

# The Indian Prostitute as a Colonial Subject

## Bengal 1864-1883

by Ratnabali Chatterjee



*L'article examine la position des prostituées dans la société indienne au XIX<sup>e</sup> siècle. Il retrace le chemin parcouru par les courtisanes indiennes. Ces dernières jouissaient d'une liberté et d'une dignité relatives dans la société avant d'être privées de leurs droits en vertu d'une loi promulguée sous le régime colonial pour lutter contre la prostitution. Cette loi a imposé sa morale et la crainte de la sexualité féminine aux prostituées indiennes.*

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. (Home Judicial File no. 48 1145)

In 1864, the Contagious Diseases Act was passed in Britain and also applied to other parts of the empire. It was amended with a view towards greater effectiveness between 1866 and 1869. The key element of this measure was the compulsory examination of women (mainly prostitutes) suspected of having venereal disease. As such, it became more binding upon the prostitutes than their clients. In India, those prostitutes who were mainly visited by the British soldiers were picked out, segregated, and examined.

In an immediate sense, the legislation was 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 diseases were publicized. The military logic for the Contagious Diseases Act in India was made clear by the Quartermaster 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 bazaars they may be expected to avoid the risks involved in association with women who are not recognised by the regimental authorities. (Secretary of State's Report Par. 9; Kaminsky 79).

It was through the act of registration that the Indian prostitute was enrolled as a colonial subject. This was carried out through the ritual of medical examination in the Lock Hospitals. Here, she was also asked to complete a form in which she gave a description of her social and physical status. These forms were translated into regional languages and a number of small booklets like the *Beshya Guidet* (Guide to Prostitutes) in Bengali were published during this period.

The necessity of keeping up a steady supply of 'attractive women' to keep the British soldiers contained within the cantonment was becoming a problem and the authorities used any excuse they could find to drag in young, healthy, and good looking Indian women as registered prostitutes in the cantonment bazaars who could then be physically examined. These measures became doubly necessary as the authorities generally felt the growing needs for 'commercial sex' among British soldiers. It was believed that the common English soldier recruited from the ranks of the working class lacked those moral or intellectual scruples which would make a properly bred British gentleman oppose the "exchange of sex for money." Also, the low pay of a common soldier made it impossible for him to remain within the norms of respectability by maintaining a family in India. (Ballhatchet 2-3). The Indian prostitute's desirability thus depended upon a crude assessment of demand and supply. 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, with her ability to evade and even actually refuse approaches, offered the colonial state a challenge. In the struggle that followed between

the colonial authorities and the subject population, the women's body itself became a battle site.

Foucault has shown that regulation of sex through policing took the form of public discourses. (25) Within the context of colonial rule, the Indian prostitute was defined as a criminal through the discourse of the Contagious Diseases Act as it developed in Britain and was then transported to India.

In Britain, the threat of prostitution to society 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 image of the prostitute in mid-nineteenth century Britain took on a specific class perspective, as prostitution was seen as the ploy of working class women to get to the classes above them. The cohabiting of middle class men with working class women was condemned not only on medical or moral grounds, but for breaking down class boundaries.

This image of the British prostitute as a subversive agent was allowed to grow in the official discourse. In a number of moral tracts of the period, for example, *Wardlaw's Lectures on Female Prostitution* (1842), the link was established between deterioration of national character and consequent weakness, and the decline and fall of nations. As pointed out by Nead, "the terms plot both a moral and an imperial narrative and a fall from virtue can symbolise the end of an empire." (110-14)

By the 1890s, the mounting moral pressures on British women, exemplified by the public debates, brought the definition of respectable/unrespectable femininity along with the private area of the home into its purview.

For moralist doctors like William Acton, women's sexuality varied radically with the context in which sexuality was played out. The ideal English wife and mother, due to her total dedication to moral duties, abhorred "all sensual pleasures," and her sublimated sexuality was perceived as 'normal'. The prostitutes, on the other

hand, were desexed, having lost all womanly feeling while consorting with eight to twelve different men in the same night. (Acton 8)

Statistical surveys coming into prominence during this period as a major basis of British ruling class knowledge added to the vocabulary defining prostitution. The British prostitutes were grouped into three categories, according to the economic status of their clients: (i) the aristocratic courtesan; (ii) the mistresses of the middle class professional; and (iii) the common prostitute hanging around the sol-



A. Ramachandran, from *Yayati, The Complete Man*, 1986

diers' barracks. The members of this last category were usually of working class descent, whom the police treated as criminals. All the feelings of class antagonism were fused into the criminal law, and the Contagious Diseases Act empowered the police to isolate a particular group of women from working class culture and make them into deviant outcasts. This image of the British working class prostitute taken out of its context was turned into a metaphor with wider significance. (Nead 110-111)

The fear of deviant sexual behaviour and prostitution continued to grow in Victorian England. This was transferred to the colonies through the middle class members of the official bureaucracy. The first batch of British civil servants sent out to India after 1858 were told to behave like Victorian gentlemen and refrain from indulging in corrupt 'native' practices. The list of taboos included having Indian *bibis* (mistresses), attending *Nautch* parties, and dressing like 'Native aristocrats.' (Ballhatchet 144-157)

A distancing from the 'natives' in every way remained the spoken and unspoken official directives. The Indian quarters were now perceived as the actual source of 'miasma', which was thought to cause disease. Surrounded by garbage, domestic animals, crawling children, and the stench of human excretion, the whole area was a scene of filth, pollution and 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 amalgamation of all three—filth, disease and crime.

