

# Refracted Reality:

## The 1935 Calcutta Police Survey of Prostitutes

by  
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THE discussion on prostitution in the modern Indian historical context has been sketchy. The original initiative for such discussion came from the military and naval posts in British India - the regulation of venereal disease affecting soldiers and sailors made control of prostitution by the British government an imperative.<sup>1</sup> Around the midnineteenth century, the rise of evangelism and the Contagious Diseases Acts in England led to a renewed investigation into prostitution and its control.

### Policing Prostitutes

The Contagious Diseases Act, first passed in England in 1864, and subsequently confirmed in 1866, provided that a woman identified as a diseased prostitute by a plainclothes member of the metropolitan police had to undergo examination. If found diseased, she could be detained in a hospital for up to three months. The accused woman could elect to submit voluntarily to the examination or, failing that, could be brought up by a magistrate and then be bound by his orders.

As Judith Walkowitz explains, these Acts simultaneously fulfilled military and social needs.<sup>2</sup> The British army in England prohibited enlisted men from marrying (in order that a professional, bachelor army without family ties could be assembled whenever needed) and so sex had to be sanitised for the army men; at the same time, “impure” women were demarcated from “pure” women, and new

precedents for policing and medical supervision of the lives of the poor were created. A campaign for the repeal of the Acts built up around the latter issues, vociferously aided by feminists, Liberals, members of the Social Purity movement (which focused on prevention of youthful sexual activity which it saw as

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*Comment by Josephine Butler, campaigner against the Acts, in England, on the policy of punishing prostitutes: “As well might you attempt to do away with the slave trade by making it penal to be a slave.”*

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more dangerous than adult “illicit” sex), humanitarians, and working women and men. The Acts were repealed in England in 1886 and in India in 1888.

During the 1870s and 1880s, officials and reformers had uncovered a small traffic in women between Britain and the Continent; also, from the Continent to the East. Though these women were not the young innocents depicted in a lurid press, and though their numbers were grossly exaggerated by the purity propagandists, this became a major rallying cry around which national and racial pride could be organised. It was this issue that the League of Nations was persuaded to take up in 1921, and it developed into a broader enquiry into prostitution in the empire.

### Nationalist Reaction

In India, in the nineteenth century, the British Orientalist view of an ancient

golden age in the East was countered by a negative perception of the present, at the centre of which was the rulers’ projection of the position of Hindu women as a singularly abject one. The operation of colonial ideology emphasised the supposed moral inferiority of a subject population that was accused of treating its women barbarically. The position of colonised women was used as one pretext to establish the moral right of the imperial masters to rule the subject population, since the British women were somewhat more formally educated and were deemed far more civilised.

The indigenous intelligentsia, alienated from the ruling regime as it pressed its controls down even more firmly from the midnineteenth century onwards, responded with a fervent nationalism that asserted its superiority in the supposed spirituality of its culture. Resistance to the Westernisation of Indian women was expressed by suggesting that the Western woman was fond of useless luxury, cared little for the well being of the family, was immodest and somewhat coarse mannered. A new patriarchy emerged, laying down the code which would delineate the desired spiritual femininity of Indian women. The dress, diet, social demeanour, religiosity of this new Indian woman of the middle classes and upper and middle castes, was to be different both from those of the Western woman and from those of the indigenous common woman, who was

characterised as quarrelsome, sexually promiscuous and vulgar.<sup>3</sup>

So, the colonial regime and the nationalists needed to investigate prostitution for differing reasons: one to ensure that “the spectacle of European women indulging in the occupation of prostitution. . . [did not] lower British prestige”,<sup>4</sup> the other to better control the sexuality of “their” women and to defend themselves against the rulers’ charge that Indian women were in an abject and degraded condition. Reformers were especially concerned that child widows could be lured and abducted into prostitution.

Neither rulers nor reformers were particularly concerned about the prostitutes themselves. Their concern was to prevent women from their own groups being channelled into prostitution. Thus, when Dadabhoi Naoroji introduced a Bill in the governor general’s legislative council in 1912, clause 5 of the Bill said: “whoever procures any girl under 16 years of age, *not being a common prostitute*, to have

unlawful sexual intercourse with any man... shall be punished with imprisonment.” (emphasis added). Under this Bill, custodial rights of prostitutes were to be assumed in an attempt to prevent the “contamination” of male youth by this “social evil” which was “eating into the vitals of society.” In fact, custodial rights over the girls “rescued” from brothels was a matter of acrimony. The government was not willing to take over rehabilitative functions because doing so would be expensive and politically dangerous.

A fresh Bill was introduced by Reginald Craddock in the same council in 1913, still aiming to “rescue” girls under 16 from brothels and prostitutes. Under this Bill, a girl could be “rescued” if someone was willing to testify that she was under 16. It should be noted that the girls were often unwilling to be rescued; in one case, the court had to intervene and uphold the girl’s plea that she was being coerced rather than rescued.

