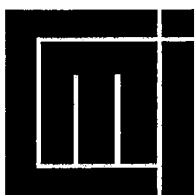


The Queens' Daughters: Prostitutes as an Outcast Group in Colonial India

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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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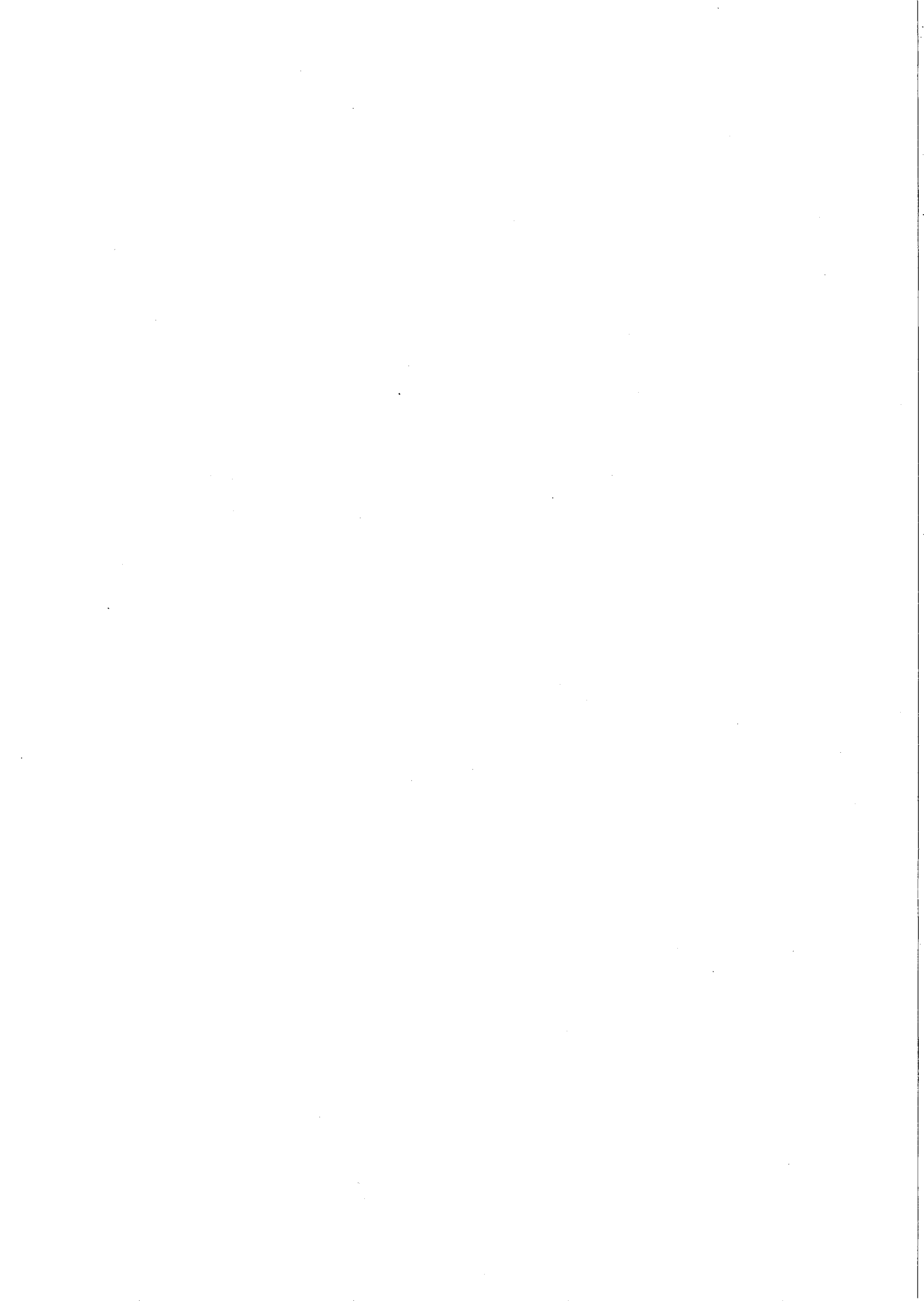
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Preface

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.

and contagion. According to the former theory disease was generated by miasma, i.e. smell produced by decomposing organic matter. Disease was thus caused by putrefaction and it was airborne. Though this was challenged and the theory of contagion proved conclusively that particular diseases, such as venereal diseases, were only spread through personal contacts, the theory of miasma continued to have a lot of popular support even among the middle classes.¹⁷

The fears of the British middle class were channelled to their members in the colonies. After 1858, the new ideological apparatus of control in India justified them as valid and formulated them into policies. A distancing from the “natives” in every way, both social and physical, remained the spoken and unspoken official directive. The native quarters were perceived as the actual source of miasma. Huddled together in unclean hutments whole families lived without thought of any privacy even for the married couples. Surrounded by garbage, domestic animals, crawling children and the stench of human excretion, the filth and pollution of the whole area conjured up a scene of vice. Superimposed on this was the fear of the “native” as a rebel. The native prostitute was thus by her very origin perceived as an amalgam of all four — filth, vice, disease and rebellion.

Interestingly, the 18th century sexual myths of the Oriental woman were now eclipsed by the image of this diseased creature whose major harmful potential lay in her powers of flight and ability to evade the British law. The official attitudes were clearly expressed in their directives:

A short time ago I caused warrants to be issued for the arrest of all women, whom according to the register of 1867 were struck off as absconded. Twenty eight warrants in all were issued. I wished to satisfy myself if these women had returned to their homes when they thought they could safely do so, knowing that their names had been removed from the register. The result was that three women were only arrested of whom two were punished and registered.¹⁸

Yet even the strictest measures proved ineffective, when soldiers went off on a lark to Calcutta, where the areas of segregation could not be so strictly maintained as in the cantonments. Often soldiers pointed to some local women as the cause of their infection, and embarrassed officials on examinations found the women to be healthy. But this embarrassment was

¹⁷ Lynda Nead, *op.cit.* 118-121.