This unilinear official perception contrasted sharply with the existing indigenous categories describing the Indian prostitute. In Bengal, for example, the word *Beshya*, which continues to indicate a prostitute, can be traced back textually to the classical manuals on erotics and dramaturgy. (Bhattacharya 36-37) Traditionally, the Indian prostitute was associated with professional entertainers. Terms such as *Nati* (actress) and other terms such as *Baiji* (court dancer) which had been imported by Muslim court norms continued to be used in the vernacular until the nineteenth century.

Right up to the end of the eighteenth century, courtesans as dancers and musicians were perceived as the products of the feudal society which they aesthetically represented. The hierarchy which continued to control the indigenous society (in the mid-nineteenth century) also regulated the lives of prostitutes. They were socially situated according to the economic and social position of their cli-

ents. This was totally ignored by the British.

By 1872, surveys made in Bengal showed a large influx of rural women in Calcutta's brothels. These included girls from lower castes sold by parents in acute financial crisis, girls kidnapped or falsely lured and sold to the brothels, and daughters of professional prostitutes who left their villages and moved to the metropolis in the hope of a better income. (Chakrabarty 25-26) Yet among these, one group of women puzzled the officials and embarrassed the Bengali gentlemen. These were the upper caste Hindu widows who, often out of a desperate need to be free of their social restrictions, fled their village homes. They sometimes joined the liberal religious sects like the *Vaisnavas*. The latter professed a belief in the theory of "free love" and shunned material comforts for a mendicant's life. Their freedom of movement was frowned upon as licentious by both the indigenous elites and the colonial officials. (WBSA Report, 1872: 73)

That the Indian woman as a subject of reform needed different standards of assessment was the view expressed by the officials in their reports. The latter were also forced to acknowledge that prostitutes in India could not be as easily categorized as the prostitutes in Britain.

Prostitution is an institution the history of which in India at all events is lost in the mist of ages. Prostitutes danced before Yudisthir and Rama and in the guise of dancing girls and singers they are a necessary part of domestic ceremonies today. (Home Judicial File no. 48 1143)

Yet, in spite of these observations the colonial officials categorized Indian prostitutes into only two groups—the 'decent or respectable prostitute' who lived in the regimental bazaar and could therefore be easily examined, and 'idle or disorderly prostitutes' who lived in 'native bustees' or big cities beyond military control. (Ballhatchet 10) The official attitude to 'native' prostitutes was fraught with ambiguity and this was reflected in their reports. As an easy solution, they clung to the Lock Hospitals for institutionalizing the Indian prostitutes.

Whenever a woman is reported as an absentee from the periodical medical examination a warrant for her arrest is immediately ordered, issued, and made over to the police for execution. In this not a day's delay takes place....I may mention here that the registered prostitutes are examined at the lock hospital fortnightly, on the 1st and 3rd Monday of every month. (WBSA Report, 1878: 37-38)

The response to these governmental measures regulating prostitution was felt in different ways. The men and women of the poorer classes, i.e., the relatives and friends of the women chased by the British officials, offered a sullen protest. Their weapons were silence and non-co-operation.

***The Indian prostitute offered the colonial state a challenge. In the struggle that followed woman's body itself became a battle site.***

When the police proceed to the woman's place of abode they find that perhaps ten days or a week previously, she had absconded and left the jurisdiction.....is very certain that none of her friends or relatives will afford the slightest clue to her whereabouts, it is possible that she is lurking within the jurisdiction and so the warrant is kept in hand. (WBSA, 1878: 7)

It was through this relentless game of hide and seek between the police and the Indian prostitute that her identity as a criminal came to be finally established. The shame and alienation of women who once had some sort of a niche in the indigenous society and were ousted from

it by the official measures were recorded by some of the visiting missionaries, who offered a second voice in the official discourse.

Imagine yourself as 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 ....You contend that you have a right to your good name.....and that it is the punishment of the worst sort to be taken by a policeman through the street in a hospital where only disorder of a certain kind 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.

(Andrew and Bushnell 15)

While elaborate measures for recruiting and controlling Indian prostitutes within the cantonments continued, British soldiers in greater number went to Calcutta and returned with venereal diseases. The problem was further aggravated by the swelling ranks of white male vagrants and prostitutes in the city. The medical officers and military authorities now agreed that Calcutta and larger cities near the cantonments must be brought under the Contagious Diseases Act.

