

Conclusion

With the rise of British Colonialism prostitution underwent a dramatic transformation. Nineteenth century was a period of transition from feudalism to capitalism and it produced a new breed of sex-workers called 'commercialized sex-workers'. From a respectable elevated position of pre-colonial period they became reduced to the status of criminal. The nineteenth century Bengal had undergone a revolutionary transformation in the socio-economic, political and cultural spheres which in turn also influenced the marginalized sections including the prostitutes. During pre-colonial period some categories of prostitutes used to enjoy a few privileges in the society. They used to get exposure to the cultural field which became a strong medium for them through which they could come in close contact with the people of conventional society. Cultivation of skills in various art fields (songs, dance, paintings etc.) were always nurtured with a motto of entertaining clients.

First generation of English educated Bengalis called '*bhadralok*' formed the new clientele of the nineteenth century prostitutes. As prostitution had always flourished on the demands of clients, the nature and tastes of *bhadralok* clientele influenced the nature of nineteenth century prostitution. The stratification of prostitutes in the form of class-structure was largely determined by the nature of clientele. The inter-relationship between the *babus* and prostitutes in nineteenth century Bengal was very significant. It had tremendous impact on socio-economic, religious and ideological spheres of contemporary Bengal. Some of the richest prostitutes used to regulate the position of some *bhadraloks* – zamindars, doctors, lawyers, priests etc. They were largely dependent upon the rich prostitutes. On the other hand, a large number of prostitutes used to be dependent upon Bengali *Babus*. Most of the times, they served as kept mistresses of these Bengali *babus*. Obviously, a power-relationship in the form of domination and subordination existed between these two groups. Commercial power constituted a major criterion of this interdependence.

There was a transition in the ideological, ethical and moral fields with the introduction of Victorian value system. And this led to the ambivalent attitude of the Bengali *Bhadralok*. On the one hand they were much inclined to the western culture and keen to imbibe Victorian values but on other hand they could not totally give up their traditional culture. Therefore, their ambivalent attitude becomes amply clear. The 'notion of respectability' motivated *bhadralok* to raise a vigorous bogey against prostitution. They attempted to free their women of *andarmahals* from the influence of polluting popular cultural forms of lower orders. Because women of these respectable houses began to acquire an outward outlook, the *bhadralok* housewives were getting influenced by the

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independent life-style of the prostitutes. This became a tremendous threat to the security and position enjoyed by Bengali *bhadralok* in the society.

The nineteenth century Bengali prostitutes were not a homogenous group. Prostitutes hailing from different strata of the society cultivated different ways of expression which got clearly reflected in various forms of the popular culture. During this colonial discourse the introduction of press was a remarkable development which recorded the voices of prostitutes as it got engaged in recording the voices of Bengali intellectuals on prostitution. Bengali Missionary denounced the popular cultural forms considering it substandard. But there was also a small section of *bhadralok* who had been sympathetic towards the prostitutes. With the help of these sympathizers prostitutes got exposure to the mainstream cultural world through theatre. And this was the field where their talent got appreciated. Thus theatre served as a medium for a prostitute to achieve the upward-mobility. Performing in the theatre became a status-symbol for the prostitutes infusing in them a feeling of being intimate to the conventional society from where they had been outcast. They felt that performing in theatre gave them partial acceptance to the society.

In this study the cultural manifestations of the first generation of prostitutes, especially their contributions in the cultural field (literature, theatre) have been discussed in a great deal. A sharp class difference is observed in the ways of expression of the prostitutes. What is common to them is their self-confidence. Despite living a life of persecution and humiliation they continuously struggled for acquiring respectable position in the *Bhadralok* society. Assertion of right, securing self respect became part of their long-drawn struggle, ignoring the fact of vigorous opposition raised by the Bengali *Bhadralok*, British administrators, and Christian missionaries. Their cultural manifestation also shows their tremendous disrespect for the so-called conventional *Bhadralok* society and reflects their aggressive attitude against the suppression and domination exercised over them within the patriarchal social structure. This gets clearly reflected in the songs, sayings, letters, writings and autobiographies of the prostitutes.

The theory of 'Defence Mechanism' has been clearly observed in their cultural manifestations, mainly in their letters and reminiscences where they have consistently attempted to justify their profession. They systematically attacked the double-standard sexual morality prevailing in the society and preconceived notions of ethics and code of conduct in the conventional society. The profession of prostitution has been perceived as the strategy for survival.