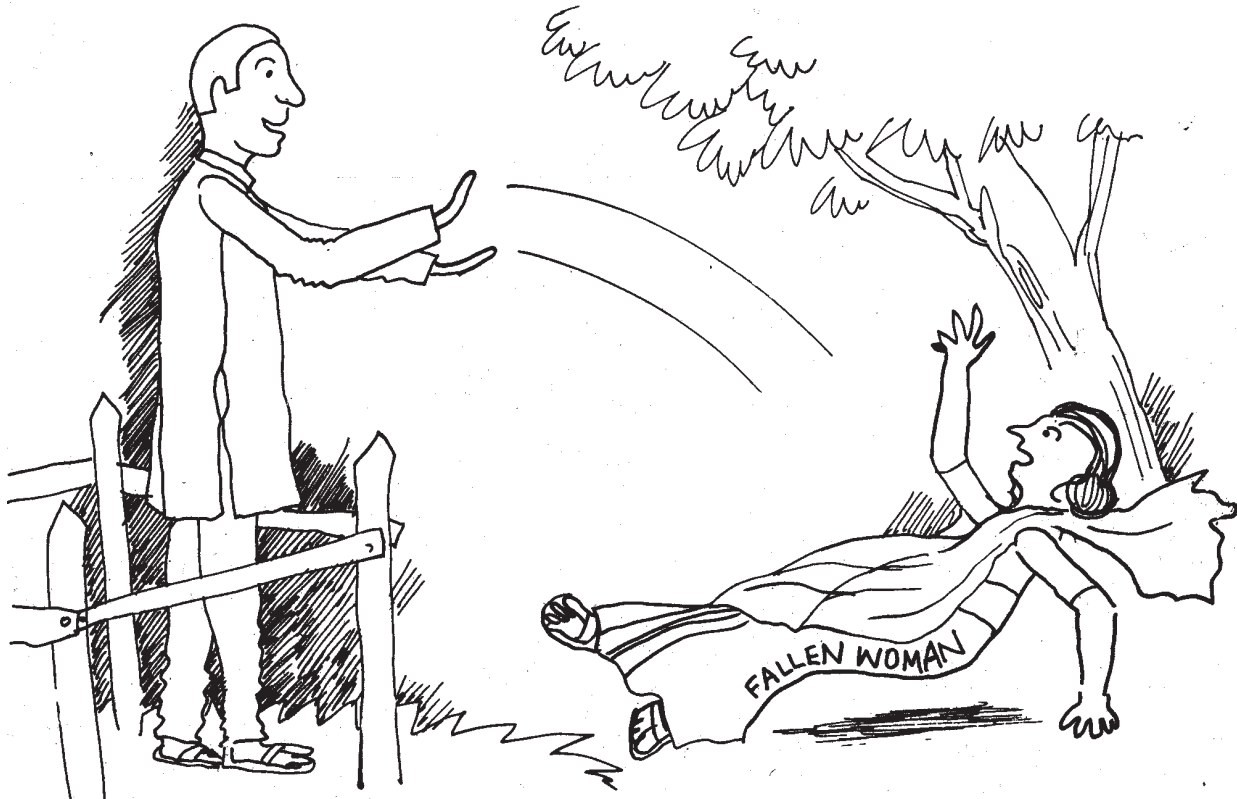
However, both Hindu and Muslim

males responded to the Bill with typical male centred anxiety rather than with any concern for the prostitutes’ rights.

Maulvi Musharraf Hussain of Jalpaiguri felt a man “may be falsely accused by an enemy of frequenting a girl under the age of 16 in a brothel.” Rai G.C. Chatterji Bahadur of Patna felt only “disappointed lovers of prostitutes” would testify out of “motives of vengeance.”<sup>5</sup>

Since male *izzat* was at stake, the Calcutta Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act, 1923, ensured the punishment of prostitutes but said nothing of the clients. Yet, the desire to raid brothels grew stronger in the 1920s in Bengal, because the increasing communalisation of electoral politics led to a major campaign against the abduction of Hindu women, supposedly by Muslims, for immoral purposes.<sup>6</sup>

Further hostility to the prostitutes became evident in demands for their banishment from fairs and for registration requiring them to produce certificates of health once every month to a district



officer. The government's refusal to fulfil the latter was not born out of any great sympathy for the prostitutes. Compulsory regulation would be financially nonviable and registration would imply "tacit recognition of prostitution as a trade"<sup>7</sup> at a time when the League of Nations Committee on Traffic in Women and Children had resolved that "licensed or tolerated house system is one of the main incentives to the traffic in women", and had asked for the closure of such houses.

### Myth and Reality

Since nobody seemed at all interested in the women actually practising the profession, the aim of this essay will be to attempt a correction, however partial, of this myopia which persists in many forms today. The two aspects of shortsightedness which concern us here are (a) the blinkers that both colonial and Indian men wore in their assumptions about prostitution; (b) the invisibility of prostitutes in the historical discussion.

Prostitution is here understood as an occupation involving sexual encounters with men for payment in cash. The difficulty in computing an estimate of the numbers of women involved, and of the amounts of the money that changed hands, lies in the fact that many women were part time prostitutes, supplementing their earnings from domestic service and other occupations, even begging. Nevertheless, a rough estimate can be made from police statistics. In 1880, when the registration system was in operation in Calcutta, under the Contagious Diseases Act, it was estimated that there were 7001 prostitutes. We may assume that the number would have been more by the 1930s. The League of Nations Committee in 1926 stated that there were 20,000 Indian prostitutes in Calcutta.