Since cities like Calcutta with its large civil population could hardly be considered appendages to garrison towns like Barackpur or Dum Dum, new acts had to be passed to ensure the safety of the soldiers. The Contagious Diseases Act by a special amendment known as Act XIV was thus applied in 1868 to the whole city of Calcutta. Not only the prostitutes but all brothel keepers had to be registered. Any prostitute could now by law be detained in the Lock Hospital if detected with venereal disease, and released only when she was cured and certified as safe. The police were further empowered to keep the prostitutes confined within certain areas of the city.

*It was through missionary discourse developed in Britain that the Indian prostitute was transformed from a criminal to a victim of official discrimination.*

The presence of European and Eurasian prostitutes in Calcutta even more than Indian prostitutes seemed to engage the attention of the Colonial authorities in 1870. In a detailed report given by an anonymous missionary gentleman, we find that of the 525 Christian women engaged in prostitution in Calcutta in 1871, the largest number were Europeans and Eurasians. Their lifestyles varied according to their incomes. While the members of the first class lived in well ventilated houses in the fringe areas of European dwellings, the third lived close to the 'native quarters' like Cheena Para, Mallanga, Cheenaum Gully, Goomghar, and Teretta Bazaar. This was considered a great embarrassment by the rulers. (WBSA 1871)

This strengthened the demand for the suspension of the Contagious Diseases Act, which was organized into a movement in Britain. A number of women led by Josephine Butler broke away to form the Separatist Ladies Association. Two of their members came to India to examine the actual conditions prevailing in the colonies. On their return, they accused the British officials in India of harbouring and even encouraging sin. It was through this missionary discourse which developed in Britain that the Indian prostitute was slowly transformed from a criminal to a victim of official discrimination.

The descriptive focus of the missionary narrative rested on recreating an atmosphere of vice. This was done to show the exact division of space that existed between the rulers and the ruled. Since the logic of Christian belief pervaded the entire discourse, the British officials in India were accused not on political but strictly on 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 the British soldiers and their officers, full provision was made for the flesh to fulfill the lusts thereof. (Andrew and Bushnell 15)

These loud denunciations by the Repealers inflicted a blow to the Colonizer's self image as the 'white Saviour' and caused a fracture in the official discourse. This was to be seen in the defensive tones of the official reports.

The missionary ladies due to their ignorance of the 'native' customs have magnified the problem....the Repealers in desperation pointed to the number of English and Eurasian prostitutes in Calcutta and Bombay's brothels. The authorities were now forced to an embarrassed admission—in some stations the rules had been strictly carried out, but in others it now turns out this has not been the case. (Secretary of State's Report 52).

It is quite clear from the debate which continued to rage over what is known as 'Lord Roberts Bill' that ruling class opinion was divided on what the missionaries aptly termed as the project of 'State Regulation of Vice'. The Indian prostitutes provided the main focus for these debates. Represented as victims by the missionaries, they now posed a greater problem to officials, who were unwilling to cross race boundaries or take up any reform projects which would be opposed by their subjects.

By 1883, the Contagious Diseases Act was finally suspended. Officially, this curtailed the general powers of the military and police to indiscriminately arrest and punish prostitutes. In India, even those prostitutes reserved solely for the British soldiers were given the option to walk out. Yet this did not take place, and officials gleefully reported that 'native prostitutes' were now far worse off than before. They could no longer claim the benefit of the military hospitals or the right of residence in clean houses within the cantonments.

Thus the Indian prostitute found herself in a paradoxical position in what was considered to be her moment of liberation. The pre-colonial norms had granted her a social space which eroded under the pressures of colonial rule, and she was left

without any patrons. The new group of comprador elites agreed with the missionaries and looked upon her as a 'victim', setting her up as a subject of reform. The English educated young men demanded to see her health tickets, and she realized that unless she was certified healthy, she could not hope for any British or Indian clients. As colonial rule entrenched its position, the Indian prostitute, fearful of losing her place in it through being officially declared 'disestablished', clung to her given identity, be it as criminal or victim, holding up her registration ticket for recognition as a colonial subject.

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## MALATHI RAO

### Mother

Mother, you wore out this visit.  
 I wonder now  
 why like Durga at Navaratri  
 you prowled the garden—  
 the machete in your raised arm  
 gleamed its deathly fascination on me

What demon did you seek, your eyes  
 your body burning. O Fury, out to  
 destroy the world, was it me,  
 your daughter who was your quarry?  
 Father performed the ceremonial  
 while the family priest muttered  
 mantras  
 And you, mother, with accurate strokes  
 of the machete  
 denuded the coconut for the goddess.

You laughed at me, mother,  
 You frightened me  
 with your celebratory play with  
 fire and water, your *puja*,  
 in the face of Death.

You frightened me, mother.

*Malathi Rao teaches English Literature in a women's college in Delhi, India.*

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 EATER

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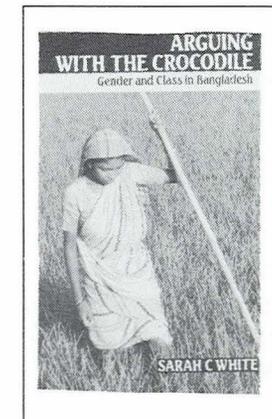
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