The popular cultural forms started getting disappear due to two factors - migration of people from rural areas to the urban Calcutta where native language started getting fragmented and got mixed-

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up with the urban culture. In the discourse of cultural assimilation the popular cultural form started losing their originality and was pushed to the margins. Another factor was lack of patronage. The new patrons were more influenced by newly emerging cultural values advocated by Victorian England. These cultural norms totally discarded these popular cultural forms.¹

The rise of newly educated women by the end of the nineteenth century had produced a body of literary compositions written in chaste Bengali advocating traditional values and norms. These works were highly appreciated in Bengali *bhadralok* society. But in this process the language used in popular cultural forms with robust, vigorous, direct nature started getting lost. The double entendre idioms and metaphors were no longer in common use in the songs and poems of popular cultural forms.

In the pre-colonial Bengali society, prostitution, at its worse, was considered a sin, but never a legal offence. By stigmatizing Indian prostitutes as a criminal and putting it within the jurisdiction of colonial penal laws, the British administration gave Indian prostitutes a new appearance. The urge to give this new appearance to Indian prostitutes was basically motivated by the need to protect the British soldiers. But the British administrators faced major difficulties. On the one hand the British faced vigorous opposition to prostitution from Christian missionaries and other social reformers both in England and in India. These missionaries and reformers demanded an abolition of prostitution. On the other hand, there was a compulsion on the colonial officials to allow prostitution in a controlled manner in order to meet the sexual requirement of their soldiers. Keeping this in mind, series of official measures were taken up to control the prostitution (The Cantonments Act, The Contagious Diseases Act, The Lock Hospital Act, etc.). These measures caused controversies in England as they suspected administration of legalising prostitution through enacting these legal measures. "This, the British Social reformers felt, went against the colonial power's professed moral claim that it was in India to carry out the mission of 'civilising' the natives!" In order to give the moral justification to the regulations that permitted prostitution to continue under the supervision and control of the colonial administration, the colonial authorities often left the impression that prostitutes were not subjected to any kind of coercion but they voluntarily registered themselves. "But the obligation is compulsory or voluntary depends on whether the obligee and the obligor are equal in education,

¹ Sumanta Banerjee, *Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, 1989, p. 165; The woman migrants to Calcutta during the early nineteenth century mainly comprised the wives and daughters of artisans and cottage industry workers. They attempted to restructure their financial and cultural lifestyles in the new environment. But the growth of modern industries in Bengal and a new generation of their successors including their sons and daughters emerged in the urban environment (they took up the profession of industrial workers as their livelihood) being detached from their original 'rural roots' brought a severe blow to the 'rural cultural traditions' to a larger extent. People hailing from Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar comprised a larger section of this working class in these urban industries. The cultural output was highly affected by the occupational changes. The fragmentation occurred into the 'linguistic homogeneity' of the working class in Bengal. *Ibid.* 165-166

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position and other matters, or the former is superior to later." In the case of prostitutes of nineteenth century Bengal, they were holding an inferior position and could be easily subjected to the colonial suppression through various oppressive methods which could easily make their 'coercion appear voluntary'. The practices which were considered as 'voluntary' (e.g. extortion of rack rent or taxes) under colonial administrator might be considered by the prostitute –the colonised subject –as 'compulsory'. The latter was thus left without option except submitting themselves to the colonial authorities being frightened of dire consequences if they refused to oblige.²

The composition of the Calcutta red-light areas is important factor to be looked into. By the early twentieth century these red-light areas started acquiring concentrated forms with regard to their topographical positions. In the course of the twentieth century, these red-light areas of Calcutta have undergone a dramatic transformation. Some have disappeared; some new areas have sprung up. The horizons of these topographical areas have also got shrunk but density of population in all these areas has been on rapid rise. One aspect deserves to be mentioned that prostitution has never been confined to these specific red-light areas only but it is very much visible that there have been numerous floating zones prevailing outside the red-light areas in Calcutta throughout the twentieth century where flying sex-workers along with the common prostitutes continued to ply their trade.