### The 1935 Calcutta Survey

The League of Nations devised a committee to enquire into the extent of white slave traffic and child prostitution,

## Testimony of Ashalata Dassi

"I am daughter of Sarojini Dassi of Sonagachi Lane. I am aged twenty-three years now. My mother was also a prostitute. I lived with my mother till I was 7 years of age. I went to a Primary School at the age of 6 years and studied Bengali Vernacular for about a year. At the age of 7 years, I was married to one Mohan Lal Das of Baghbazar, Calcutta. He was the grandson of a prostitute (she) died some years before my marriage. My mother gave Rs. 500/- in cash as dowry in my marriage. I did not go to my husband's house after my marriage as my mother kept me with her and was waiting for my attaining majority. After about one year of my marriage, my mother heard that my husband would not allow me to remain with him at his house. My mother went with me to my husband's house and left me there. I remained there for about a month but my husband used to torture me and my mother therefore brought me back to her and kept me in a house on Cornwallis Street in a respectable locality and had myself admitted in a day school. I studied there for some time but did not like it I was then admitted in a rescue home named Sarju Sadan for learning some work but I came back to my mother the very next day. Since then I lived with my mother. I started prostitution at the age of 18 years as the lives of prostitutes attracted me - I am quite happy with my present life. I earn about Rs. 80/- per month now. I have never been approached by any social worker. I have never been convicted of any offence connected with prostitution. I did not join any other profession."

and, to that end, required all governments to answer a questionnaire. The Government of India was thus forced to gather such information as it could. The provincial governments in India were asked to report on the matter, especially on methods of "rehabilitation."

As part of this process, the commissioner of police, Calcutta, in 1935, reported on the "life histories" of 50 prostitutes. His report consists of the first hand testimonies of 50 prostitutes. (see Box for an example). It is stated to have been "obtained at random from prostitutes living both in the better class and lower class brothels in Calcutta."<sup>8</sup>

This statement should not, however, be taken at face value. It is more likely that the police recorded the statements of the prostitutes with whom they were in somewhat regular contact and that these 50 women came from what may be called the upper and middling strata of prostitution rather than from the bottom of the heap.

The document, which is the main source I am here examining, does not specify what kinds of questions were

asked of the women, nor even whether the prostitutes volunteered information or were coerced by a policeman. The information we get from the women's supposedly firsthand accounts is patchy, as some women give information of a particular kind and others do not. A uniform assessment of caste or religion is not possible. Going by the names, all of the women appear to be Hindus, although a change of name cannot be ruled out. Only a few mention their fathers' names, of whom one is a Brahman while others have names that could belong to any of several castes. Only seven women mention the amount of money they earned. It is necessary to use caution, therefore, in reaching any conclusions about the representative nature of these data.

Also, the document seems to have been edited and revised before being printed, and the role of the transcribing and translating policemen must be borne in mind. A comment of J.N. Reid, secretary to the government of Bengal on October 3, 1935, indicates the authorities' contemptuous and dismissive attitude:

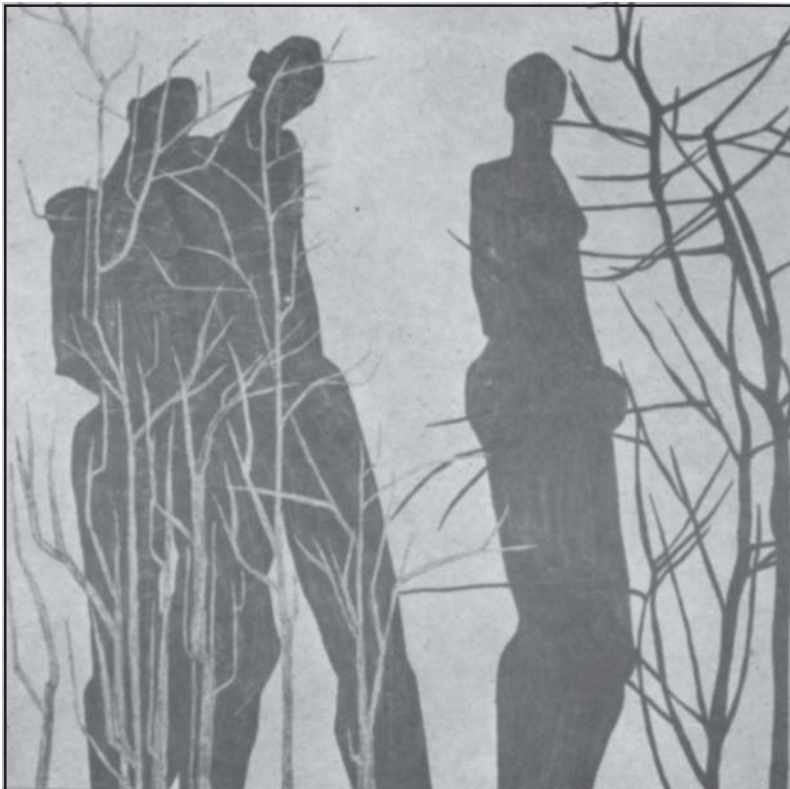
“... awful sob stuff too, might to cut down to about half, and the sob-stuff omitted.”<sup>9</sup>

### Marriage No Protection

In the legislative council debates and in the indigenous press, a clear opposition was assumed to exist between prostitution, characterised as vice, and marriage, characterised as virtue. It was assumed, for instance, that all prostitutes, being unscrupulous women, trained their daughters for the trade. It was also assumed that women entered prostitution primarily by being abducted, raped and otherwise lured away by older prostitutes.

A primary assumption was that marriage served as a protection against such seduction or abduction. Thus, when the Sarda Bill of 1929 sought to raise the age of marriage from 12 to 16, there was tremendous agitation in Bengal. One of the main arguments used against the Bill was that girls, if not married by 12, or by puberty, would be more likely to become prostitutes, that is, that marriage was required for the protection of girls.

