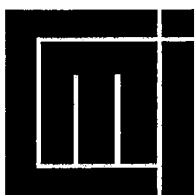


The Queens' Daughters: Prostitutes as an Outcast Group in Colonial India

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Summary:

The report historically traces the social construction of the Indian prostitute, which misrepresented and degraded the imagery of an accomplished courtesan and artistic entertainer to the degraded western image of a prostitute. The first part deals with the methods and motivations of the colonial government in construing Indian prostitutes as a separate and distinct group. The second part analyses the reactions and effects the colonial discourse had on indigenous elites, and ends with a presentation of the imagery surrounding the Indian prostitute in Bengali popular literature of the time.

Sammendrag:

Rapporten er en historisk analyse av bakgrunnen for ideen om indisk prostitusjon, og dokumenterer hvordan grupper av høyt respekterte og anerkjente artister ble mistolket og sitert. Den første delen dokumenter motivene til og metodene som kolonimyndighetene benyttet for å skille ut prostituerte som en egen gruppe. Den andre og siste delen dokumenterer og analyserer den indiske eliten sine reaksjoner på dette og anskueliggjør debatten som fulgte med eksempler på presentasjon av den prostituerte i bengalsk populær litteratur.

Indexing terms:

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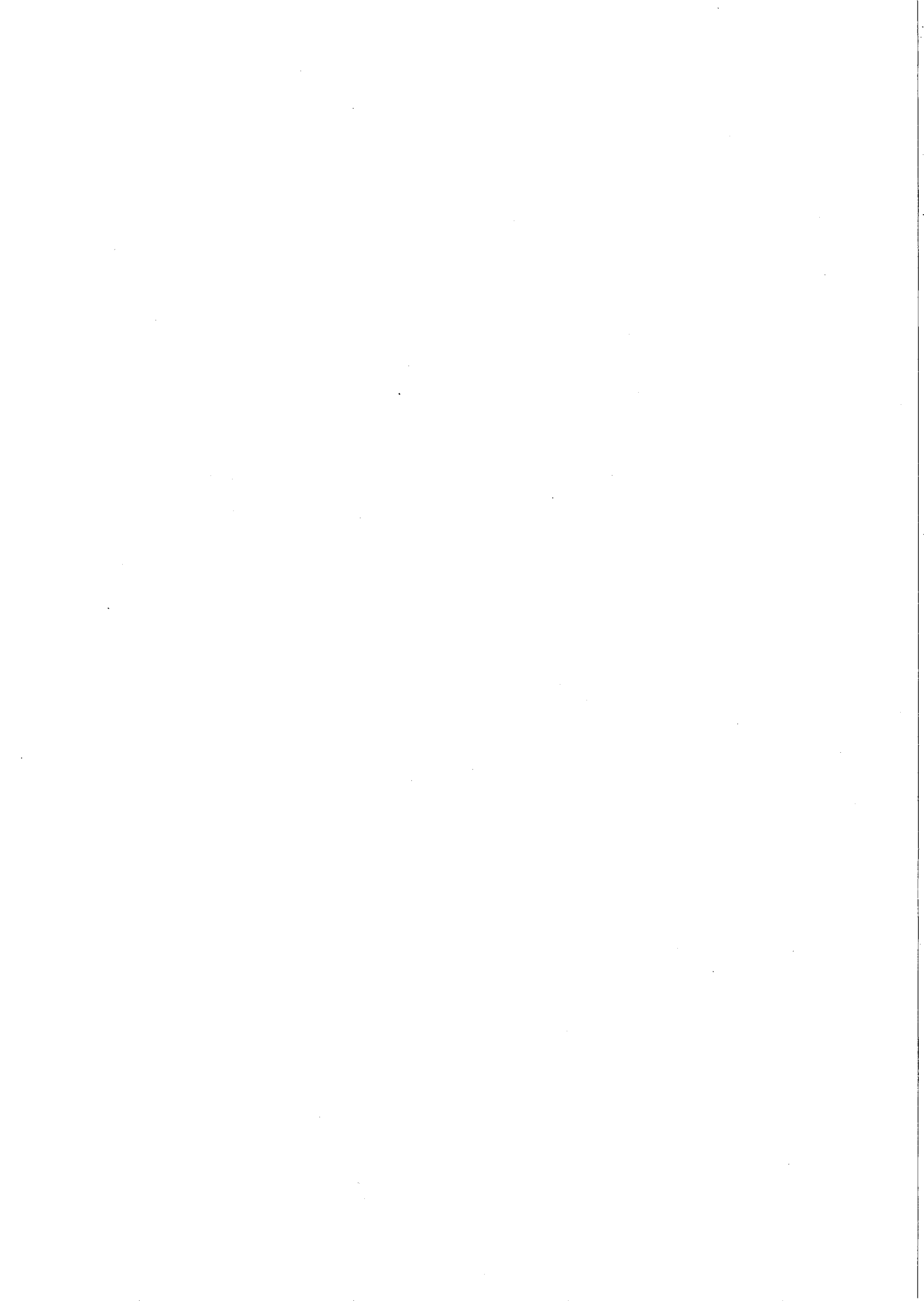
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Preface

