

Brothel as a Space of Drink in Colonial Bengal: The Disorder and Reforms

Lab Mahato*

Submitted: 25.02.2024

Revised: 03.04.2024

Accepted: 15.06.2024

Abstract: *Prostitution and drunkenness are considered interrelated because prostitution is always used as a space for indulging in drinking liquor. However, from the earliest times, several pieces of evidence dealt with the topic of prostitutes in her old days involved in the liquor business. These practices were widespread during the late nineteenth century in colonial Bengal. However, such practices demoralised social values in both Indian and European society. But the Britishers never really paid heed to such things, and they promoted the practice of prostitution. The morality of Bengal was very much altered and shaped by the so-called superior culture of the Britishers. The British culture always promoted drinking. Such vices severely hampered the concept of morality in colonial Bengal. However, time and again, several social reformists protested against such implementations. But they failed to uproot the social evil in totality. It would be worthwhile to mention that the British government made no such attempt to close the brothels when sexually transmitted diseases were increasing among foreigners and the natives of our country. In place, they introduced several acts, which proved futile. Hence, the interaction with the British culture altered and created a new sense of morality in colonial Bengal.*

Key Words: *Brothels, Space, Sexual Diseases, Immorality, Drunkenness.*

*UGC Senior Research Fellow, University of Kalyani, West Bengal.
e-mail: labmahato23@gmail.com

Introduction:

The terms '*barangana*' and '*beshya*' were frequently used in Bengali texts of the nineteenth century to indicate the prostitute. Textually, it can be traced to the classical manuals on eroticism (Vatsyana's *Kamasutra*) and dramaturgy (Bharat's *Natyashastra*). The Indian prostitute was thus, by tradition, inseparably associated with professional entertainers, and the terms *nati*, *ganika* or *barangana* (considered synonymous in ancient India) generally indicated the accomplished courtesan. In India, prostitution started as early as its first-ever developed civilisation, *Harappa* and *Mohenjodaro*; several archaeological findings indicated the fact that they were aware of prostitution and they also practised such things. In several parts of India, from ancient times to the present, prostitution prevails. In Bengal, specifically, the Chandraketurah civilisation and several other port cities of Bengal traced the presence of prostitution. Hence, the practice and notion of prostitution in Bengal was a very age-old phenomenon. However, the number of brothels and prostitutes was limited to some extent and were found in limited places. However, the advent of colonial rule, particularly the development of the capital economy, triggered prostitution in Colonial Bengal. In the mid-19th century, around the 1830s, visit prostitution became a prominent aspect of '*Babus*' popular culture. The new culture was confined to going to brothels for sexual fun and drinking. Therefore, prostitution or brothels were always accompanied by drinking. It was found that there were two classes of prostitutes: high class and low class. The two kinds of prostitutes prevailed: professional entertainers, and there were slaves of a house satisfying their master's sexual desire. Thus, there was a difference between a common sex slave and a professional entertainer.¹

Increasing Number of Brothels linked with liquor Trafficking

It needed to be remembered that brothels in Europe were quite common, and prostitution was a legal practice in those nations. It was also present in the Indian culture. According to the Hindu and Muslim communities' religious practices, women were barred from drinking. Women could never drink; drinking was always considered and looked after as a male phenomenon. However, the modernity brought about by the Britishers to India encouraged Indian women to drink and live lives of their own. There were specific differences in practices regarding the pattern of drinking beverages. The affluent class preferred imported spirits, whereas the low-class prostitutes illegally trafficked the outstill drinks. Therefore, they used to drink cheap spirits. The growing drinking habits among the natives supplemented the flourishing of brothels as a private consumption space. The native entrepreneurs find scope within the prostitute business

and are involved in a new business. The other reason was that a prostitute or a brothel was considered wealthy. That's why having a prostitute or running a brothel was in fashion during the 1850's. Due to its business prospects, many Bengali *Babus* started running brothels.²

There were multiple motives for visiting brothels for entertainment. The new working culture at an external workspace diminished the social connections, which curtailed the fear of being outcasted. For fun making and satisfying their lust, a brothel was the only space left for the lower-earning persons. On the other hand, in a new time frame, the dimension of the working brothel was the only source to buy alcohol or wet their throat. Therefore, the importance of city life increased the demand for prostitution. The amusing patterns of the prostitutes created disorder in the surrounding areas. The protector of the Indian value systems objected to the changing culture or embracing adultery. Many satirical plays and poems were written to criticise the evil. One such play was '*Hadda Mojar Rabibar*', which discussed leisured in the brothel of Sonagachi in Calcutta. It argues,