¹⁸ General Department, February 1878. 101 Lock Hospital File 37-38. No.252 C dated Dum Dum the 27th September 1877. From Captain T.B. Mitchell, Dum Dum to the Magistrate 24 Parganas.

a passing phenomena in the face of the greater danger, that of unregistered prostitution. Reporting about the condition of Calcutta in 1879 the commissioner of police wrote:

The number of registered brothels increased from 2,420 on 1st January to 2,458 on 31st December. There is no difficulty in keepers of these under law, but the commissioners justly observe that the increase in the number of brothels concurrently with a decrease in the number of registered women, shows that the object of the act is being evaded.¹⁹

The entire process of criminalisation therefore hinged on the act of registration, through which the prostitute offered the state all knowledge of her person and allowed herself to be bodily subjected to its regulations. Through the final act of coercive legislation the colonial state completed the process of commodification of native women. This process of branding was resurrected in the reports of two American women missionaries, Elizabeth W. Andrew and Katherine Bushnell:

Imagine yourself as the one apprehended and the case assumes a different aspect. A policeman comes to your door and reads a warrant of your arrest as a common prostitute; you ask on what authority. You are informed that the name of the informant is not to be made public — if a man can be induced to help trace out disease it being disregarded as a “point of honour” to inform other men where danger lies — his confession must not be made known, it could injure his reputation.

You contend that you have a right to your good name and that it is a principle of justice that no one can be punished on secret and unproved evidence, and that it is a punishment of the worst sort to be taken by a policeman through the street in a hospital where only a disorder of a certain sort are treated. You are then informed that if you do not go, you will be taken out of the town in which you live, set down as a common vagrant by the roadside, and if ever again found within the limits of the city in which your parents, brothers and sisters live, you will be arrested and put in jail.²⁰

These harrowing details were yielded by the officials themselves and relate the same story: women fleeing and hiding like hunted animals, and leaving

¹⁹ Medical and Municipal Report: Medical Proceedings, May 1881. Letter from Commissioner of Police, No. 1186, dated 16th April 1881.

²⁰ Elizabeth W. Andrew and Katherine Bushnell, *The Queen's Daughters in India*. London 1899, pp. 50-51.

their homes forever to shake off police pursuit. The reports negate the earlier much publicised images of “native women prowling around soldiers barracks” in search of prey. They therefore reveal the ambivalence in the attitudes of officials.

An elaborate measure was now formulated for the registrations of not only prostitutes but pimps and brothel keepers as well. By 1868 the Contagious Diseases Acts were imposed on all the major cities in India. The act was also translated into different regional languages. A guide book for prostitutes in Bengali shows how the women were instructed to fill out forms and how brothel keepers and pimps were brought in as subsidiaries within policing measures.

The recording of prostitutes followed a similar pattern as that of the registration of births and deaths. There was an effort on the part of the officials to keep on record even the most private action of their subjects. This has been explained by Foucault as a political anxiety of the rulers:

One of the great innovations in the techniques of power in the eighteenth century was the emergence of “population” as an economic and political problem: population as wealth, population as manpower or labour capacity, population balanced between its own growth and the resources it commanded. Governments perceived that they were not dealing simply with subjects, or even with a “people”, but with a “population”, with its specific phenomena and its peculiar variables: birth and death rates, life expectancy, fertility, state of health, frequency of illnesses, patterns of diet and habitation... At the heart of this economic and political problem of population was sex.²¹

After 1858 the colonial state was haunted by the fear of an uncontained rebel “population”. Hence its first anxiety regarding the native subjects was not moral but political. Through the recording of not only the sanctioned but also the unsanctioned sexual activities of its subjects, the state hoped to entrench its political position. Thus registrations of births and deaths were not mere enumerations of living people but records of the productive and unproductive sexual practices of subjects.

Right through the 1860-1880s (the most controversial years regarding the passing and amending of the Contagious Diseases Acts), the colonial state showed no moral concern over the large number of rural women coming into cities like Calcutta. Being denied any means of subsistence they were often forced to take up the profession of prostitution. The majority of these urban migrants were upper caste Hindu widows, lower caste serving women

²¹ Michel Foucault, *op.cit.*, p. 25.

without any work in the villages, and starving children sold by parents during famines.²² The records catalogued their different economic conditions, but when registering them as prostitutes all these details were blurred under generalised categories of caste and religion. Though registered individually, these women were denied a face or separate identity. For the officials registration was merely a process to be conducted efficiently:

I am pretty sure that they have nothing to say to European soldiers and that should she see a white face enter her busti, she would run into the house and hide away as is the wont of Bengali females. Natives visit them only but still they are subject to rules.

Once the process was completed the official concern had spent itself:

The old hands, professional prostitutes give no trouble at all, they have in the register "clean sheets", and such too is the case with women who are registered at their own request.²³

From criminals to victims

The suspension of the Contagious Diseases Acts in 1883 was considered as a triumph of the repeal movement led by women. Though the newly founded National Anti Contagious Diseases Acts Association first provoked the women by excluding them, they were quick to change their policies. Women led by Josephine Butler broke away to form the Separatist Ladies National Association. The women justified their entry into the political arena on the grounds that the issues raised by the acts touched on all aspects of womanhood, i.e. the questions of virtue, purity, decency and social welfare. They also insisted that these issues were of paramount importance to all women because they were fundamental both to marriage and the family and to its valid extensions in social reform and women's charity work.

Josephine Butler in her retrospective account of the repeal campaign admitted that the movement was mainly to be seen not as a revolt of a sex,

²² Home Judicial Files, September 1872, pp. 1138-1641. Home Judicial Files, July 1873, para 5.

²³ General Department Lock Hospital Files 37-38, No. 255 dated Alipore the 17th December 1877. From W.W. Souther Esq. off. Magistrate of the 24 Parganas to the Commissioner of Presidency Division.

but as a movement made successful by the depth and sincerity of the moral and religious convictions of the mass of the population. It is interestingly reflected in her *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade*:

The slave now speaks. The enslaved women have found a voice in one of themselves... it is the voice of a woman who has suffered, a voice calling to holy rebellion.²⁴

These biblical images of “rebellion” and “holy war”, when transported to the colonies, justifiably alarmed the officials. It also tarnished their image as “white saviours”, which they had so far successfully projected.