The British Medical Journal 1991 (no. 6792, vol. 302) reported a global convention on AIDS where various speakers had expressed their concern at the rapid spread of the disease in Asia. The countries particularly affected were said to be Thailand and India. In the context of India social scientists like Swaminathan Sundaran (Institute of Social Affairs) pointed out that since prostitution in the country continued due to economic reasons and social coercion, the women had no power to negotiate safe sex and were the principal carriers of the disease. The main responsibility for spreading the disease was thus foisted on the poorest section of the Indian prostitutes.

Recently the first AIDS victim in Calcutta was picked up from a well known red light area of the city. After she fled from the hospital where she was being treated, a great commotion was caused which revealed clearly the notional links that existed between venereal disease and moral or immoral sexual practices.

My interest in a historical study of prostitution springs as much from my needs as a middle class academic as from my interest in left wing feminist politics in this country, to understand these underlying fears of female sexuality and venereal diseases which operate equally among the illiterate poor and the members of the literate middle class.

Much of the initial impetus for historically studying questions of Western sexuality had been taken by the French historian Michel Foucault. Foucault's classic area of study relates to the historical interrogation of objects usually accepted as "natural". He argues that these are constructed through particular genealogies and systems of knowledge which produce certain forms of power. Foucault's analyses seeks to understand how power is produced by this knowledge and also how it becomes regulating through certain institutions. Madness, medicine, sexuality and punishment are areas which Foucault's analyses spans as "subjects of discourse".

Using Foucault's methodology a number of studies on women's sexuality, and medico-moral politics concentrate on British Society in the nineteenth century. Among the many books which have been published in recent years I have found Frank Moits' *Dangerous sexuality* (London, 1987) and Lynda Nead's *Myths of sexuality: Representations of women in Victorian Britain* (Oxford 1990) particularly useful. Judith Walkowitz's book *Prostitution and Victorian society: Women class and state* (Cambridge 1980) published earlier is probably one of the best historical studies of prostitution in nineteenth century Britain. Current research on colonialism has, however, focused on new forms of production during this period which

coincided with new market relations developing out of European occupation of Asia and Africa. This affected women universally, as women wage workers in British textile mills, Afro-American slave women in the plantations and Indian women spinning in remote villages fared badly under the economic changes ushered in by imperial rule. Yet, specifications of race and class shaped their experience in such a way that certain boundaries can be clearly demarcated. It is within this framework of race, class, and gender that I would like to study how the Bengali prostitute was constructed.

The available data on which this paper is based, mainly official records, missionary reports and a large number of moral tracts, skits and satires in Bengali reveal multiple aspects of colonial perception. The official surveys and missionary reports varying in their emphasis have shown a fragmented vision which at times clashes with indigenous categorisations through which the Bengali prostitute was separated from the general body of Bengali subjects both in terms of gender and class to fit into the colonial schematisation of an outcast group.