That, in fact, marriage was not much of a protection is adequately suggested by the fact that in the 1935 Calcutta Survey of 50 prostitutes, 33 (66 percent) had been married, and of them 21 (42 percent) had either been driven out of the husband's home or had themselves left for various reasons. For example, Lakmani Dassi<sup>10</sup> reported that she was 14 when she was married to a widower aged 45, was ill treated by her husband, seduced by her husband's brother, and then driven out. Menakabala Dassi said



she was married at the age of eight to a man about 40 years old, found that her husband was having an affair with one of the maidservants and, on her protesting, was driven out of the house. Kalidassi and Ranibala Dassi said that finding similar situations in their husbands' cases, they returned to their fathers' homes. Giribala Dassi said she was married at the age of seven, decided at 14 that she could not bear the tortures any longer, “quietly left” her husband's place, and came to Alam Bazar with her cousin. Kironbala Dassi, too, said she was married at seven, and after staying for six years in her husband's house, one day became entranced by a *kirtanwali* (singer of religious songs) who had come to the village. Enchanted by the music, she decided to become a *kirtanwali* herself, and left her husband's home. Other women said they had left their marital homes because of cruelty by in-laws. Of course, it was usually a long and circuitous route from the marital home to the brothel. But the significant

point that emerges from these accounts is that marriage did not afford the protection which was projected as its major function in a woman's life, by authorities and nationalist reformers alike.

Was the case of widows any better, since they had no husbands to ill treat them? Of the 50 surveyed, 17 (34 percent) were widows who had been married early and widowed between the ages of 12 and 16.

These women are unlikely to have had any independent control over assets. Manibala Dassi, Sisirbala Dassi, Motibala, Ranibala, all obtained employment as

maidservants after they were widowed. But they were “allured by the prospect of a free life”<sup>11</sup> and left this employment. As the experience of Kendibala and Basaiyanbala showed, employment as maidservants often also meant providing sexual services to “promiscuous visitors on several occasions”, if not to one of the inmates of the house, as Gouribala Dassi's experience with the sons and male servants of her employer revealed.

### Not Forcible Abduction

A significant number of these women had come away from their villages and families with some other person or persons, who was often a man of their own class, who was expected to play the role of a protector. This was much more common than a procurer abducting the woman. The transition to the brothel was rarely direct.

The element of physical force so often highlighted in a lurid manner by reformers, was almost totally absent here from these 50. There seem to be scarcely any cases of children being kidnapped,

or women being abducted by force. Some of these women had ended up in prostitution via the route of elopement with young men with whom they were in love. These men had brought them to Calcutta, lived with them for a while and then abandoned them. This was the case with Menakabala Dassi, Amitabala Datta, Ranibala Dassi, Kironbala Dassi. The last of these had eloped with Ganguly Babu, a railway clerk. Anitabala had eloped with her cousin, of whom she subsequently “tired” and thus entered a brothel.

The case of Anshilabala Debi is a good example of how a married woman was caught in various conflicting tensions generated by various male relatives. She was married but was not sent to her husband’s house on account of her “alleged” insanity. While living with her father, she was seduced by one of her father’s servants. When her father heard of this, he conspired with other members of the family to kill her and her lover; but they managed to escape and went to Calcutta. The girl’s husband then brought a case against her lover, with the result that the latter was convicted and sentenced to two years’ rigorous imprisonment. After his imprisonment, she entered a brothel

Binapani Dassi is another example of a woman caught in family disapproval. She left her husband because of his cruelty and took shelter with her uncle in Calcutta. But she committed a grave social error by falling in love with a boy of the locality. Her uncle and aunt found out and drove her out. She came to Rambagan and lived with her lover for some time. Only after he deserted her did she start entertaining “casual visitors.”

Thus, for a married woman to fall in love with another man could lead to her falling through the net of limited security provided by the family and the community. Prabhavati Dassi, too, after 10 years of marriage, fell in love with a neighbour and had to flee the village. It was considered no less grave a misdemeanour if the woman was

widowed, as the cases of Chugni Theterin and Kali Dassi show: both were widowed and then fell in love, and both were turned out by their respective employers and families and later entered brothels.

Sometimes, the woman left her home in the company of another woman with whom she had been associated. Sonabala Dassi, for example, came to Kalighata on a pilgrimage with her cousin Indubala who then told her of the freedom and wealth of a prostitute’s life, and so brought her to Sheorafuly in Howrah district. Sometimes it was a maidservant or an old woman of the same village (Bina alias Shaharia Devi, Hari Dassi). It is noteworthy that these women were acquainted with the family and visited the home of the younger woman.

Thus, while the dominant discourse

treated prostitution as the diametrical opposite of marriage, with the former threatening the latter, the two institutions in fact functioned often in a complementary manner, the one feeding into the other. When it appeared to the public that prostitution was threatening family life, it was often because a male member of the woman’s family projected himself as an aggrieved party whose rights were being affected by the removal of the woman from his custody. Thus, when an abduction case was registered, it was usually by a man of the family, her father, brother or husband, and her own volition was, denied, for it was often a case of an elopement with a man seen as unsuitable (a Muslim, a servant or a cousin).

Thus, whether in prostitution or in the family, the woman, in the dominant discourse, was and continues to be rarely

Name	Age at which married	Age at which widowed/ separated	Age at which began prostitution
1. Lakhmani	14	18	18
2. Lebangalata	0	not mentioned	not mentioned
3. Menkbala	8	..	..
4. Sakrabala	9	..	..
5. Matangini	7	..	..
6. Amitabala	13	..	..
7. Usabala	7	Between 12 and 16	..
8. Ranibala	7	..	..
9. Lilabati	7	..	..
10. Lakhimani	7	..	..
11. Anantabala	7	..	..
12. Motibala	9	15	15
13. Surabala	6	25	30
14. Mohinibala	9	12	not given
15. Kalidassi	7	16	25
16. Ranibala	13	not given	not given
17. Shahana	5	8	..
18. Gouribala	10	14	16
19. Patitbala	3	not given	16
20. Haridassi	5	..	16/17
21. Binapani	11	12	18
22. Kalidassi	7/8	20	22
23. Ashalata Dassi	10	15	not given
24. Nandarani	6/7	9	..
25. Giribaladassi	7	14	..
26. Nanibala	6	7	15/16
27. Kironbala	7	13	20
28. Pamabala	9	12	not given
29. Prabhavati	7	17	23
30. Ashalata (Sonagachi)	7	8/9	18
31. Ranibala (Grey St rt.)	9	12	15
32. Sonabaladassi	13	17	18

seen as an agent, a subject, but usually as an object who must be rescued, bullied, reformed, or otherwise acted upon by authorities, including governmental and familial authorities.