The controversy over the New Cantonment Act between the repealers, the British Committee for the state regulation of vice and the Indian officials came to a point in 1890. James Stansfield and James Stewart — active members of the British Committee against vice — categorically challenged the Secretary of State for India in parliament. The reformers declared that the proposed rules for the Cantonment Acts were just continuations of the Contagious Diseases Acts in another name. The matter ended in heated exchanges with Lord Cross, the Secretary of State for India, pressing the government of India for further information.

This information came from two American women, already mentioned: Elizabeth Andrew and Katherine Bushnell. Members of World Women’s Christian Temperance Union arrived in India in December 1891, and in spite of official hostility visited ten military stations during the next three months. When they submitted reports of their findings Lord Roberts was forced to acknowledge that the entire question of supplying prostitutes to British soldiers should be seen as a moral problem. This, in a way, was the first clear indication of a change in the attitudes of the ruling class regarding the question of Indian women. Lord Roberts verbalised this in his proffered apologies to the missionary women, but he also added that “the missionary ladies due to their ignorance of native customs had magnified the problem”.

The officials continued to insist that the regulations for the examination of women in lock hospitals and with it the continued participation of the government to supply Indian women to British soldiers had ceased. The observations of the missionaries only drew from them the guiding concession that “integrated in some stations the rules had been strictly

²⁴ Josephine Butler, *Personal Reminiscences of a Great Crusade* 1896, p. 94. Quoted Frank Mort, *Dangerous Sexualities. Medico Moral Politics in England since 1830*. London 1987, p. 93.

carried out, but in others it now turns out this has not been completely the case".²⁵

It was quite clear from the debate, which continued to rage over what was generally known as "Lord Roberts Bill", that ruling class opinion was divided on the subject of what the missionaries had aptly termed the "state regulation of vice". Opinions from the public sector in India, such as in British journals, approved of the government measures as sanitary precautions necessary for the resident Europeans, and their criticism was hurled at those British administrators who had considered giving in to the "howling religious fanatics".²⁶

The repealers, however, had based their claim on truth — Josephine Buteer writing a preface to a small booklet, published by Elizabeth W. Andrew and Kate Bushnell, emphasised: "It tells the truth, the terrible truth, concerning the treatment of certain Indian women, our fellow citizens and sisters, by the British government."²⁷ For the first time the term "native women" was replaced by the term "Indian women" in British records. The protesting voices thereby claimed solidarity with a set of people whom official concern in India had always appraised negatively.

The repeal movement subsequently reconstructed the image of the Indian prostitute. Their members were to recreate the scene of vice situating the Indian prostitute in its centre. Instead of emphasising the proposed reforms, the narrative therefore elaborated the process of criminalisation and the atmosphere of moral decadence which the officials in India perpetrated. But even while they protested against official conduct, they still acknowledged and even reinforced the official categories of the Indian prostitute as a marginal and outcast group.

The main focus of the missionary narrative rested on recreating the atmosphere of vice. This was done to show the exact division of space that existed between the rulers and the ruled. The language was fired with heavy moral overtones in order to justify criticism. Since the logic of Christian belief provided the major metaphors, the officials were accused not on political but strictly moral grounds:

When so called Christian England took control of "heathen India" and plots of ground called cantonments were staked off for the residence of

²⁵ Report of the Committee appointed by the Secretary of State to enquire into the Rules Regulations and Practice in Indian Cantonments and elsewhere in India with regard to Prostitution and to the Treatment of Venereal Disease. London 1893, p. 52.

²⁶ Kaminsky, *op.cit.*, p. 80.

²⁷ Elizabeth Andrew and Kate Bushnell, *op.cit.* Preface.

the British soldiers and their officers, full provision was made for the flesh to fulfil the lusts thereof. A cantonment is a considerable section of the land, sometimes comprising several square miles, and within these cantonments much more arbitrary law prevails than the civil law by which the rest of the country is governed. There are about 100 military cantonments in India... There were placed in each regiment of about a thousand soldiers from twelve to fifteen native women who dwelt in appointed houses and tents (as the case might be) — called Chaklas.²⁸

The account moves on giving a description of how Indian women were segregated and how through the examination in lock hospitals, which the repealers term “surgical rape”, the women were given “a ticket of license to practice fornication” and returned for that purpose to the cantonment.

The second focus rested on the women as subjects. Instead of the earlier method of official records to treat the women as a collectivity, the repealers tried to give each woman a face. Though the individualities were uniformly that of victims of social injustice, they provided a contrast to the official discourse which addressed Indian women only in the legal language reserved for criminals.

The account begins with the significant title “Seeking the Outcast”, but in contrast to official recording it goes on to relate particular events in the lives of each prostitute, thus according them a social space:

Once a girl was left an orphan at the age of six years. She was taken up by an Englishman at the age of eleven, and when deserted by him after three years, there was no door open to receive her but the Chaklah.

A young girl brought over by her own brother and sold to the Chaklah.

A Kashmiri woman ill treated by her husband so that she ran away with another man who promised to marry her but sold her to the Chaklah.²⁹

The narrative continues to focus on the unfortunate condition of women who are reduced to prostitution by men. Interestingly, it leaves out the questions of women’s sexuality altogether. Women are perceived only as the oppressed victims of aristocratic men in England and brutal officials in India. Questions about poverty always bring in their wake the justification of the deserving poor. The repealers, with their vocabulary of “pity” and

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

“sympathy”, reconstructed the Indian prostitutes to fit into the parameters of an outcast group which they sought for their works of charity.

The novelty of these reports, however, lies in their introduction of a new group previously unmentioned by the officials. Much to official embarrassment, the missionaries now pointed at the number of Eurasian children and even British women who were to be found in the lock hospitals of the cantonments. While the officials tried to deny any knowledge of such occurrences, the repealers triumphantly pointed out the infamous sins which the ruling race was perpetuating on their own kin.