This work, though begun earlier, was put together in the form of a paper with the help of my colleagues at Chr. Michelsen Institute (Bergen, Norway). A generous grant enabled me to complete the first draft between July-September 1991. It gave me leave from my teaching in Calcutta University and supported my stay in Bergen.

Tone Bleie, Gisela Geisler and Karen Kapadia very generously helped me with information and suggested readings. It is a pleasure to remember our hours of discussion which helped to clarify some of my thoughts. I am specially grateful to Gisela for helping to edit this paper and to Marianne for transforming it into print.

Useful discussions with professor Sumit Sarkar. Tanika Sarkar (Delhi University) Shibaji Bandopadhyay and Jasodhara Bagchi (Jadavpur University), Tirthankar Chatterjee (Kalyani University), Nirmala Banerjee (Center for Social Science, Calcutta), Samita Sen (Trinity College Cambridge), Sudipta Sen (Chicago University USA) have helped to revise the paper. A lot of errors still remain for which I alone remain responsible.

Introduction

In 1858 India became a part of the British empire. This ended the paradoxical situation when the vast number of people subjugated by the British, still owed allegiance to another ruler — the Mughal emperor in Delhi. The great rebellion of 1857, derisively called the Mutiny by the British, had frightfully illustrated the resentment which the colonised people nursed against their white masters. The new imperial policy was therefore directed at appeasement as well as repression of the still recalcitrant elements among the Indian subjects.

Reforms were perceived as the best measures to culturally link the colonisers with their subjects. The dream of a country populated with Black Britishers held an appeal for all sections of administrators. Yet, all good resolutions were subordinated to British interests to extract surplus and create classes conducive to colonial rule, which led to an intensification of the existing unequal relations (both in terms of class and caste) within the indigenous society.

In agrarian sectors, the new land settlements empowered the landowners in the context of individual ownership and market relations to exert greater pressures on the peasants both through economic and extra-economic forms of coercion. Peasant women were thus individually and socially affected. Women's participation in large numbers in the peasant struggles against the Colonial Government clearly testify to these facts.

Women's rights to land determined both by casts and class regulations were individually subordinated to their marital status, i.e. widows and unmarried daughters had no access to property. In this there was a confirmation of the pre-existing colonial customs which were sanctioned as law by the British. When the Hindu law was codified, high caste Hindu practices were privileged over those where matrilineal customs prevailed. This codified law has permanently placed the Hindu women in a subordinate position from which there does not seem to be any release.

With the gradual emergence of an industrial sector the change in the agrarian economy affected women even more adversely. Recurrent famines in the nineteenth century, the decline and in some cases destruction of artisanal production led many women to be edged out of traditional occupations. To take an example — in Bengal women of all classes had traditionally earned some money by spinning. With the destruction of the handloom industry not only the male weavers but also uppercast widows who earned their livelihood by spinning were absolutely pauperised. They now crowded to enter the new industrial sectors — the textile and jute mills. But as recent researchers have shown, most of these women, widows,

and deserted wives were forced out of such industries. These women of the once productive classes were thus pushed into domestic service or prostitution.

By the middle of the nineteenth century, the emergent Indian middle class, influenced by colonial education and affected by constant onslaughts on traditional customs, participated in the reform programmes. The conservatives advocated a return to the past, and held up all Hindu customs as sacrosanct. Progressive forces pointed out that social practices like *Sati* (Window burnings) or *Kalin* (polygamy) could hardly be considered civilised behaviour. Women emerged from these debates as the markers of civilisation. The middle class now devised new ideologies legitimising their different positions regarding women, and the debates on public vs private domains inhabited by women gained an unprecedented importance. While *Antapur* (inner habitat) was marked as the fit place for the good woman — the mother and wife — by the traditionalists, the progressive advocated education for the *Bhadramahila* (ladies) and an entry into the public space as suitable partners of the *Bhadralok* (gentleman).

This public vs private space inhabited by the colonised intelligentsia assumed greater significance as more and more male members of the landed families came to Calcutta to receive Western education and secure jobs in the new bureaucracy. Most of these men came alone, leaving the women in their spacious village homes where the distinction between the *Antapur* or *Zenana* (the female quarters) and the *Kachari* (where the landlord met his male subjects) was more clearly demarcated.