*Dhnno Kolkata sohor dhnno rabibar
Dhnnya dhnnya Sonagaji dhnnya sova ter.
Bibider ghare nitto Mahotshab hoy.
Ki kobo tahar ghota kothoniya noy.*³

The colonial British government was well aware of the drinking issues, prostitution issues and the sexual diseases transmitted through such practices. However, the colonial government never really paid attention to such bohemianism. At this point, it needed to be mentioned that the Britishers also brought to India the concept of Barmaid to attract men for drinking. To attract clients by offering a glimpse of home in the empire and the opportunity to socialise with European women, hotel bars and upscale taverns in colonial cities began to employ European women behind bars in the second half of the nineteenth century. For a hotel bar in the late nineteenth century colonial Calcutta or Rangoon, having a European, and in particular, an English woman behind the bar became a selling point: an advertisement for the Grant Road Refreshment Room specified as one of its attractions, in addition to billiards and wines.⁴ But these places turned into a place of immoral activities.

The government concentrated on controlling the illegal trafficking of liquor. The government's experiments on excise matter were less fruitful in the cases of preventing drunkenness and for the point of enhancing revenue. Another matter of concern was introducing an outstill system, which dearer the price of alcohol. Therefore, among the prostitutes, the liquor purchasing capacity had increased. Now, all of a sudden, lower-class women also started drinking, which was very much influenced by the outstill

system. The Outstill system produced liquor at a very cheap price, which allowed the lower-class women to afford drinks for the very first time.⁵ Regarding the impact of the British culture in colonial Bengal, it could be said that their culture did not only influence the habit of drinking but also created professions such as barmaid and by profession prostitutes in a brothel. But in curious circumstances, there was confusion regarding race and culture among the British prostitutes and native prostitutes and also among British and native brothel-going men. The British prostitutes considered themselves superior to the native prostitutes because of being white. Native men also considered going to the British brothels, but it was only restricted to a few upper classes of Indian men. However, the Britishers had no such problems in going to an Indian brothel; instead, they were treated with much hospitality and compassion. The complexity of race and skin colour immensely impacted the cross-cultural relationship.

The Government adopted a three-year triennial settlement or license granted in Calcutta from 1905-08, which increased the revenue amount of Rs. 1,55,834 under the fixed fee system. The result was satisfactory, considering the number of licenses had been reduced from 724 to 708. It enabled a wealthy combination to enter the field and create a monopoly, which meant raising prices to a prohibitive extent and driving the consumers to resort to illicit practices or to indulge in more harmful drugs and intoxicants. On the other hand, when the price was not raised, there was a tendency for more trafficking from the prostitute houses. Therefore, the government was always in conflict over which system they preferred.⁶ On the other hand, with the enormous pressure from the social reformers and British philanthropists, the British government provided specific rules to safeguard its European subjects. But the questions on native subjects were neglected.

It must be mentioned that, after 1833, the Britishers started to realise their growing association with the natives. Hence, from 1833, Britishers were very much concerned about having Indian wives, as the presence of the number of white women increased in India. The growing outrages and mistreatment of British barmaids resulted in their exclusion from the bars. Though the number of English barmaids was relatively small, the chances of intimation were always high due to open space going of hotels.⁷ However, it was also a point that natives were barred from entering into the Britisher's bars. The Britishers avoided contact with the native Indians in such places. It was also found that in colonial Bengal, liquor bar was often accused of smuggling alcohol. The uncontrolled manner of production and sale of country spirit not only increased the rate of alcohol consumption but also increased acts of adultery and criminality. These European prostitutes were seen as an unwelcome aspect of city life because of their behaviour and promotion tactics. Compared to local sex workers, European

prostitutes displayed more incredible audacity and lack of inhibition. An English officer characterised their actions as a stagnant pool of loathsome vice, which was more shameful in its overt nature compared to the Indian vice zones. They caused disgrace to the imperial administrative morals. The government labelled Kalinga Bazaar as the epicentre of European immorality.⁸