But there is a class in India being trained to prostitution though not a caste properly speaking and they are getting their training in the brothels established and manned by Englishmen, and many of the candidates in this class are the children of Englishmen who have been deliberately placed there or allowed to go there by their own inhuman fathers. This is properly speaking the prostitute class of India those born to their fate.³⁰

This last revelation (of information) acted as a rejoinder to the official reports which earlier justified prostitution on the assumption that prostitutes formed a caste in India. The defence of the British administrators was that they were only allowing a “native” social practice to continue. They were, therefore, at best guilty of negligence but not of any social crime.

Yet, in spite of the potential for protest and social change one is tempted to read into these missionary accounts, one is well advised to also remember the ideological restrictions of the repealers. The feminist commitment to moral improvement and social change in Britain had a direct bearing on the repealers’ image of the prostitute. In the British context they continued to stress that prostitutes were the hapless social victims of debauched aristocrats and manipulative media. In India they were the victims of brutal officials. Their rescue and reclamation was meant to restore prostitutes to their pre-fallen state of virtuous morality and asexual purity. The notion that a society like India actually and supported allowed “sensual enjoyment” and provided a niche for some women, was completely incomprehensible to the missionaries.

The repealers were thus trapped within the official discourse. Their metaphors for women were drawn from the dominant notions of motherhood and marriage. In India they accepted the imperialist argument that Indians were incapable of governing themselves. Arguing her case for the repealers Josephine Butler declared her unwavering loyalty to the

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 52.

British nation: "I am a loyal English woman. I love my country and it is because of my great love for her that I mourn so deeply over her dishonour."³¹

The authors of the pamphlet ultimately simply added to the imperial narrative. Thus they compared the British empire to a family with the Queen as its mother:

The little women of India in the simplicity of their faith and their lack of practical knowledge had ventured to intimate that we ought to go to England and see the Queen and tell her their troubles. For they said the Queen does not countenance it for she has daughters of her own and she cares for her daughters in India.³²

The failure of the repeal movement thus charts the problems built into its course. In India the officials taking their cue from the missionaries, allowed the women subjects the status of victims and once again propped up their images of "saviours" by turning to reforms as a more effective means of control.

Indigenous categories

The word *Beshya* in contemporary Bengali indicates a prostitute. Textually it can be traced to the classical manuals on erotics³³ and dramaturgy³⁴. The Indian prostitute was thus by tradition inseparably associated with professional entertainers and the terms *Nati*, *Ganika* or *Barangana* (considered synonymous in ancient India) generally indicated the accomplished courtesan. She was perceived as the product of a feudal society which she also aesthetically represented.³⁵ The hierarchy that was built into the core of the feudal relations regulated the lives of the courtesans and their aristocratic clients. This conception did not stretch to peasant women since they usually catered for men of their own class, or, as the *Dasi* (slave/servant) for the sexual needs of their masters.

Muslim courtly norms confirmed the earlier position of the courtesan in Brahmanical society and continued to grant them a space in the court. As dancers and musicians they participated in public rituals and moved into the

³¹ *Ibid.* Preface.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 86.

³³ Vatsyanas Kamasutra.

³⁴ Bharatas Natyashastra.

³⁵ Moti Chandra, *The World of Courtesans*. New Delhi 1973, pp. 57-100.

zenana mahal (women's quarters) to entertain the inmates. Often they were incorporated into the household through contract marriages. This practice continued well into the eighteenth century. Mir Jafar, who became the Nawab of Bengal, married with the help of the British two "dancing girls" from Agra — Muni Begum and Bubbu Begum. The latter became the mother of his son and heir, while the former was appointed the minor Nawab's guardian by the British after Mir Jafar's death.³⁶

Nawab Wziid Ali Shah of Oudh, known as an accomplished poet and musician, turned his entire harem into a dancing school which he called the *Peri Khana* (the place of fairies). Every dancer was connected to the Nawab through the contractual form of *muta* marriage.

Veena Talwar Oldenburg in her book on Lucknow gives a vivid account of the relationship between the courtesans and their patrons, once British rule was established in the area. In order to show the contrast in the lives of different prostitutes Talwar Oldenburg gives a description of the courtesan's establishments.

From a number of old texts (18th and 19th century) and the interviews of a number of retired courtesans taken in 1976, Talwar Oldenburg has tried to reconstruct the lives of those women who had enjoyed royal patronage in the nineteenth century. It seems that the practice of holding musical sources and *Nautch* parties in the houses of courtesans continued in Lucknow till 1946. One of the oldest courtesans who claimed to be 75 years of age in 1976 recalled that British soldiers compared to her Indian clients had seemed boorish and bent on only having plain sex without any cultural embellishments. This naturally alienated the women who were accustomed to seeing themselves as the pivot of aristocratic cultural practices.

Under the generous patronage of the Nawabs of Oudh and the town notables during the eighty odd years that Lucknow served as the Nawabi capital, the apartments in the Chowk bazaar, where these women lived and entertained in decadent opulence, were centers for musical and cultural soirees.

A courtesan was usually part of a household establishment under the chief courtesan or *chandhrayan*. The latter owned and maintained extra apartments, having acquired wealth and fame through her beauty and musical and dancing abilities. Typically a wealthy patron, often the King himself, would set her up in agreeable quarters and support her household in the style in which he wished to be entertained and she would recruit

³⁶ Somnath Chakravarty, *Kolkatar Baiji Bilash*. Calcutta 1991 (Bengali), pp. 59-63.

budding young singers and dancers to compete with other reputable establishments... Every reputable house maintained a team of skilled male musicians who were often connected to famous lineages or *gharanas* of musicians thereby enhancing the prestige of the establishment. Doormen, touts and other male auxiliaries screened the clients at the door.³⁷

Yet the courtesans were not the only persons involved in the profession of commercial sex. Lower than the *tawaiifs* in rank and accomplishments were two other categories of women known as *thakahi* and *randi* who lived in the market area and catered for lower class clients including the labourers.