### Unfit Mothers?

There was another set of assumptions that was at the core of the kind of legislation enacted to “rescue” and “rehabilitate” “girls” from the brothels. These assumptions were about the world inside the brothel. One of them was regarding prostitutes’ relationship to their children. It was (and still is) assumed that prostitutes were by definition unfit mothers and would be out to exploit their daughters by putting them into the trade. In 1914, Babu Jagdish Chandra Sen said: “It is a notorious fact that the chief business of (these) old or infirm prostitutes is to recruit girls for prostitution or concubinage”.<sup>12</sup> W.J. Clifford, secretary to SPCI also said, 30 July 1914: “It is a well known fact that prostitute mothers in this country almost invariably train their children for the lives they themselves lead; so that to make any sentimental concession to them is to consign a number of children to a life of shame and infamy. . .”<sup>13</sup>

However, of the 50 women whose statements were recorded by the Calcutta police, only six (12 percent) were daughters of prostitutes. Of these, five said their mothers had tried to ensure that the daughter did not take up the same profession as herself. Pushpalata Dasi said her mother “tried to have her admitted in a Calcutta school” but in view of the immoral past of the mother the authorities declined to admit her. Her mother then engaged a private tutor for her, who, promising to marry her, eloped with her. Ashalata, daughter of a prostitute, Sarojini Dassi, said that her mother had tried to ensure a good life for her by marrying her to the son of another prostitute and paying a dowry of Rs 500. But when Ashalata was tortured by her husband, Sarojini brought her away and

kept her in a “house in Cornwallis Street in a respectable locality” and had her admitted in a day school. Later, she enrolled Asha at Sarju Sadan for learning some work. But Asha came back to her mother as the “lives of prostitutes attracted me.”

Bimanbala Dassi, who was also born of a prostitute, was educated in primary school, and said: “My mother tried to give me in marriage but I refused as I did not like to curtail my freedom by marriage.” Sarojini Dassi, herself the daughter of a prostitute and mother of two (Asha and another) had also studied

in primary school but preferred the environment of the brothel. She tried to restrain her daughters but they refused. Her only pride was: “I do not take their earning but I generally help them with money,”

Yet, the Society for the Protection of Children in India (SPCI) had consistently demanded the removal of children from the custody of prostitute mothers, through the whole of the first half of the twentieth century, on the grounds that the mothers conducted illegitimate trade in children.



## Child Prostitution

Perhaps child prostitution did exist, but there was a conceptual confusion in the authorities' projection of it. The child prostitutes were not necessarily the daughters of prostitutes. They were often illegitimate children sold in their infancy by their mothers.

The SPCI tended to confuse this trade with the idea that prostitute mothers brought up their own daughters with the sole view of channelling them into prostitution.

The sale of illegitimate children was apparently current. In one instance, a woman had offered to give away her illegitimate daughter, aged three months, to the SPCI, but when the SPCI informed her that the child would be put in a "home" she declined to part with the infant unless paid for it, as "she could get money for it elsewhere." One girl had been sold for Rs25; another had been brought for Rs 24 as a wife for an aged woman's son; yet another woman who had been deserted by her husband just before she gave birth to a daughter had been offered Rs 33 for the infant; and yet another girl found by the SPCI had been sold for Rs 12 and had refused the SPCI's "help" because she said the woman she was sold to was "kind" to her.<sup>14</sup>

Andrew Fraser, the lieutenant governor of Bengal in 1906, had taken the SPCI's allegations seriously enough to appoint a committee to enquire into the numbers of children in the custody of prostitutes. In 1908, the committee had reported that in Calcutta, there were 1042 girls under the age of 14, living in brothels, of whom only 140 were not living with their mothers or near relatives, that is, under lawful guardianship.

But the committee also recognised that these children had been sold by indigent parents and guardians, who were not interested in instituting a prosecution or giving information to the police. It would appear that the prostitutes, instead of initiating the sale



of children, or abducting them, were possibly the buyers in a market initiated by the parents and guardians, especially women with girl children born outside of marriage.

As in time of famine, witness the famine of 1942-43 in Bengal, so in "shame", the prostitutes buying the children may well have saved the lives of these infant girls.

Furthermore, no SPCI memorial from these years shows any effort to save girl children from marriage and sexual initiation at a very young age. Looking at the data from the 1935 survey, (see Box on p.30) we find that of the 50 women, the lowest age of marriage was three years, the highest 14, with the average age being about seven.