Prostitution and Sexual Transmitted Diseases

Not only had the drunkenness that was triggered by the British government's rule but also the number of prostitutes and brothels increased by threefold amount. In this aspect, it must be mentioned that, before 1833, the English fortune seekers came to India and seldom brought their wives. Therefore, to fulfil their desire, they went to brothels. Hence, in several port cities of Bengal, brothels increased in number. And for the rich Bengali Babu, running brothels became a new source of profit. The Britishers were very fond of brothels, specifically the merchants and soldiers. With the arrival of the Britishers, the prostitution system in India went through a radical change. These people visited the Indian and European brothels regularly. But such an uncontrolled manner of prostitution was always wrought with dangers of sexually transmitted diseases such as syphilis, gonorrhoea, etc. Therefore, drinking and sexuality presented the most significant obstacles for the British administration. The British government began to pay attention to deadly diseases and implemented the Contagious Disease Act in 1864.⁹ The extension occurred in 1866 and 1869, followed by a repeal in 1886. The Acts were implemented to restrict 'common prostitutes' and decrease the spread of sexually transmitted diseases in the British army and navy. The Acts replicated systems previously established in nations like India and Greece. Initially, they were implemented in garrison towns and ports but later expanded to include other areas.

The Contagious Diseases Act mandated that women believed to be involved in prostitution must register with the police and undergo a thorough medical examination. Nevertheless, this practice also heightened the disparity and brutal acts against women in Colonial Bengal. The Act granted the police the authority to identify individuals engaged in prostitution. If the woman were discovered to have a venereal disease, she would be isolated in a 'lock hospital' until declared free of the ailment. The alternative to agreeing to the examination was three months' imprisonment (extended to 6 months in the 1869 Act) or hard labour.¹⁰ The Acts did not enforce the examination of men. The Act evoked outrage among the British public because it led to the unjust treatment of women. It was eventually repealed after an impressive grassroots movement led by Josephine Butler, who founded the Ladies' National Association to campaign against the implementation of the Act.

During the 1850's colonial Bengal, sexually transmitted diseases started to spread hurriedly. In most cases, it was the British soldiers among whom such sexually transmitted diseases spread fatally. According to a particular Government Report, the percentage of English soldiers getting infected with such diseases was 29 per cent in 1827 and 31 per cent in 1831, which increased to an all-time high of 70% in 1860.¹¹ The colonial government adopted several ways to control such diseases. Several acts were created to contaminate the diseases, but all such attempts proved useless. According to their Contagious Act, it was mandatory to medically check all the prostitutes of the cantonment and give them unique registration numbers for the same. The British officials also recruited women in those cantonments to look after such prostitutes, and in this way, discrimination against prostitutes would also decrease.¹² Even though the Britishers tried to get rid of such a disease, their attempt failed because the British soldiers would always go outside of the cantonment and regularly visit nearby brothels. Thus, such activities never allowed the opportunity to decrease the infection rate among the British soldiers. Even after such an increase in sexually transmitted diseases, the British government fired such soldiers by considering those affected soldiers as disabled but never really paid attention to closing those brothels.

Prostitution and the Question of Morality

Relationships between public women and prostitutes were of a peculiar kind. In India, there had been a prevalent notion about women of good morals and bad morals. There had been notions of superior and inferior women. Such kinds of atrocities and malicious, unjust division were seen primarily among the upper caste and lower caste women in India. The division of women in India was based on class and caste, and even there were divisions within the division. Hence, the relationship between lower-class women and upper-class or caste women was never strong, nor did they have a healthy social bond. Hence, it would be a straightforward guess to imagine the relationship the prostitutes had with other public women. The prostitute's appearance in public was always looked down upon by the so-called *Bhadrolok* (*Babu* class). Hence, public appearances of prostitutes were often considered an unwelcome event because prostitutes were always regarded as women of loose morals and would pollute the sanctity of a particular place. The images of prostitutes were also reflected in nineteenth-century Bengali texts. The projection of prostitutes was found to be on the side of moral decay.¹³ In nineteenth-century Bengali literature, there was a projection of two kinds of women: good women, known as '*patibrata stree*', and evil women, also known as women of loose morals or *beshya*.¹⁴ It could be said that prostitutes had been treated as outcasts and untouchables

amidst public gatherings.¹⁵ Hence, brothels were favoured and enjoyed by the upper-class elites, but they discarded the appearance of prostitutes in public gatherings. Such was the place of prostitutes in our society, and in Bengal also, prostitutes were considered outcasts and women of loose morals, and these women were not treated like any other women because of their profession. The more so troublesome was the Hindu religious mindedness, which outcasted women who drank and those women associated with brothels. In Bengal, such practices were even crueller, and prostitutes were barred from taking part in any social events or public gatherings.