The British refused to recognise these hierarchical differences among "prostitutes" in Lucknow out of administrative convenience, and though the officials went to *Nautch* parties, they looked upon the dancing girls as products of the "native society" to be left alone. So the laws, specially that of clinical examinations in lock hospitals were uniformly forced upon all prostitutes. This completely alienated the women who were accustomed to see themselves as the pivot of aristocratic cultural practices. To be equated with a common bazaar prostitute was to them an extreme degradation. When asked by Talwar Oldenburg they expressed their common bitterness:

The soldiers, they said, had no *tamiz* (manners) or *tahzib* (culture), we could not speak their language, nor they ours. For them we were no different from *randis* and they seldom wanted to stay for the time, nor money to partake of the pleasures of the *Nautch*.³⁸

According to the accounts of the courtesans of Lucknow the British soldiers were only satisfied with women who could provide them with plain sex without any cultural embellishments. They were therefore content with women who had taken up residence in the cantonment or the ordinary *chowk* brothels.

By the middle of the nineteenth century Calcutta had become an important center of cultural activities, as more and more deposed rulers of Indian states were forced to take up their exiled residence in the city. With the migration of a number of musicians, dancers and poets once patronised by these Nawabs, parts of Calcutta were landmarked as the Mughal city. Here the dancers of Wazid Ali Shah, and the poets of the Delhi *darbar* mingled with the aristocratic members of the Tipu Sultan's deposed family

³⁷ Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow 1856-1877*. New Delhi 1989, pp. 134-135.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, footnote 105, pp. 137-138.

to create the cultural ambience for those who came in a nostalgic search of the grand old days.

It added to the already existing fashion of arranging *Nautches* for family occasions (of a son/daughter's marriage) or religious festivals like the *Durga Puja*. The dancers were invited from Agra, Benares and Lucknow to come to Calcutta. The rich families in Calcutta vied with one another to get the highest paid *Baiji*. Local newspapers in Bengali, as well as the British journals, reported these social gatherings. Thus, in 1815 a Bengali journal reported that the famous *Baijis* Niki and Ashroom were invited to the houses of Nilman Mallik and Raja Rama Chandra. On the occasion of the *Dol Jatra* (known as the festival of colours) in the same year, the *Asiate Journal* of 15th March reported for instance: "At the *Nautch* parties held in the garden house of Babu Motilal Mollik, the two major attractions of the evening were Begum Jan and Hingul."³⁹

These dances were regarded as a social event even by the British, and in the early days of the East India Company the "native" way of entertaining the *Sahebs* was through a feast following a *Nautch*. This developed into a new "custom" which had its roots in the early history of Calcutta. Traditional festivals like *Durga Puja*, originally an occasion when the family got together with men travelling from far off work places to their ancestral village houses, were transformed in Calcutta. The urban *Babus* seized the celebrations as an opportunity to invite the *Sahebs* to their homes and offer them lavish entertainment. For European artists like Belnos and Solvyns these feasts offered a colourful opportunity to look at the "native" household and its luxuries of which the dancing girls formed a part. To the artists the dancing girls, the dancing hall and its mixed audience of Indians and Europeans provided a colourful background. To visitors like Fanny Parks it was part of the exotic Oriental adventure. She went into raptures about one of the dancers — Niki, calling her the "Catalani of the East".⁴⁰

Solvyns recorded the different groups of dancers, whom he distinguished by their dresses, fascinates by their rich embroidery and design. He mentioned three groups in particular: the *Ramjani*, the *Bayadari* and the *Domni*. The last named were lower caste women who came in groups to perform at marriages and were mainly folk singers. Solvyns further recorded (after a conversation with Colonel Gardner) that while the *Domni's* songs were always full of ribaldry, the *Baiji's* were strictly against obscenity. Even so they were not allowed in the *zenana* (women's quarters) where pretty slave girls performed for the women. According to Solvyn's

³⁹ Somnath Chakravarty, *op. cit.*, pp. 50-51.

⁴⁰ Somnath Chakravarty quotes on p. 35.

both Colonel Gardner and his son had their own groups of "Nautch girls".⁴¹

By 1858 things were starting to change even though the British administrators were still not adverse to these feasts. A *Nautch* was seen as an aristocratic gathering of "natives" and definitely to be distinguished from the revelries of the vulgar. Reverend Dr. Millar, the principal of Madras Christian College, for instance, saw nothing wrong in attending a "Nautch Party" arranged in honour of Prince Albert Victor's visit to the city.

By 1893, however, both missionary appeals and indigenous public opinion were uniting to call out against official participation in these immoral activities. The Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, Sir Charles Elliot, was accused by a Bengali journal for indulging in immoral conduct because he attended a *Nautch*: "His honour has been in this country for a long time, and does he not know to what class these dancing girls belong." Interestingly, the charge, as it was framed, was not directed at the organisers of the orgy, but was based on the character of the women who merely served as entertainers. British official attitude at this stage was one of polite refusal to intervene in what they considered to be an age old "native" custom, even though a group of "natives" were crying out for its removal.

Another group of women artists in the 19th century considered to be semi-prostitutes, were mendicant singers known as *Vaisnavis*. These women were often referred to derisively as *Neris* (shaven headed women) by their contemporaries. They belonged to a popular religious order who looked upon the medieval saint Sri Chaitanya as their *guru*. In the 19th century these sects had bifurcated and multiplied and they mainly lived either as mendicants or in small settlements called *Akhras*, usually built on donated lands. They tried to move away from the rigorous rituals of the Hindu society. One of their innovative reforms was to dispense with the formal system of marriage. Professing love to be the central tenet of their faith, they changed partners whenever it suited them.

They were seen by their contemporaries as the main upholders of popular culture. Through their rendition of folk songs, poetry, and bardic narration, they kept alive the tradition mainly among the poorer people, while the *Vaisnavis* carried it to the homes of the gentry. Here they had free access among the women and acted as a link between the private and public space from which the gentle women were barred.