This segregation of the male and female spheres was less marked in the case of working women — the washer women, barbers, milk-maids passed to and from the *antapur* and the streets with only their heads and faces partially covered.

In Calcutta, the high preponderance of males over females had led gentlemen of the upper classes to seek the companies of prostitutes and women in the service sector. By the middle of the nineteenth century once the Bengali gentlemen became more established they brought their families to Calcutta. Yet, in the fluid and changing social atmosphere, control over women's persons and conduct attracted greater attention. Since the presence of women played an important part in consolidating the social identity of the *Bhadralok*, the parameters assessing the good woman fixed in her gender roles as wife and mother became rigid. All deviants were considered as the other, the prostitute.

Even as colonial rule entrenched itself in India, the officials continued to oscillate between coercive legislations and reforms right through the nineteenth century. Yet, with the great rebellion of 1858 still fresh in the

minds of the British administrators, the officials were warned to be cautious about what was termed “native sentiments” and they decided to acquire a certain knowledge of their subjects as a prelude to taking up new projects of reform. This was attempted through a number of official surveys and census reports.

By 1881 a process of categorisation was set in motion. The term “prostitute”, however, did not give an objective description of an already determined group, but rather overlaid some of the earlier categories like *Devdasis* (temple dancers) or *Baijis* (court musicians). It also denied the Indian prostitutes a history as performers and artists. Colonial rule thus constructed a specific identity for the prostitutes obliterating their existing class gradations. Thus rich courtesans, muslim concubines, Brahman widows and Sudra maids were now all fitted into the parameters of an outcast group.

As a term it was only one within the signifying system of the colonial order and was to be understood in relation to other terms constructed during the colonial period like the “untouchable castes” or “criminal tribes”.

Further, being situated within the broader category of “Indian Women” the prostitute was also a subject of reform. Meanwhile, legal, medical and political discourse on “prostitution” continued to grow in England and India right through the 19th century, but British officials with a remarkable persistence continued to regard the Indian prostitute as a sexual commodity only.

William Acton, British medical authority on venereal disease, first conceptualized prostitution in terms of economic laws of supply and demand:

The desire for sexual intercourse is strongly felt by the male on attaining puberty and continues through his life as an ever present sensible want ... this desire of the male is the want that produces the demand of which prostitution is a result ... in fact the artificial supply of a natural demand.¹

The natural sexual desires of the British soldiers in India constituted the bulk of the demand for Indian prostitutes and the British administration was forced to comply with it. Most officials conceded that the health and vigour of the British soldiers needed special attention as they were greatly

¹ William Acton, *Prostitution Considered in its Moral, Social, and Sanitary Aspects in London and other Large Cities and Garrison Towns with Proposals for the Mitigation and Prevention of its Attendant Evils*. 2nd edition, 1870, pp. 161-162. (Quoted in Lynda Nead: *Myths of Sexuality*. Cambridge, Massachusetts, 1990, p. 197.)

outnumbered by Indian sepoys. After 1858 the matter was considered more seriously as a strong British Army came to be regarded as the precondition for maintaining a stable empire.

The deployment of the British Army in the continuing imperial wars east of Suez which further diminished their numbers in India was another incentive for colonial officials to look into the health conditions of those posted in India. These British soldiers known as the "Indian army" gained a reputation for their toughness and efficiency, and the Indian government paying for their continuous transfers (at its own expense) grew alarmed at the increasing rate of venereal diseases prevalent among the soldiers. Since these fell among the category of "controllable diseases" the colonial authorities now engaged in the formulation of a policy to ensure the safety of the soldiers.² Their models for providing institutional checks such as the setting up of lock hospitals (where the patients would be locked up till cured) were derived from England. In 1864 the Contagious Diseases Act was passed in Britain and it also applied to other parts of the empire. The key element of this measure was the compulsory examination of women suspected of having venereal disease. As such the Act became more binding for the prostitutes than their clients. In India prostitutes who were mainly visited by the British soldiers, were picked out, segregated, and examined within the lock hospitals (or *Lal Bazaars* as they came to be known). This was the only way in which the colonial rulers could be sure of providing the British soldiers with a safe sexual commodity. Interestingly, it was through this negative act of commodification that the Indian prostitute was granted an identity as a colonial subject.