Criminality and Social Vices

The introduction of the outstill system triggered the consumption of alcohol in Colonial Bengal, along with drunkenness. The number of brothels and prostitutes increased in colonial Bengal, influenced by the new capital economy. British colonialism and the advent of the capitalist economy in India led to significant changes, causing a drastic upheaval in the status of prostitutes. The colonial system created a new category of prostitutes, known as 'commercial sex workers', and established moral and legal limits that isolated them, along with their counterparts from the pre-colonial era, such as dancing girls and courtesans, from the rest of society. They were ostracised from society and officially labelled as felons by the government.¹⁶ British Government worried about the illegal trafficking of liquor, which decreased the income from abkari matters. Therefore, the Government needs better supervision of brothels merely for the exaction of fiscal demands. Hence, the Britishers impacted heavily upon the culture of Colonial Bengal and triggered the movement of cultural degradation. They were not only responsible for altering the culture of colonial Bengal in the nineteenth century; they were also responsible for the moral degradation of the society through drinking, prostitution and criminality. The increase of such phenomena not only affected domestic households and familial relationships but also impacted the socio-economic and political perspectives of those people associated with drinking and prostitution.

Drinking and prostitution have been the evils of our society since ancient times. If such aspects of our society were not controlled, then that particular society would be bound for degradation. The murder in a prostitute area was a day-to-day incident. One such case was committed at Chitpore on 21 September 1878. Tincowree, a prostitute who resided in Chitpore, was murdered that day, and her ornaments of Rs. 129 were stolen. The police arrested Otool Behari Mullick from Collotollah as a suspect, and his stolen ornaments were recollectd.¹⁷

In the 19th century, Bengal was perceived as undergoing significant changes compared to the rest of the country because of various progressive social reforms

aligned with Western civilisation standards. The Bengali Hindus viewed these improvements as specific accomplishments throughout their transition from *babu* to *bhadrolok*. Conservative Hindus opposed the revisions as anti-traditional, while liberals viewed them as entertaining. The participants in the debates were docile and obedient. Their voices were primarily perceived as reverberations of either group. One of the most notable Bengali writers, Kali Prasanna Singha, reacted against the prostitution system and tried his utmost to uproot such social evil from Bengal. Like him, many Bengali reformers also took notice of increasing drunkenness and prostitution and protested against the colonial government's policy.¹⁸ Numerous letters of requests and suggestions against the outstill system were sent to the colonial governments without fruitful results. The British government paid no such attention to stopping or decreasing the increasing prostitution or the drinking issue in colonial Bengal. However, the British government reformed excise systems but never to stop the expanding rate of prostitution or drunkenness but to ease the process of selling liquor and continuing the increasing rate of prostitution.

Conclusion:

Prostitution culture was fashionable through the practice of 'Babu' culture, whereas the Bengali elites and service class went to brothels for amusement. Tekchad Thakur, in his book *Mad Khaoa Boro Dai Jaat Thakar Ki Upay* for man's evil, blamed the lack of a recreation programme within the 'Antapura' or house compound. The Hindu orthodoxy did not allow singing and dancing within the domestic sphere. Singing and dancing strengthen the cordial relationship between the husband and wife. The English women, by singing, amused their husbands. In the context of the main protagonist of the story, Bhavani Babu and his drinking problem, he argued that in British society, without medication, the problem is cured by the efforts of his wife. In the evening, the wife performed singing and dancing in front of his husband, which helped them to curb the temptation of liquor. Many educated *babus* of our society had the habit of drinking and went to brothels for the company of prostitutes. If the wife of the *babus* conversed well and performed singing and dancing with their husband, then the admiration for the wife increased. For this reason, he advocated for women's education.¹⁹ On the other hand, the Colonial Government enacted vagrancy laws to restrict the mixing of white women with natives. Those who were unfit after the sensitising process to live in India for notorious activities were deported to England.

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