

Caste and Prostitution in India: Politics of Shame and of Exclusion

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Abstract

The act of prostitution has existed in India since centuries have undergone change within its nature, intensity and issues concerning it. Once, socio – culturally sanctified prostitution is now have been reconstructed and represented through language as a matter of undignified profession eventually marginalizes ‘women in sex work’ from all Public Spaces. The power of culture and language of social morality instrumentalizes the body of women which eventually denies them their most basic human rights on the pretext of being indulged in Shameful activity. Shame constructed through social morality has instrumentality to make women in sex work subservient to the desires of Men. Caste is one of the determining factor when it comes to Ritualized prostitution. Even though ritualized prostitution is illegal it is still prevalent. Caste-system as essentially being exclusionary tends to impose prostitution which is socially considered as ‘Shameful’ on lower caste groups (as in the case of Jogins of Andhra Pradesh) in such a manner that it eventually reinforces the dominance of cultural traditions of which caste system is a part. Many lower caste communities are forced to be in this profession in the name of traditional culture (Like Nats in Rajasthan). The forms of Ritualized prostitution in India in case of Devadasi/Jogins and caste based prostitution reinforces societal moralities on these women in such a manner that it alters their perception about their own SELF as someone indulged in immoral/shameful practice. Therefore, need is to deconstruct the language of ‘shame’ and exclusion and how it institutionalizes the caste hierarchies and gendered power relations in a manner that helps in sustenance of caste based cultural practices.

Keywords: Immoral; Victimization; Mrginalization; Patriarchy; Morals; Caste-system

Changing Forms and Realities: An Introduction

Prostitution in simple terms means ‘selling sexual services for material/commercial/economic gains. This profession has existed in India since many ages. The ancient roots of it may be found in many historical accounts of Buddhist literature, Kautilyan Arthashastra, Vedas, Puranas, Mahabhartta etc. The Purana states that very sight of prostitutes brings good luck. The women prostitutes in those times were classified into three categories, namely, Kumbhadasis, Rupajivikas and Ganikas. The act had religious and cultural sanction and these women enjoyed considerable respect within social hierarchy as the courtesans of king. Shailendra Nath writes in *Ancient Indian History* (1999) “courtesans or prostitutes (in mauryan period) enjoyed a social status not accorded to them anywhere in the world” [1]. There was no such intimate link between caste and prostitution. No Hindu religious text associates the act of prostitution with caste hierarchies.

Prostitution in ancient India was largely regulated by state institutions and not considered as an act having loss of dignity but a profession that was adjusted with the social institutions in an otherwise male dominated society. Abdur Razzak, the Persian ambassador to prosperous kingdom of Vijaynagar wrote in 1443: “Prostitution was permitted, regulated and turned into royal revenue”. In medieval India, inspite of the fact that most of Mughal ruler did not like the act but though regulated it through institutions and the women enjoyed a status within society as being a part of the society at large. The Oxford history of India says: “Akbar greatest of the moguls had nothing like it and yet it may be doubted if any of the ancient Greek city were better organized it”.

Devdasi (handmaiden of God) system of dedicating unmarried young girls to Gods in Hindu Temples, which often made them objects of sexual pleasure to temple priests and pilgrims, was an established custom in India in 300AD. There are reasonably good records of Prostitution in large Indian cities in different times from ancient to medieval and British colonial India; prostitution was not considered as a degrading profession in that period as it was in the second – half of the 19th century. Beginning in the 1850s, perceptions regarding the morality of prostitution changed, leading to an increased criminalization of the practice [2]. Simultaneously British saw prostitution as an evil necessary to satiate the “natural sexual- desire” of their troops and sought to control the practice by ordering that Indian women be available in the cantonments for soldiers, thus giving birth to Brothel-system and Red Light Area districts in urban Indian society.

With the changing political economy of colonial India, these different groups of women lost their customary rights and privileges – such as inheritance rights or spaces to perform at elite gatherings –and were increasingly pushed to engage only in sexual labour for which they came to be condemned. The state sought to homogenize the category of prostitute by branding many women operating outside the marital framework –such as courtesans or devdasis or popular cultural performers –as immoral and as prostitutes, so that these women could be made available for the white soldiers and could be directly regulated for curbing the spread of venereal disease among soldiers. The highlighting of the immoral practices among the colonizers would mark the natives as licentious, barbaric and backward, and consequently legitimize colonial rule. From this emerged legal measures and social campaigns attempting to regulate and eliminate ‘immoral’ practices such as devdasis. However, the inclusion of devdasis and courtesans in the category of prostitutes came to be

opposed by the nationalists in the name of culture as autonomous domain. This act, however, was not a benevolent nationalist act but an act that sought to preserve and promote the caste system and its practices.