The *Vaisnavis* were also erudite women, who tried to enter the arena of reforms by becoming some of the early teachers in the schools set up for

⁴¹ Somnath Chakravarty, *ibid.*, pp 36-40.

women. Yet, as Sumanta Bannerjee has shown, a systematic attack was launched against them by gentlemen reformers, both Indian and British. They were culturally marginalised and by the end of the 19th century, when the moral indictment against them was so strong that it made their works of charity, i.e. providing shelters for destitute widows and prostitutes, appear abnormal. It was, however, their freedom of movement that barred their access to the homes of middle class Bengali.⁴²

But even more than the *Vaisnavis*, the large number of Hindu widows, threatened the upper caste Bengali society. Their lives had been spared with the addition of *sati* laws and they were now regarded as a burden by their upper caste families. The widows generally served as household “drudges” working as unpaid maids in the houses of their fathers-in-law or brothers. The alternative open to them was to run to Calcutta and take up prostitution. A great many, unable to bear the hardship of a widow’s life, did just this. The same fate overtook the wives of Kulin Brahmins after they had been seduced by a neighbour or a distant male relative. Sometimes these women sought refuge with the *Vaisnavis*, often they ended up in Calcutta’s many brothels.

This state of things did not escape the British administration. A. Mackenzy sharply pointed it out:

In Bengal the prostitute class seems to be chiefly recruited from ranks of Hindu widows. The prominence of Hindu women among the prostitutes of Bengal, often it is stated: women of good caste and that even in districts where a large Mohammedan population predominates is the most curious feature disclosed in the correspondence and quite different the Lieutenant Governor believes to the state of things in other parts of northern India.⁴³

By 1872 prostitution in Calcutta was looked upon as a social problem by the officials as well as the indigenous population and official enquiries were being made into the prostitutes’ ranks and patterns of recruitment. A look at these reports shows that a definite gradation was to be perceived in the recruitment pattern itself.

⁴² Sumanta Bannerjee, Marginalisation of Women’s Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal, in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (ed.): *Recasting Women*. New Delhi 1989, pp. 135-136, pp. 154-155.

⁴³ Home Department Judicial Proceedings No. 5829, dated Calcutta, 17 October 1872. Bengal. To H.L. Dampier Esq. Official Secretary to the Government of India.

It appears that the professional prostitutes recruit their ranks as follows: (a) By their female children; (b) Nutts, Domes and Mirasis, i.e. musicians attached to the dancing girls, go about the country and get married to girls whom they bring away and hand over to prostitutes and brothel keepers to be taught dancing and to be brought up as prostitutes; (c) There are also a number of children of low caste brought during times of famine or from excessively poor parents at other times: these are generally purchased at a very early age, they are taken to brothels and trained as the former are.⁴⁴

Writing about the condition of Bengali women around the second half of the 19th century Usha Chakrawarty mentions a group called *Kheltas* and *Gandharbas* in the Bhagalpur area. They were professional dancers, actresses and mimics, and their women were often trained as prostitutes or forced into it by their husbands and fathers who lived on the women's earnings. Evidently girls from these groups were also recruited for prostitution in Calcutta.⁴⁵

Between 1858-1873 the largest group of migrants from the surrounding districts to Calcutta were widows from low-caste families or rejected wives of barbers, milkmen, *Malis*, *Jugis*, *Kaibartas* and *Haris*. Most of them were forced into prostitution, and although British sources condemned them as being "notoriously unchaste", they were merely peasant and artisan women who had been thrown out of their traditional occupations without any other alternatives offered to them.

It is interesting to note in this context that after the passing of the Indian Factories Act (in 1881) women and children were legally allowed to join the industrial workforce. As a result, the British parliamentary reports of 1884-1885 state that unlike the cotton mills of Bombay, the jute mills of Calcutta employed a larger proportion of children and women. Often these women labourers were given only menial jobs and according to an earlier source (1871), they were called *Jharoonis* (sweepers), and also regarded as part time prostitutes.⁴⁶

The sheer numbers of prostitutes increasing each year in the larger Indian cities confronted indigenous elites as a social evil which reflected on their leadership position. At the same time colonial education and missionary onslaughts held up images of a past tradition which shook their faith in themselves. The more progressive among the elite found an outlet in

⁴⁴ Usha Chakravarty, *op.cit.*, p.28.

⁴⁵ Usha Chakravarty, *Condition of Bengali Women around the second half of the Nineteenth Century*. Calcutta 1963, pp. 24-28.

⁴⁶ Usha Chakravarty, *op.cit.*, p. 28.

joining the campaign for reforms. Thus the major agendas of reform such as polygamy, widow burning, child marriage and prostitution brought Indian women continuously to the forefront of the debates. In fact they were now used as a site on which the agreements and conflicts between colonisers and colonised subjects took place.

In the 19th century Bengal was considered to be in the throes of a change by the rest of the country. A number of social reforms considered progressive by the civilising standards of the West, were the reason. The Bengali Hindus, in their passage from the *Babu* to the *Bhadralok*, assessed these reforms as their particular achievements. While the more conservative Hindus resisted the reforms as anti-traditional, liberals invested them with the logic of enlightenment. The subjects of the debates, however, remained passive and compliant. Their voices were rarely heard except as echoes of the one or the other group.

The unprecedented presence of women as subjects within reformist debates invested “gender” with multiple layers of meaning and as interpreted at different historical moments in the light of class and racial concepts.

From the very inception of the reforms it was clear to the campaigners that they were meant only for upper class Hindu women. Lower caste artisans and peasants were kept on the very fringes of the debate as participants upholding the Hindu moral order. Muslims were completely excluded. The dominant ideology looked upon upper class Hindu women as the embodiment of “moral order” and a number of Bengali texts of the 19th century project this image as the central motif.