The colonial discourse

The connotations of prostitution were achieved through a particular language. As Lynda Nead has pointed out:

The term described a regular practice, the regular exchange of sex for money. The combined associations of cash and public sphere rendered the prostitute powerful and independent, qualities which were unique privileges of white middle class male. The threat of the prostitute was thus constituted in relation to both gender and class... Distinct from respectable

² Arnold P. Kaminsky, *Morality Legislation and British Troops in Late Nineteenth Century India*, in *Military Affairs*, Vol. 43, No. 2, p. 78.

classes she belonged to the residuum, that displaced and disinterested mass at the very bottom of society.³

A prostitute was thus defined as essentially dangerous to the entire social order.

From the 18th century onwards, there was a multiplication of discourses on sex in the field of the exercise of power itself, almost an "institutional incitement".⁴ This expressed itself through legal debates, medical investigations and moral sermons. In Britain these were taken up and discussed through newspapers and journals, forming a large body of texts to be repeated and reformulated at all levels of social and cultural production.

Statistical surveys which came into prominence during this period as a major basis of ruling class knowledge, added to the vocabulary defining prostitution. The main criteria of demarcation remained commercial sex and deviancy from moral norms. However, while conducting a survey of British conditions the officials did not perceive prostitutes as a single category and classified them according to the economic position of their clients (like the aristocratic courtesan, the mistress of a middle class man, or a woman hanging around the barracks).

In the colonial context notions of "race" and imperial order acted as important terms of reference and the surveys were riddled with preconceived notions about the Orient which seemed to have grown from the 18th century. Right through this period travellers' tales, accounts of merchants turned rich, and missionary reports of mysterious pagan rituals created an imaginary world whose main charm lay in being the "other".⁵

Among the many themes which developed in the European variations about the Orient, two appear to be most persistent. The first claimed the East to be a place of lascivious sexuality, and the second that it was a realm characterised by inherent violence. Both themes had their origin in the medieval period, but gave Western imperialists in the 19th century their greatest justifications for invasions and establishments of control over an alien people.⁶

All attempts of documenting this "Orient" can be seen as Europe's desire to document itself. This is clearly expressed in official census records and

³ Lynda Nead, *op.cit.*, p. 95.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, Vol. 1, An Introduction. Translated by Robert Hurley. Random House, USA, 1978, p. 18.

⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism*. London, 1978, p. 103.

⁶ *Ibid.*

surveys where the occidental was always projected as the civilising agent. The first British census taken in 1801 contrasts sharply with that taken in India in 1861: The latter is preoccupied with religion. The reason for this was explained by Risely in his introduction to the "Tribes and Castes of Bengal":

In dealing with the intricate fabric of social usage, it is difficult to define the component parts of the main subject closely enough to distinguish minutely the point where administrative utility fades away into scientific interest. Most of all in the East where religion, law custom and morality are inextricably mixed and jumbled together.⁷

What needs to be marked here is how official attitudes were influenced by this new conceptualisation of religion as a community. The individuals, unlike in Western perception, were now given religious characteristics which were formally defined. Within this religious definition fell the family as a whole, as well as the individual attainments of its members. These qualified data, however, did not negate preconceived notions about the "Orient" or of the "native": It emphasised the concepts of otherness.

The official description of prostitution in India clearly illustrates this. Reporting on indigenous public opinion on the subject of infant prostitution in India Major C.A. McMohan, the officiating commissioner of Hissar division, wrote:

Native public opinion would not go with us in an attempt to put a stop to professional prostitution. The mind of a native is no more shocked at the thought that a girl should be born to prostitutes than that a man should be born to be blacksmiths and carpenters. Prostitution is an institution the history of which in India at all events is lost in the mist of ages. Prostitutes danced before Yudishthir and Rama and in the guise of dancing girls and singers they are a necessary part of most domestic ceremonies today.⁸

An interesting feature of these official categorisations lay in the recorders' use of current scientific knowledge. Anthropology, for example, though used in the later period as a leveller of differences, was employed in the Victorian period mainly to proclaim the supremacy of the white man. The

⁷ H.H. Risely, *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal*, Vol. 1, Calcutta 1981. Introduction, p. v.