Prostitution of the daughter by the mother may not have been unknown, as the case of a 10 year old girl called Giribala suggests. She had been married at the age of four, widowed at seven and was found in the voluntary Venereal Hospital, Bhowanipore, suffering from syphilis, aggravated by bubo. Her mother, Prio, had left her home in Midnapore, with a woman called Horo. Upon arriving in Calcutta, she had gone to Kailashi

Bariwalli of Jaunbazar Street, where she lived as a prostitute. Giribala, the mother said, was an illegitimate child, and her father had died.<sup>15</sup>

What my main source suggests, however, is that better off prostitute mothers made efforts to get their daughters married, and educated, and that the channelling of daughters into prostitution was a function both of poverty and of prevalent prejudices against such children, rather than of prostitutes' inherent unfitness as mothers or callousness towards their children.

## Police Not Protectors

While being ever ready to blame the women, very few people pointed to the role played by the local level police in prostitution, although plenty of evidence is available for it. This evidence did not lead reformers to as vociferously demand safeguards for prostitutes against police. The SITA in fact works to give police great powers over prostitutes' lives.

In 1906, the commissioner of police, F.L. Halliday, wrote to the director of the CID, Simla, about the police in Watgunge (south Calcutta) who had been "extracting money from prostitutes as a money bribe or fee and also festival tips."<sup>16</sup> Two constables, S.M. Singh and Bhandhu Khan, particularly, were named as having aided and abetted Kariman, a prostitute in the keeping of S.M. Singh, in forcing a widow of 18 and another girl, much younger, into prostitution at Kariman's brothel in that area.

Nor was such dereliction of duty limited to "native police." A case from Dacca, around 1926, shows the various stages of a prostitute's progress. On 14 July 1926, one Ekim Ali lodged an information at Sutrapur police station that his wife had run away from home on the night of July 13 and he did not know where she had gone. His wife, Jahanara Bibi, along with another Halumenessa, used to work in the house of Khan Bahadur Juhural Haq. But they were ill

treated there and so arranged to leave at night for Serajdhikan, where “Helumenessa used to be a prostitute.” On their way, they met two constables who, finding them wandering about at a late hour of the night, decided to take them to the police station. They were proceeding there when Sergeants Cooper and Simpson intercepted them, sent the two constables on their rounds, and proceeded to take the two women on to Gandaria where the sergeants lived. The two women were sexually used in those quarters and were sent on their way at dawn. We do not know whether they were paid anything for their sexual services but we do know from a comment on the back of that file that “the head constable secured them free accommodation in a motor bus. .. (they neither) resisted nor took any action.. to seek redress. . .”<sup>17</sup>

### Organisation of the Trade

Apart from the police, the potential prostitute also had to establish some relationship with a *bariwalla* or *bariwalli*, the organisers of the trade. In 1918, one such organiser in Bombay murdered a prostitute, Akootai, which made the government of India ask local governments to investigate into the conditions prevailing in their respective presidencies.

In Bengal, the Rev. Herbert Anderson wrote to the commissioner of police, Calcutta, that it was mostly the middling sort of prostitute who was employed by a *bariwalla/walli*: “The mistresses are often old and have much experience. One woman in Sovabazar Street has purchased her house, a large two storey residence with accommodation for 10 women each with a small room for herself, after five years’ tenancy, and has now owned it for three years. Another woman not far away, a lessee herself, of a house with eight rooms, had been in residence for 40 years. In such cases they become well known, and have no difficulty in recruiting the women they want or in supplying other brothels.”<sup>18</sup>



In cases where prostitutes were engaged by a mistress, Anderson found “the usual arrangement is stated to be that half takings are kept by the girl and half are given to the mistress.” Some clients paid directly to the prostitute.

Though very little is known about earnings, the 1935 survey gives some idea, from testimonies of the seven women who stated their earnings. (see Box).

The lowest earning prostitute in this survey earned four times, as much as a jute factory worker of the same period. We cannot, however, as stated earlier, treat the sample as representative of all

prostitutes in Calcutta at the time.

According to the author of *Rater Kolkata* (Calcutta Nights), prostitutes could be classified according to the type of tenements in which they lived and the kind of customers they dealt with. Within Calcutta, there were:

- a) those who lived in dark, filthy one storeyed houses with roofs made of indigenous tiles, whose clients were mainly porters and men of the lowest socioeconomic status;
- b) those who lived in two storeyed mud built houses, dealing with small businessmen and shopkeepers and artisans;
- c) those who lived in brickbuilt houses and had lesser men in service as clients;
- d) the *bariwallis*.<sup>19</sup>

This hierarchy appears to reflect the hierarchy of the other world, the world of the government officials, *babus*, and workers. In the 1935 survey, six out of 50 stated their middle class origins and education: Lakhmani Dassi, educated till 14 at school; Pushpalata Dassi, whose mother tried to admit her to school and failed; Lebangalata who was the daughter of a famous Bengali actor and went on to acquire property and respectability; Ranibala, daughter of a jute merchant of Calcutta; Mohinibala, from a middle class family; Bina alias Shahana Devi, daughter of Rudra Narayan Mukherjee (Brahman) who had some landed property in Murshidabad;

### Reported Earnings

Sonabala Dassi	Casual visitors	Rs 200 a month
Sarojini Dassi (42 years)	Dancer, musician and keep of rich man	owned three storeyed building
Sarojini daughter, Bimanbala Dassi (26 years)	Dancer, musician and prostitute	Rs 100 a month (“spend my earnings on myself on my food, and luxury”.)
Sarojini’s daughter, Ashalata Dassi (23 years)	Prostitute	Rs 80 a month
Ranibala Dassi	Casual visitors only	Rs 65 a month
Prababati Dassi		Rs 75 a month
Pannabala Dassi	Prostitute with her mother	Rs 60 a month



Prabhabati Dassi whose father was a contractor in Calcutta, “a respectable family.”