The good woman, the chaste married wife/mother empowered by a spiritual strength, was also perceived as the iconic representation of the nation. She was at once a captive to be freed by her morally inspired children, and the central figure who created and protected the sanctuary of the home, where the colonised intelligentsia persecuted by a foreign ruler could take refuge. In order to contextualise these contradictory images of themselves and the motherland, middle class Bengali created new social binaries. From the earlier *Brahmin/Sudra* categories the shift to *Bhadralok* included women among their constructs. Thus, *Bhadramahila* stood in equal distance from *magi*. Interestingly, the early 19th century common term for widows and prostitutes — *Rarh* — was now discarded for *Bidhaba* indicating the widow and *Beshya*, the prostitute. At the same time the latter was described by adjectives generally used in English — *Palita* being a literal translation of the words “fallen” or “degraded”, common attributes applied to British working class prostitutes in the same period.

Indigenous categorisation of the Bengali prostitute thus fixed her in a social space outside the home. Public performance, freedom of movement (religious mendicants included), and even participation in labour outside the domestic sphere pushed any woman from her accepted social role of mother, daughter, sister, and wife to that of the prostitute — an outcast.

Representations

The image of the “prostitute” as the other to the good woman was circulated by a number of Bengali texts throughout the nineteenth century. The varied literature, both high and low, subscribed to the theme of moral decay brought about through the agency of sexually deviant women. Her deviancy engrossed the male authors and they used all their literary devices to make it a salacious subject for their male readers.

Colonial education, coinciding with the beginning of a print culture, allowed the indigenous intelligentsia a creative outlet. Yet, as colonial experience deepened, a sense of alienation became evident mainly among the members of the lower middle class. These men were described by the colonial officials as their greatest allies, yet the kicks and blows which the former received as petty clerks and lower grade civil servants were expressed mainly through the narrative of moral doom — the *kali yuga*.

This has been a powerful theme in the epics. In the *Vana Parva of Mahabharata*, the upper caste male anxieties are expressed through the descriptions of the *kali yuga*. Textually the period of doom is supposed to have begun soon after the *Mahabharata War* when existing power relations were subverted. The *Mleccha* (alien) rulers replaced the rightful kings, *Shudras* appropriated the authority of the Brahmanas and most important of all sexually deviant women who make love to menials, slaves and even animals, wield power over man. A deviant woman’s insatiable sexual appetite is depicted in popular paintings through the central image of the dominant woman who tramples upon the man, forcing him to be a servant, while she appropriates his postures — smoking, sitting and being served. What needs to be remembered here is that literary texts and popular paintings do not merely reproduce a conventional image of the deviant woman, the texts also mediate, transforming and adapting the theme to suit the requirements of their contemporaries. While the questions of *Shudra’s* slowly fade as more pressing anxieties take their place, women continue to be the major target of attack in nineteenth century texts.

This image of the deviant woman is constructed by establishing her relations with the male protectors i.e. husband and father. She is shown as rebellious and unwilling to remain contained within the restricted sphere of

the *andarmahal* (inner sanctum). Her distancing from the good woman also situates her within a separate social space so that the deviant woman is always projected as a homeless wanderer, her only refuge the prostitute's quarters on the fringes of cities and villages.

In a number of moral tracts the binary distinction between the chaste wife (*Palibrata Stree*) and the prostitute (*Beshya*) are structured into visible signs. This is best worked out by an anonymous author in his "Advice to Women" (*Stridiger prati upadesh*). He offers the formula as two distinct moulds in which he casts all women (The comparative examples used are gems and glass).

The good wife, *Patibrata*, is shy, silent, does her duty and is totally undemanding, stays away from men, keeps her whole body covered and does not wear flashy clothes.

While

The *Beshya* is loud mouthed, always restless, bares special parts of her body, falls on men, demands jewellery and continuously wears revealing clothes.⁴⁷

The author laid down social codes and via the process of stereotyping casts women into separate "bodies". Thus the myth that develops around the prostitute is homogenised by physical signs of dress and manners. This charts the prostitute's social moves through the verbal recreation of the immoral and decadent scene, which gives her a location. She is now individualised and the story, related in the first person, singularly appeals directly to male readers.

In *Swarnabai*, a novel written by Sri Nabakumar Datta (1888), we have all the details utilised by indigenous literary formula to construct the prostitute and her sinful habitat. The author, an upper caste *Kayastha*, belonged to the group of traditional loyalists who in this period formed the core of the lower middle class. These semi-literate men worked as clerks, surveyors and technical assistants in British owned commercial firms. They shared the dominant ideology of Hindu conservatives, and their identity rested on the preservation of the "home" as a sacred space which could not be invaded by the colonial masters.

⁴⁷ Anonymous. *Stridiger Prati Upadesh*. Calcutta 1874 (Bengali). (Translations done by R.C.)

The opening pages of the book contain the English inscriptions: "Woman thy name is Frailty." Then follows the preface advertising the main aim of the author:

Sins are being committed every day. People cannot be freed from it through preaching and religious advices. Their follies can be brought home to them only through an account from the sinners themselves about the terrible consequences which they suffered. It is for this reason that we have decided to publish the story of *Swarnabai*. If after reading this even one person shuns the lure of sins we shall consider our task to have been successful.⁴⁸

The narration begins with this striking first sentence: "My name is not Swarnabai. I was named Katayani by my father, a Brahmin priest from Bardhaman." Thus the pace is set for the social passage of Katayani from a respectable origin to the sinful transformation and end as Swarnabai. The narrative begins with the heroine's early life as a child widow in her father's family where, though not rich, she lived in comfortable circumstances. The readers are thus persuaded to believe that she was not forced to leave her home due to economic circumstances, and is therefore not worthy of their sympathies.

The first episode describes her as an impulsive woman. She falls in love with a man who saved her when she was lost in a crowd. This fixes her image as wilful and self-indulgent. She leaves home to seek out this chance-met lover and in the course of events seduces a young male relative. The two elope to Calcutta. When the money runs out the boy returns to the village, but Katayani is picked up by an old prostitute who turns her over to a rich old man. She now gets money, good clothes, a palatial house, but not satisfied with these, and driven by innate sexual needs she cohabits with a young servant. Finally she leaves the old man to live with this servant.