⁸ Home Judicial File No. 48. P. 1143. From Major C.A. McMohan, the 7th June 1872 to C.M. Riwarzi Esq. officiating Undersecretary to the Government of Punjab.

colonial administrators in turn, used the supremacy theory as an ideological prop for projecting their images of civilising agents and saviours of a barbarous people.

In India the superiority of the colonial rulers was expressed by moralising declarations about native customs, and particularly those pertaining to women. Polygamy, widow burning, and infant marriages were examples. Prostitution too, was presented as a part of these static “native” social practices:

The life of a professional courtesan in India is not of the same degraded character as that of a prostitute in England, nor are prostitutes as a class looked down upon by other sections of community. They have special usages and rules of succession which are recognised by courts and they are not the same objects of mingled aversion and commiseration as persons who resort to a similar means of livelihood in more civilised countries.⁹

The British recognised such social practises as separate moral standards of a different society. Yet they were not willing to assess them as comparable ethics in evaluating their own social conventions. Instead they looked upon customs through their preconceived notions of a thwarted practice of native society.

It also suited the convenience of the white ruling class to allow these customs to continue. Terrified of crossing race boundaries they took refuge in quoting “Orientalists” who sometimes justified customs as expressions of “native” wisdom.

To take an example — Richard Burton, the translator of the *Arabian Nights* and Vatsayana’s *Kamasutra*, justified infant marriages as a necessary evil practice. Burton, like other military officers of his time, had been served by an Indian maid who looked after his house and met his sexual needs. Burton noticed that though she was compliant and passive she never expressed any love for him. This led him to come to the moral conclusion that Indian women were driven by innate sexual needs which could never be satisfied by a European. He further concluded that in recognition of this native men got their daughters married before they reached puberty.¹⁰

Burton was a typical upholder of Victorian polarised ideas on women and looked upon Indian women as comparable to the working class women at

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 1145.

¹⁰ Rana Kabbani, *Europe’s Myths of the Orient*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990, pp. 45-48.

home who were doomed through their innate sexual desires to be prostitutes. In direct opposition the asexual women of the middle class were seen as fit companions and loving wives who sacrificed everything for their husbands.

Indian women, even when they were married, were never granted such position of respectability:

It may perhaps be supposed that the seclusion in which native women are kept effectually prevents their forming intrigues beyond the circle of their own home. This is a mistake. Old women go between persons who are strangers to each other, and in our large towns there are regular meeting houses where men and outwardly respectable women are brought together. The majority of these women who visit these houses I am told are married women.¹¹

At a time when clandestine prostitution was posing an important problem to the police, and medical men were bent on keeping a check on venereal disease in Britain, respectable Indian women were accused of being carriers of the disease and subjected to police enforced medical examinations. The necessity of keeping up a steady supply of “attractive women” to keep the soldiers contained within the cantonment was becoming a problem and the authorities used any excuse to victimize the women.

Moreover, it was believed that the average British soldier came from a working class background and as such would have neither the moral or intellectual resources to keep away from “commercial” sex. The altered structure of government in India demanded, however, that a stricter segregation be maintained between the rulers and the ruled. The average British soldier working for an organisation of merchants in the 18th century had the advantage of owning, among other Indian luxuries, an Indian *bibi*. In the Victorian period they were asked to be content with English wives, which on their low wages was becoming impossible.¹² The Indian prostitute’s desirability thus provided a problem to the colonial state. In the face of growing demands for more candidates engaged in the profession of what was termed “mercenary love” and a short supply from the native subjects, the Indian prostitute in her ability to disappear, evade, and refuse offered the colonial state a challenge. This was met through the coercive legislation of the Contagious Disease Act, when the Indian woman’s body

¹¹ Home Judicial File, No. 48, op.cit., p. 1145.

