



Dangerous Outcast The Prostitute in Nineteenth Century Bengal

Sumanta Banerjee

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Review : ○ Rudrangshu Mukherjee

In two classics of 19th century Bengal literature, there are comments on prostitutes. In Kaliprasanna Sinha's *Hutum Pyanchar Naksha*, time is described to be as fleeting as the youth of a whore. And in Dinabandhu Mitra's farce *Sadhabar Ekadasi*, the rich man's son is called the refuge of the prostitute. These references suggest that prostitutes were an important presence in the ambience that surrounded the world of the rich in Calcutta. Prostitutes and mistresses and *baijis* occupied that peculiar grey area between elite and popular culture. Their number was by no means insignificant. Reflecting on the life-style of the rich, Sinha wrote, "Because of these great men, the city of Calcutta has become the city of whores. There is not a single locality where you won't find at least ten houses of whores. Every year, instead of coming down, the number of whores in this city is going up." Yet, as Sumanta Banerjee notes with some justification, there has been no analytical study of the position, roles and the attitudes of these women in 19th century Bengal. His book is an attempt to fill this gap.

At the end of his book Banerjee says with characteristic modesty that this book is "essentially a starting

point for further research." This is to underestimate the importance of the work that Banerjee has done. He has looked into the subject from every possible angle. He has seen it from the point of view of the British policy makers and from that of the chief patrons of the brothels, the Bengali *babus*. But the richest section of his book is devoted to the attitudes of the women themselves. He has allowed them to speak to the readers in all their earthiness and ribaldry as well as through their dreams and their pains. As anybody who has done some research will appreciate, gathering this material could not have been easy. Banerjee has delved into the rich oral tradition of Sonagachi, that infamous red light area of Calcutta which still thrives, and into the popular literature of the time. Social historians of Bengal are indeed indebted to Banerjee for this pioneering work.

The coming of colonialism saw a change in the position of the prostitute. In pre-colonial times, her activities were never made illegal. Colonial administration brought prostitution under penal laws. This was prompted by the need to protect British soldiers from venereal disease. They could not prohibit prostitution given the sexual desires

of the British troops and other functionaries of the administration. But they tried to control it through the Cantonments Act, the Contagious Diseases Act, the Lock Hospital Act and so on. These controls led to harassment of the prostitutes. Not surprisingly, neither the British administrators nor the Bengal *bhadralok* social reformers tried to restrict the activities of those men who frequented the brothels. Banerjee makes the rather obvious point—but a point worth making nonetheless—that prostitutes were denied the dignity of labour and even on the rare occasions that some of them became rich they had no social status. But not all of them sacrificed their dignity. Binodini told her lover, "I have made money, but money cannot make me." Moreover, as Veena Talwar Oldenberg has shown for the courtesans of Lucknow, prostitutes could also develop their own cunning arts of resistance. This is not an aspect that draws Banerjee's attention.

This omission is surprising because Banerjee is aware of how the "outcasts" often had the last laugh. In the 19th century, many of them moved from the margins to the centre of society. They became the subjects of popular verse writers, of farce

writers and of dramatists; they became the objects of desire of various types of males from a cross-section of classes, and of the reforming zeal of many *bhadraloks*. The predominance of *babu* culture in the 19th century made the prostitute's existence somewhat high profile.

In 1873 an autobiography of a prostitute was published. But the arena in which these women left their most long-lasting mark was the theatre. Almost all the actresses of the Bengal theatre in the 19th century were drawn from the red light districts of Calcutta. Here they proved themselves equal to the acting talents of *bhadralok* actors and earned the applause of the *bhadralok* audience. The highest moment for the actress-prostitute came when Ramakrishna Paramhansa, the saint of Dakshineswar to whom the elite of Calcutta flocked, went to the greenroom and blessed Binodini. One version of the story says that Ramakrishna actually went into *samadhi* when he saw Binodini. He is believed to have commented later that he had seen Sita in her.

The quotidian life of the prostitute was, however, far from such concerns. The voices that Banerjee has rescued seem more concerned with old age, with devices to attract and hold on to male attention. Some of the sayings and songs that Banerjee has brought to light are extraordinarily vivid and novel in their use of language and imagery. It is clear that Sonagachi had its own sub-culture within the domain of what is commonly referred to as popular culture. The world of the prostitutes represented—and perhaps continues to represent—the interface between the elite and popular culture. Banerjee's book reconstructs this world with detailed research and not a little poignancy. □

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Summer Magic

*Young girls at dusk
in short skirts and tight blouses
hang about their houses
in groups of three or four,
cluster near lamp posts.*

*Young girls utter silly nothings,
ride high-horses
are a bit down-hearted
their Gods are not innocent
any more.*

*In Queens, Delhi or Greece,
young girls outside their steaming houses,
at dusk in clinging blouses
yearn for mothers they say they hate
so...o...o.*

*You'll see them of evenings
as they spill from behind closed doors
in Bombay, Harlem or Mozambique
young girls on a leash,
in dreams of summer-magic.*

Sunita Jain

Manushi Delays

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