The second phase of the narrative describes her life as a common prostitute. She contracts venereal disease and is sent to the Lock Hospital. The author here treats her with a degree of sympathy. The descriptions of shame at being examined by a white male, laughed at by young unsympathetic doctors, being raped by clerks, just when she was getting cured, are invested with a certain degree of poignancy. Physical pains transform her body, once an abode of pleasure, into a cage which

⁴⁸ Naba Kumar Datta, *Swarnabai* (a novel in Bengali). Calcutta 1888 (translations done by RC).

perpetuates her torture. This vivid description of the Lock Hospital serves as a sign invested with layers of meaning. At the more factual level it gives a realistic depiction of the fate of a poor women who had been dragged there against her will. At another it corresponds to the Hindu mythical version of hell.

Katayani enters the third phase of her life not as a victim but as a fortunate person, different from those who are pushed into prostitution for economic reasons. She now has the opportunity to learn classical music and dance and makes her name as a famous *Baiji*. She is in her words able "to discard that heinous life". But once again driven by her innate sexual desires she starts on her earlier career. It is as a musician — now known as Swarna Bai, that she meets her very first lover. He does not recognise her. She uses every trick she knows to lure him into a life of degradation and vice. Realising his mistake the lover is able escape. Swarna, now scorned as a women, turns her full vengeance on all men, particularly her lover's friends, whom she brings to the brink of social and financial ruin.

The heroine is shown to become addicted to alcohol, unable to live on her own and thus exploited by young male servants. Finally, once again contracting venereal disease, she now tries to become a procuress. In her own words: "I had ruined many a young man in my life, now it was my turn to ruin young and innocent girls." So she not only sins herself but spreads sin, even as she spreads disease. In a nightmare she sees herself as a criminal and murderer. Her retribution is therefore complete as she becomes diseased in both mind and body. This physical deterioration construes for the reader the end to which a woman's sexual impulses lead her. Her broken body, for which even death comes as a release, finally fixes the stereotypes.

But the narrative does not end here. The author offers his solution through the resurrection of the prostitute into an ascetic being. She is now saved by a white missionary woman whom she calls "my new mother". The author here tries to force the point of the prostitute's new birth. Like the criminal who has served a jail sentence, the repentant sinner is given a new lease of life. She is transformed into a good and industrious person.

She now takes the job of a maid servant in her former lover's house in Benares. Seeing his chaste and good wife, surrounded by their "lovely children" she is mentally reformed. Love now takes on a metaphysical turn and she resolves to renounce earthly pleasures altogether. She lives like an ascetic widow, is accorded an honourable position and is finally allowed to die. The Hindu reader recognises the significance of this death in Benares — where if immersed in the holy Ganges one is freed of all sins to be free to be born to a better life.

The narrative thus herds together a number of moral codes necessary to construct the myth of the prostitute. It also clearly indicates how at that point the dominant Hindu ideology merged with the colonisers' perceptions. The woman is depicted as one who steadily and wilfully commits sin and tries to harm her innocent victims but finally pays for her deviancy by great bodily suffering. It was the awareness of her body — "I realised at the age of sixteen that I was beautiful" — which is her first declared sin. So it was not only the deviation from the strict life of a Hindu widow, but the affirmation of her physical self that needed to be punished.

The theme of the body is again taken up in her emergence as Swarna Bai. Music and dance are depicted as the knowledge that allows a woman to vent her sexuality. The performances of the singer and dancer are inducted into a social code of physical display. Here the moral censorship of the author takes on a universal attitude and the prostitute is transformed from a particular to a universal symbol of sin.

The metaphor of venereal disease in particular represents the dominant discourse, as the coloniser and the subjects agree on its ability to represent the prostitute. Lynda Nead, writing about Britain, points out:

The metaphor of disease was a central component in the representation of the prostitute both as an agent of chaos and as a social victim. Ill health and physical decline were a significant stage in the narrative of the downward progress. Within the mythology disease was constructed not as a social threat or a sign of the prostitutes power but as her punishment and an index of the depths of which she had fallen.⁴⁹

The indigenous perception grafted the metaphor of disease to that of "performance". Singing and dancing, which as cultural activities had once empowered the prostitute to the status of a creative artist, were now transformed into expressions of overt sexuality. Once a sign of class, signifying the courtesan, they were now construed into abusive epithets used against the common prostitute. This was borne out in actual legal cases, where women were denounced as prostitutes for singing.⁵⁰

In 1868 a case against three women residents of the Madan Mitra lane was registered in the Jora Sanko Thana, Calcutta. The complaint of neighbours — Koylash Chandra Bannerjee and one Umrito lal Makherjee — were that the women sang obscene songs and often did this with men. The singing, they went on to complain, lasted from midnight until the early

⁴⁹ Lynda Nead, *op.cit.*, p. 172.

⁵⁰ Home Judicial Proceedings, 1873.

hours of the morning. One witness also stated that the women went to theatres accompanied by men. The case proceeded for a couple of months. It was finally dismissed by the British judge on the grounds was no definite evidence against the women: "Not an iota which would justify my saying that the defendants are carrying on the business of common prostitutes within the meaning of the law." But due to moral pressures the magistrate warned the women that they would be punished if they caused annoyance to their neighbours through their singing.

These images of deviancy as the representation of prostitutes mainly reflected indigenous male perceptions. By coalescing the imagined and actual instances into the myth of the Indian prostitute Indian men were able to construct a universal symbol of sin. At the same time they were able to push the Indian prostitutes out of history. But they could not be totally silenced and from the limbo of darkness occasionally their voice could be heard offering a challenge:

I have become a prostitute, I have left my family and home, but still this bastard of a husband dares to speak to me in a threatening voice.⁵¹

⁵¹ Sukumar Sen, *Women's Dialect in Bengali*. Calcutta 1979.

Indian terms used

Baiji	Court musicians and dancers (usually associated with the Maghal courts)
Devadasi	Temple dancers dedicated to the deity
Bibi	Wife/mistress
Beshya	Prostitute
Nati	Actress
Ganika	Courtesan
Barangana	Courtesan
Bhadralok	Gentleman
Bhadramahila	Ladies
Antapur	Inner sanctum
Kachari	Place where public business is executed relating to the official space in the landlords' household or the judicial court

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