But one of the fundamental question which needs to be asked is when and why caste became a determining feature for women to choose this profession. Perhaps, the situation changed with the colonial encounter and with weakening of the feudal power-relations. It was because of resistance from the lower caste communities and the modern ideas challenging the legitimacy of caste system which compelled the feudal elites and upper caste people to (re)construct such a tradition of caste based prostitution. In a way, this caste based prostitution can instrumentally be used against the Dalits.

Caste and forced prostitution: A case of Nat community

Caste as a principle determinant of the forced prostitution is most visible in case of Nat communities, Bedia and Bachra tribes of North India. Nat community, the lowest in the traditional caste system were associated with the acts of performing folk arts. During the Monarchy days the women of this caste assumed the role of entertainers. But with the colonial encounter and subsequent weakening of the feudal empire these communities lost their traditional feudal patrons. In some regions, the women of these communities had to accept the prostitution as their profession since they belonged to the lower caste communities lacking opportunities at that time. Brahmins and upper caste lords saw this as an opportunity to do counter-revolution in order to strengthen their hold on the lower caste communities. The social morality of Shame which is attached to this profession was an instrument for the continuation of the culture of caste system. Women of nat community chose it in struggle for livelihood eventually compelled to practice an intergenerational profession because women of these caste do not get opportunity to get out of it. [3].

In Punjab Nat claim to be by origin of Brahmin of Marwar, whose duty was supply of funeral pyres, on a particular occasion, as the community was transporting the funeral pyre, a member of the party died. This was seen as a bad omen, and the communities were outcasts. They therefore, took the occupation of dancing. Not very surprisingly, the Nat who claim to be by origin of Brahmin still don't practice intergenerational prostitution. This shows the entrenchment of caste hierarchies.

Interestingly, it was not only in the expediency of the caste system but British colonial rule also wanted this to be continued. Whatever they may say about modern ideals at surface level, British government too was not interested as such to abolish such practice. However, colonial rule outlawed devdasi system but did not ensure its implementation. British colonial rule wanted some prostitutes to satiate the sexual desire of their army personnel and they knew it well that upper caste women would not take up to this profession. Therefore, these kinds of traditions perpetuated and forced prostitution became a need of British rule. This attitude of colonial rule transformed this tradition into one of organized/intergenerational prostitution.

Caste and forced prostitution: A study of Bedia tribes

While India's loathing of daughters leads to more than a million female feticides each year, and the killing of thousands of new born girls, the Bediais are one community that wants girls. But do they want girls because they have a sense of equality? Certainly not.

When a woman is pregnant, the family hopes it will be a girl. Not a boy.

What makes the Bedia's stance on girls different from that of the rest of India?

It is their old tradition of inducting their daughters into sex-work.

For long, women have served as the lifeline of the Bedia community. There is a ceremonial initiation of girls soon after puberty in a ritual called 'Nath Utrai'. Because of the normalcy of this practice, it is not viewed as "prostitution," but as a time-honored tradition [4].

The Bedia women who get married may discontinue the work. However that would mean a loss of revenue for the family and community. Probably to discourage that, the norm has been for Bedia men to pay a large bride-price for a Bedia bride. Hence, Bedia men usually marry women from outside communities.

Prior to India's independence the Bedia women would serve wealthy land-owners and feudal lords, and be handsomely rewarded with cash and jewelry. Anuja Agarwal, author of *Chaste Wives, and Prostitute Sisters: Patriarchy and Prostitution among the Bediais*, who has spent much time getting to know the Bedia, says that many migrate to cities and urban red-light districts in search of work, and can have very high earnings, up to Rs.30,000/- a month (60 times India's poverty level income).

Caste and ritualized prostitution

Devdasi is an established practice in South India where a girl is dedicated to serve the god at the very early age. Originally, these women were associated with the singing and dancing, however, with the disintegration of feudal empire they lost their traditional patrons. This made them vulnerable and they were forced to indulge in the prostitution. Traditionally, they enjoyed high social status as being servant of God; however, with the change in social moralities and social conditions these women too were stigmatized and marginalized.