Larger numbers (16 out of 50) were lower middle class - Patitbala Dassi's father was a grocer in a village of Hooghly district; Hari Dassi alias Sarama Bala's father, Behari Lall Biswas, was a goods clerk in the E.B. Railway; Binapani Dassi's father, Ramesh Chand Ghosh, had a stationery shop at Bowbazar and lived in a rented house; Chugni Theterin's father was a utensil maker in Bikaner; Kali Dassi had been the widow of a grinder of oil seeds; Nani Bala was the widow of a cultivator; Kironbala Dassi also described her father's profession as that of a cultivator in Hooghly district; Ranibala Dassi was the widow of a carpenter. None stated that they had come from absolutely destitute families.

### **Destitution Result of Familial Oppression**

The larger common factor in all these women's backgrounds seems to be their emotional uprootedness before their entering “the life.” Given that they had virtually no education and very little resources to make a living, being orphaned, widowed, oppressed within, and estranged from, the family might have pushed them into destitution. Pushpalata Dassi lost her father when she was nine and at 12 she was brought to Calcutta by a mother who had been abandoned by her lover. Surabala was widowed at 25, stayed as the mistress of the landlord for another five years, and only entered a brothel after his death. Kali Dassi left her husband at 16, and stayed with her father till 25. Only on her father's death, left without “any means of support”, did she enter a brothel.

Bina's parents had died in her infancy and she did not even know who gave her in marriage when she was five. Gouribala had lost not just her parents but also a father-in-law and a husband before she started working as a maid-servant. Ashalata Dassi lost her husband at 15, her mother shortly after,



and having failed to get her living in the village, left for Calcutta with a man who had approached her “often with immoral proposals.” Kamalabala Dassi, widowed at 12, orphaned at 15, left Midnapore for Calcutta. Thus, contrary to the popular stereotype of prostitutes being lured by exploitative upper class men, it is clear that most “first times” were with men of their own social group - a cousin, a neighbour, a private tutor.

Prostitution being one of the few avenues of employment available to women, in Calcutta, they were recruited into it as men were recruited into many other areas of employment. Thus, the path to prostitution for these women was a long one with many halts. The journey normally began in a village in Bengal and ended many years later in one of the brothels of Calcutta. In fact the regional distribution patterns also seem to suggest that the existence of Calcutta as a major source of employment acted as a magnet for the surrounding areas, in the case of this trade as in the case of many

others. Let us look at the districts and villages mentioned in the testimonies (see Box on p.38).

Apart from the last four, the rest are districts of western Bengal, known for a greater degree of urbanisation than east Bengal. This is not to suggest that east Bengal did not have any prostitution. Other sorts of evidence suggest that possibly Dhaka acted as a centre for east Bengal, though I have no evidence from the Dhaka archives to confirm this. It is interesting that of the 50 prostitutes in the survey, some came from as far afield as Bikaner, Benares and Cuttack but none from east Bengal. It was natural that prostitutes should be found in the great city Calcutta which had factories, offices, schools, colleges, shops, rich householders, both Indian and foreign.

### **Treated with Contempt**

Calcutta had seen numerous attempts at abolition, regulation and control of brothels, “disorderly houses”, traffic in women, solicitation, from 1905 on, especially in the 1920s. There were

Name	Village	District
Bina	Pastuli	Murshidabad
Kiranbala	Kadoganj	Hooghly
Gouribala	Singul Gopalnagar	Hooghly
Patitbala	Khanakul Kristnagar	Hooghly
Sonabala Dassi	Naogaon	Bankura
Haridassi	Munshiganj	Kustia dist. Nadia
Kalidassi	Shamchandpur	Nadia
Nanibala	Mankar	Burdwan
Ashalata	Katoa	Burdwan
Kamalabala	Ramjivanpore	Midnapore
Nandarani	Badha Cuttolla	24 Parganas
Giribala Dassi	Kolaghat	Midnapore
Chugni	Bikaner	
Ramdulari	Champaran	
Bimala	Benares	
Labanya and Chuni	Cuttack	

lawful husbands. Amitabala Datta had indeed saved enough to pay for her sister's education. But the unwillingness seems not to have been a function of earnings at all; even those engaged in "low class brothels" in Calcutta, did "not appear to have any aspirations towards leading a different kind of life". Chugni Theterin and Kali Dassi stated that they preferred a prostitute's life, as did the daughters of prostitutes, already mentioned.

### Conclusion

What emerges from the brief study is the close nexus between the oppression of women within the family, the lack of alternatives available to

significant attempts to legislate on different aspects of prostitution: the Children's Act of 1921 tried to make "rescue" of children from brothels easier, the SITA of 1923 tried to penalise those procuring or supplying prostitutes. But there were hardly any attempt to penalise customers.