¹² Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj. Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics 1793-1905*. New Delhi, 1979. Introduction, pp. 2-3.

became a site of struggle between the colonial officials and the subject population.

Constituting the criminal

Foucault has shown that regulation of sex through policing took the form of public discourses: "In the 18th century sex became a police matter ... A policing of sex", however, was not conducted through "the rigours of a taboo, but the necessity of regulating sex through useful and public discourses".¹³

Within the context of a colonial rule the Indian prostitute was defined as a criminal through the discourse of the Contagious Diseases Act. The Acts were passed in 1864 and amended with a view towards greater effectiveness between 1866-1869. In an immediate sense the legislation developed in response to the growing pressures on doctors and officers after the Crimean War, when the alarming numbers of British soldiers suffering from venereal disease were publicised.

The military logic for the working of the Contagious Diseases Act in India was made clear by the Quarter Master general's memorandum of 14th June 1886: "In the regimental bazaars it is necessary to have a sufficient number of women, to care that they are sufficiently attractive, to provide them with proper houses. If young soldiers are carefully advised with regard to the advantages of ablution and recognize that convenient arrangements exist in the regimental bazaar, they may be expected to avoid the risks involved in association with women who are not recognized by the regimental authorities."¹⁴

The official demand for defining a "common prostitute" continued. Though it was also clear from their constant pleas for extensions of police power, the British administration also wanted the definition to remain flexible so that any Indian woman whom the soldiers desired could be brought under the category.

The fear of deviant sexual behaviour and prostitution grew in Victorian England in relation to wider anxieties concerning political and economic crises. Prostitution was considered immoral and seditious, a subversive system which destroyed the very roots of national life. This is demonstrated by the moral tracts of the time which became very popular. Ralph

¹³ Michel Foucault, *op.cit.*, p. 25.

¹⁴ Minutes of Evidence, Para 9, Secretary of States Report 1893, also quoted in Kaminsky, *op.cit.*, p. 79.

Wardlaw's "Lectures on Female Prostitution", published in 1842, is an example. It showed a link between the deterioration of national character and consequent weakness, decline and fall of nations. According to Wardlaw this moral deterioration was due to prostitution. As pointed out by Lynda Nead "the terms plot both a moral and an imperial narrative and a fall from virtue can symbolise the end of an empire".¹⁵

The image of the prostitute as a subversive agent was allowed to grow in the official discourse. It was now used as a metaphor with wider significance, including in it both radical opposition and working class demoralisation. In Britain the threat of prostitution was perceived as depending on three main factors: the visibility of the vice, its association with the city and its spread over wide areas. The underlying fear did not centre on the women but on the mixing of classes, as middle class men cohabited with working class women. A breakdown of social boundaries was expected, particularly as prostitution was seen as the ploy of working class women to "get at" the classes above them.

This feeling of class antagonism was now fused into the criminal law and the Contagious Diseases Act empowered the police to isolate a particular group of women from working class culture. Judith Walkovitz' study has shown that working class women enjoyed considerable freedom of movement, as they were able to change from "ill paid respectable jobs" to "street walking" and back again. Often, moreover, women were able to engage in both trades at the same time.¹⁶

By the 1850s the mounting moral pressure in Britain — exemplified by public debates — brought the private arena of the home and definitions of respectable/unrespectable femininity within its purview. For moralist doctors like William Acton women's sexuality varied radically with the context in which sexuality was played out. While the ideal English wife and mother, due to her total dedication to moral duties, abhorred "all sensual pleasures", the prostitutes were desexed, having lost all womanly feeling while consorting with eight to twelve different men in one night.

But in spite of the medico-moral discourse which dehumanised the prostitute and constructed her into a symbol of moral and political disorder, it was the legal definition of the Contagious Diseases Act that finally ensured her position as a criminal in the perception of the state.

By the middle of the 19th century there were two main theories current in England which sought to explain the transmission of diseases: Miasma

¹⁵ Lynda Nead, *op.cit.*, pp. 110-111.

¹⁶ Judith Walkovitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society*, in *Women, Class and State*. Cambridge, 1980, pp. 197-201.