Devdasi tradition has been outlawed by the government but it is still prevalent in many parts of India with different names and manifestations. One such is the Jogini tradition of Andhra Pradesh, which is the contemporary form of Devdasi. However, one of the distinctive feature of Jogini tradition is that by norm lower caste women can become a jogin which was not the norm in case of devdasi. Interestingly, jogsins tradition ensures the dominance of upper caste males. Eventually, reinforces the caste hierarchies. Once the women of lower caste become jogin she has to do sexual intercourse not only with the upper caste males but with the males of their own community. These women lose belongingness from particular community and even the lower caste males of their own community sexually exploit jogsins. This creates the identical interest between lower caste males and upper caste males and they want this system to prevail. This shows the interface of caste hierarchies and gendered discrimination.

Politics of Shame and of Exclusion

The cultural values and norms of society produce marginalization sometimes directly and reproduce marginalization indirectly through 'victimization'. The cultural codes generated through structures of patriarchy reinforces particular norms for women and thus, creates gender essentialism which subtly but strongly influences the perception of these women about their own SELF. These women in prostitution therefore perceive themselves to be indulged in some sort

of immoral practice which they might not think wrong in their individual judgment. But socially constructed meaning to this act robs off their own construction of SELF and reduces them to be a victim. Eventually, cultural codes regulates and controls the body and sexuality of the women. There are multiple forms of marginalities attached to it where social marginalization and victimization also reinforces political marginalization as well because these women are driven out of the Public Space.

It is stated earlier that the association of prostitution with the religion has been the age old phenomenon, so in many parts of the country we can find the female dancers and singers attached to temples are generally referred to by the term 'Devdasi, which literally means: 'female slaves of the deity. The cult of dedicating girls to temple is prevailing all over India in different forms and names, such as Devdasi in Karnataka state, Maharis in Kerala state, Natis in Assam state and so on. As centuries passed, their services shifted from gods to earthly lords. Also, rural child prostitution is rooted in the continued exploitation of the scheduled castes and the position of girls is the most oppressed within these historically oppressed groups (Shankar 1990). Many a times young girls of low caste, even before the onset of puberty are singled out by the rich or powerful people of the community or by parents themselves.

This is how cultural norms exploits and subjugates women and creates multiple marginalizations when it exploits women of low caste because they are most vulnerable to be exploited easily. The lower caste girls are earmarked to join this profession sometimes through some constructed ritual and sometimes through social force. Perhaps I have a poor understanding of a different community's traditions but I ask, whose tradition is this? Is it an individual girl's tradition? What about culture- who made the culture? To whose advantage and disadvantage is it? I feel as though many practices are conveniently played off as "cultural," thus assigning some sort of reason for why they exist when our intuition tells us otherwise.

The act certainly has implication for the caste system. The act in Indian society is considered to be shameful act which subsequently mean that the one who would indulge in it would be marginalized and excluded because of the shame and stigma attached to it. Why has been the case that lower caste women be inducted into this kind of culture. The logic is simple, caste hierarchies and power-relations debar the upper caste to practice such a degrading profession and it is because of their caste based world-view in which the women of upper caste is nurtured. Why this tradition is prevalent amongst the lower caste communities? This practice of earmarking the profession for lower caste is a feature of caste system which creates room for brahmanic organization of culture in such a way that lower caste automatically become excluded. The culture of shame in a way is a necessary element for the caste system. It is perhaps because this ensures the continuation of culture of caste system and hierarchies. Caste system's ideological foundation rest on purity/impurity which means impure works are to be performed by those who are lower in caste category. This closed system considers the act of prostitution outside traditional brahmanic norms of marriage was attached with lower caste and therefore became shameful and vice-versa.

Thousands of Dalit girls are forced into prostitution every year. The link between caste and forced prostitution is apparent in the Devdasi and Jogini systems practiced in India. In India, the Devdasi and Jogini systems are a form of religiously sanctioned sexual abuse. Originally a sacred, religious practice, the Devdasi dedication of girls to temples has turned into a systematic abuse of young Dalit girls serving as

prostitutes for dominant caste community members [5]. Most girls and women in India's urban brothels come from Dalit, lower-caste, tribal, or minority communities. In 2007, Anti-Slavery International published a study on the practice of ritual sexual slavery or forced religious 'marriage'. It found that 93% of Devdasi were from Scheduled Castes and tribes.

Ravinder Kumar, an unemployed graduate, says, "The moment they (employers) see the Bedia name, they set aside our job applications." Kumar says no person from the village has been able to get a job with the Rajasthan government. Bedia children are taunted and discriminated against in schools.