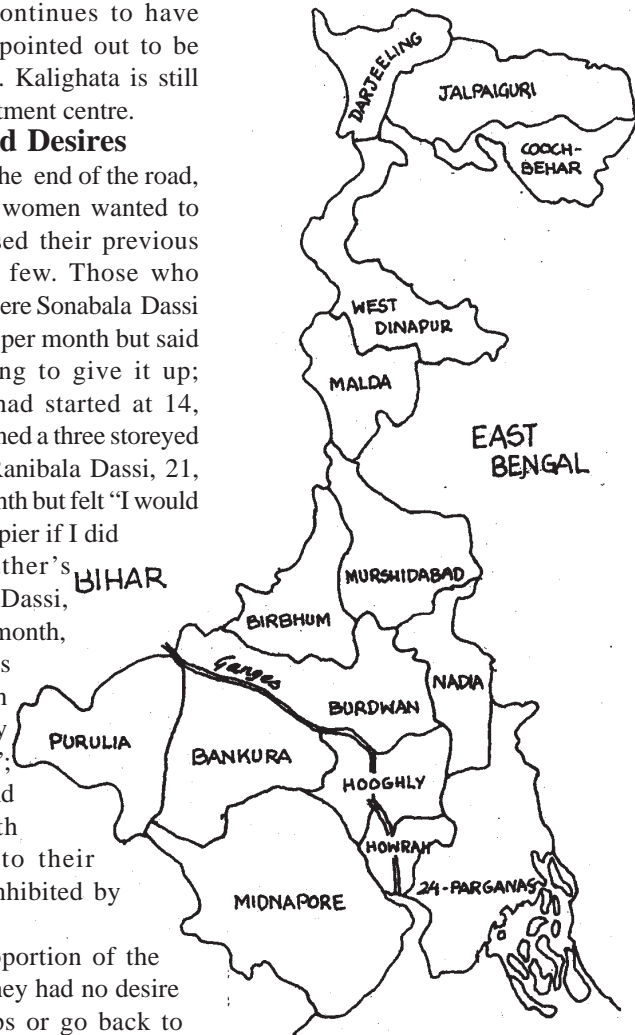
The attempts to get rid of prostitutes from the urban centre often had economic reasons cloaked as moral reasons. In Calcutta, the Calcutta Improvement Trust was set up in 1911. This heralded expansion of roads and tramways which drove up the value of real estate. Certain streets had been declared "main thoroughfares" which made Indian businessmen and shopkeepers very aware of the commercial value of houses located there. Numerous petitions to the police proliferated at this time, specifying particular streets as in need of "cleaning up"-College Street, Cornwallis Street, Lower Circular Road, Sorabazar Street, were mentioned regularly. These streets lay in the centre of the city, along the axis of urban expansion. Thus, if in 1935, complaints could be heard from Barabazar Marwaris, about brothels from which they were "previously immune",<sup>20</sup> it was as much an indicator of changes in the city as it was of the attempt to spatially marginalise the prostitute. The

attempt was not successful, as we know. Central Calcutta continues to have pockets which are pointed out to be prostitutes' quarters. Kalighata is still notorious as a recruitment centre.

### Regrets and Desires

Having reached the end of the road, how many of these women wanted to turn back? Or missed their previous lifestyles? Quite a few. Those who regretted their lives were Sonabala Dassi who earned Rs 200 per month but said she could be willing to give it up; Sarojini, 42, who had started at 14, stopped at 37 and owned a three storeyed house at the end; Ranibala Dassi, 21, earning Rs 65 per month but felt "I would have been much happier if I did not leave my father's house"; Prabhathi Dassi, 30, earned Rs 75 a month, but said she was "compelled to remain as I am as my society will not take me back"; Giribala Dassi, 26, and Nandarani, 25, both willing to return to their husbands but felt inhibited by social restrictions.

But a larger proportion of the women stated that they had no desire to retrace their steps or go back to



women in society and in prostitution. The extremely young age at which the women in this survey were married, the young age at which they were thrown out of the family in one way or another and the fact that most of them entered prostitution as young adults suggests that the oppression within the family was a major factor in determining their lives.

### Notes and references

1. See Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1793-1905*. (Vikas, 1979)
2. Judith R. Walkowitz, *Prostitution and Victorian Society: Women, Class, and the State*. (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1980)
3. Partha Chatterjee, Uma Chakravarti, Sumanta Banerjee, Nirmala Banerjee, in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid ed, *Recasting women: Essays in Colonial History*, (Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1989)
4. Government of Bengal (GOB), Home (Police) File No. P. 2A-22, 17 of 1912.
5. GOB, Home (Police), F. No. P 2A-22, 11 of 1912. No. 1169J, 24 July 1914. From CA. Radice, Officiating Commissioner of Rajshahi to chief secretary, Government of Bengal.
6. My research, however, suggests that such abduction was more a hysterical exaggeration by communalists than a reality, and that the cases projected as abduction were often voluntary elopements by Hindu girls with Muslim lovers.
7. GOB, Home (Police) F.No. P. 31-1 Progs. 21-22. April 1930. Letter of H.S.E. Stevens, 11.1.1930.
8. GOB, Home (Police) F.No. P. 3R-31. Progs. B 234-238. October 1935.
9. Ibid
10. Since the word "Dassi" (female slave) is attached to most of the women's names, it would seem that it was not part of their given names, but more of a trade name, characterising them as prostitutes. "Theterin" is a corruption from "Theatre", again a trade name.
11. All references to the lives of any of the 50 women surveyed are drawn from their testimonies although the phraseology often suggests the intervention of the transcriber and translator.
12. GOB, Home (Political) Confidential, F. No. P. 2A-4, 1914.
13. Ibid.
14. GOB, Home (Political) Confidential, F. No. 122(1-4)/1907, Memorial of Evidence for the years 1903-1907, submitted by J.G. Bell, Secretary to SPCI
15. Ibid.
16. GOB, Home (Political) Confidential, F.No. 56 (1-12)/1908, D.O. No. 311C, dated Calcutta. 12 June, 1906.
17. GOB, Home (Police) F.No. P15P -19 of 1926. Progs. B. 267. January 1927.
18. GOB, Political (Police) F.No. 14B - 3 of 1917 Progs. B 14-19, July 1918.
19. Quoted in B.P. Joardar, *Prostitution in Bengal*, (FirmaKLM, Calcutta, 1970).
20. GOB, Home (Police) F.No. P. 10 C -1 Progs. B 264-65, January 1935.