeed a long way from ‘mother goddess’ to ‘commercial sex worker’, from a culture of eroticized sexuality to a culture of commodified violence. However, the Saga of the prostitutes does not come to an end.... There were few historical events that added on new dimensions to it - e.g. the social and political-economic impact of the British rule for a period of two hundred years; freedom movement leading to the birth of free but divided country, a new third world nation - India; refugee problem, rapid urbanization and incapability of the authorities to recover the prosperity of previous era in a capitalist market economy and so on. These all lead to a socio-economic order where the mode of life, as well as the category of clientele change. Therefore, gradually we witness emergence of a category of prostitute who are neither the mother goddesses of Indus Valley nor the prostitutes of ancient or medieval India, nor are they the ‘commercial sex workers’ of the 19th Century who were still playing part in the socio-cultural arena. They are mainly the hungry rural/urban poor of a developing nation, not being able to make out a living in a globalized economic order, more so, because they are women in a society that still operates on the feudal modes of patriarchy and hetero-patriarchal sexual subjugation with the ancient and medieval modes of prostitution still prevailing in some pockets (if not legally)-e.g. Devadasis and Agrawalis (descendant of Baijis). With that, the emerging features of newer methods to prostitute a woman’s body could be seen through sex-tourism, beauty competitions, fashion parades and so on.

Sexual encounters tended (and still tend) to be a shame-ridden affair, a short stab of lust, devoid of love and passion. Official sexual time in India indeed beats considerably slower than her political, economic or other forms of time. The picture varies marginally from caste to caste, class to class, region to region and, to a greater extent in the case of tribes living at a greater distance from the urban centres of culture, where each successive influx of rulers and laws – first from Central Asia and

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then from Europe – imposed ever newer layers of restrictions and hypocrisy. There exists a general disapproval of the erotic in all the currently dominant ‘official’ religio-social cultures of the land, wherein the life and practices of the Muslims (about 12%), Christians, Sikhs and others (each about 2%) are strongly influenced by the overwhelming (more than 80%) presence of the caste-ridden Hindus. Religio-cultural taboos and controls may be weakening among the youth, in the case of sexual expressions and, the almanacs are lamenting their deviations from the astrologically ordained path, yet familial controls still produce conflicts around sexuality, spoil it for many and, generally impoverish our sexual culture.\(^{154}\)

The situation is further compounded by a demographic imbalance. Save a few pockets along the Southern Coast Line, the Himalayas and, the Central Indian Tribal Areas, we have on an average, about 100 females short for every 1000 men owing to alarmingly high increase in female foeticide, among other factors.\(^{155}\) In some areas of Northern and Western India, the gap is of 200 or more. In South Delhi, where the affluent sections of India’s capital city live, there are 732 women for every 1000 men and, in some pockets of West, North-West and, North-East it is less than 700 women per 1000 men. Even a conservative estimate shows that for sheer demographic reasons alone, about 10% of the Indian males, cannot have monogamous familial sexual life, even if they wish to. Add to this, economic affluence or poverty, work related single migration, preponderance of arranged marriage, myriads of personal psycho-sexual orientations and, a host of other hitherto un-investigated factors, like, say, the high percentage of child marriages (70%) and, of children in child marriages (54% in the towns and 46% in the villages), that contribute to our considerably large market for the buyers and sellers of sexual services at a lower price.\(^{156}\)

\(^{154}\) Ibid.


\(^{156}\) UNICEF-AT a glance: India-Statistics