Resistance to the shame and exclusion: voices from dalit movements

Some of the international bodies like Human Rights Watch have also acknowledged prostitution as a form of oppressive caste-based labour, along with scavenging and bondage. However, this voice has the complication of leading to marginalization and stigmatization of particular castes, instead of highlighting its exploitative underpinnings.

A controversy had arisen over a UNICEF – supported study, which was conducted by Madhya Pradesh Human Rights Commission about caste-based prostitution. This study is seen to have degraded and stigmatized particular caste and their women. This has been challenged for the social contempt it breeds against the women of these castes making it impossible for them to lead respectable lives. Further, the study marks the men of these communities as essentially criminals and condemns them for forcing women into prostitution. The study noted that girls were forced into this profession by their own relative. This view tends to ignore the realities of caste system which reinforces its will on the lower caste women. These studies put the burden on the individual family and easily escape from the underlying cause of this act [6].

The caste tag has become an anathema for the young people of these caste communities. This creates the conditions in which one has to accept this profession even when they know the repercussions of it.

The Dalit movement argues that not only devdasi life bound within patriarchal framework, but the system was a caste-based one which allowed the high-caste men free and religiously sanctioned sexual access to the Dalit women which could not be mistaken for the freedom assigned to them as being sexually free. Significant movement to contend and resist this practice came from various Dalit movements. Dalit literatures, especially of Namdev dhasal's poetry and baburao bagul's stories have been centered on Mumbai's red light area, located in settlements of Dalit workers and labourers and have underlined the humiliation, exploitation and pain of the prostitute as symbolizing the caste oppression. The controversy over dhasal's *Golpitha* was significant in erupting Dalit movement.

Durgabai Bhagwat, a well-known Marathi literary, had reiterated the conventional patriarchal argument that the prostitutes should be respected for performing necessary function for society. This came to be vehemently attacked by Raja Dhale. Dhale commented that if the downtrodden were to be uplifted by giving them honor in this way, then why this occupation has not been taken up by Durgabai herself, thus hitting the caste underpinning of the prostitution [7].

The Dalit movement has articulated its critique and the challenge to prostitution as caste based exploitation. It recognizes that not only the majority of women in prostitution are located in lower-caste material

life and in poverty, but that prostitution was the sexual exploitation of the lower caste-women, and it served to destroy the self-respect of these castes, to subjugate them and keep them underprivileged. These movement thus correctly highlights that how lower-caste women were engaged in cultural and sexual labour for gratification of largely upper-caste men. Dr. Ambedkar saw prostitution and the devdasis practices as stigma to the caste and appealed to these women to leave their condemned life that degrades their social status and challenge the brahmanical norms (Pawar and Moon 1989).

A feminist critique to Dalit interpretation

Interestingly, the non-brahman and Dalit movements are discredited not only for contributing to the decline of much-celebrated economic independence, cultural significance and sexual autonomy of the devdasis. The antagonism of men from the devdasi communities has been located in the internal divisions within the community in terms of family structures and performance traditions, and the men's envy for the fame, wealth and honor of devdasis (Srinivasan 1985).

Feminists argue that, Dalit interpretation have shown an important aspect of discrimination and exploitation. However, it oversimplifies a complex situation because the way Dalit thinkers say that these women should come out of the profession and live a life of self-respect is itself based on Brahmanic norms. They tend to impose the Brahmanic norms of normative married life in which women is supposed to be an object bearing Chastity. This creates a contradiction within the dalit discourse on prostitution. Had been the case that dalit women who were forced to be in this profession would have been accepted by their families then these women would not have to go into the brothels.

Conclusion

There exist an intimate relationship between caste, culture and prostitution that reinforces the structured and hierarchic power-relations which are the reflections of caste system in India. The logic of

poverty as being the primary driver for compelling woman to engage into this profession of prostitution is perhaps misplaced and half-baked truth. The poverty argument misses the link that Dalits are not Dalits because they poor but they are poor because they are Dalits. Quite visibly, caste forms the bedrock for the act of prostitution as the hard facts and cultural ways of subjugation points out this. Why is this so that majority of prostitutes are from lower-caste category, this is not merely accidental but schematic of caste system which excludes some from having equal opportunity and considers the lower caste as a category who must live their life according to normative Hindu way. The burden of Shame is put on those women in such a way that their feeling of belongingness to a community and perception about self-vanishes. This intimate link is one of the essential features of caste based power-relations. In order to understand the dynamics of cultural traditions that seek to dominate and subjugate women one must need to explore the link with caste system. Poverty is of course a reason, but not the principle reason as such.

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