From the discussion in different chapters it becomes very clear that 'brothel world' develops its own culture with a different 'code of conduct' which gives this world a distinct identity, with a great difference from the conventional life. In this world 'power relationship' determine all relationships. The organized network between all inmates e.g., *mashi* (madam), *dalal* (pimp), *goondas* (hoodlum), procurers and money lenders who work in the red-light areas is based on this power relationship and plays the vital role to regulate the lives of prostitutes. Everyone in this world has motto to make as much profit as possible and in doing so no one bothers to encroach other's right in this untold commercial war of making profit. But despite presence of this hidden rivalry it is seen that in the red-light areas police, *bariwallis* and *gundas* are better organised among themselves. In this entire organised structure the most vulnerable position is held by the prostitutes. The great irony of this industry is that the main person who earns, i.e. the one who sells her body, cannot keep hold over her own income. The other elements in the game want to en-cash her sweat as much as possible for their own benefit. In this entire system, police play major role. Political leaders also regulate the life in the red-light areas. Sex-workers are forced to cast false vote during the election times. One prostitute is made to cast numerous votes but when the right to citizenship arises, she is the first one to be denied.

² Sumanta Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast: The Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, Calcutta, 1998. p.177-178

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While looking at the factors driving women into prostitution the poverty remains the most obvious factor. But in the large number of cases it has been evident that mal-treatment of girls at home, desertion by husband, rape, trafficking, misguidance, widowhood, child marriage, family refusal to accept the kidnapped and abused girls, and excessive exploitation by husbands drove a large number of girls into the prostitution throughout the twentieth century. The dominant number of flying sex-workers besides sex-workers of the Calcutta red-light areas comprises married women. The myth that women play the role of only housewife can be dissolved because women have always been earning members in the colonial and post colonial period. And this is equally visible in the case of prostitutes too. Through their earning they are not only looking after themselves but also sending money regularly to their homes and thus meeting all kinds of family expenditures. In this way, they have repeatedly proved the positive roles played by them despite being segregated and secluded in the society. The changing socio-economic condition and the rapid deterioration in the economic condition mainly during the post-partition period resulted in merging the gaps between the prostitutes and their families. 'Survival' has now become the major concern and thus 'prostitution' has been considered as the 'strategy for survival'.

Social seclusion of prostitutes leaves no option with a new girl but to get adjusted to the lifestyle of sex-workers. The constant struggle for existence and lack of options in lives slowly transforms her values. But the question arises whether '*nishidhapalli*' ('prohibited area' meaning the red-light area) is in true sense *nishidha* (prohibited) or not? The larger section of males flocks to these areas for sexual pleasures. The romantic love, quite often absent in the traditional married lives in India, is sought in the company of prostitutes. The unfortunate housewives left behind have no way to go out to meet their sexual need, as sex is a taboo in the Indian society. The social status of men flocking the brothels remains fairly un-stigmatized while the women who fulfil these needs of men are stigmatized and segregated in the society.³ Here it can be said prostitutes are acting as the safety valve for the girls and women of the respectable society. Through absorbing the all kinds of lusts of men, they are constantly providing protection to the other girls of the society.

As supply is determined by demand, therefore, changes in the nature of clientele have largely influenced the nature of prostitutes in the twentieth century. The changing tastes and culture of the clientele has gradually led to the deterioration in the nature of demands. *Mujra* now got reduced to the nude dance, *toppa-ghazal* have been replaced now with cheap Hindi songs. This degradation

³ Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightholme, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta*, Kolkata, 1996, pp.113, 123

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can be subjected to various socio-economic and political factors. Decline of the aristocratic class, dislocation of indigenous rural economy, economic distress aggravated by the world war, partition etc. altogether brought a severe blow to the nature of clientele which in turn influence the nature of prostitution as well. Here it must be mentioned that clientele of the prostitutes has also not been homogenous category in the twentieth century. In this regard it would be interesting to note here that the nature of red-light areas varies in terms of its own standard which is largely determined by the nature of clients frequenting those areas. This leads to class structure both in terms of red-light areas as well as status among prostitutes. Therefore, in short it can be said, the nature of the red-light areas is also highly heterogeneous by their characteristics.

Class structure of babus (fixed clients) is determined by his commercial strength and sexual potency. On the basis these determinants his position is regulated. This position of clientele only regulates the power relationship or relationship of politics between babu-bibi. That is why the position and inter-relationship between the aristocratic babu and his bibi differs from the relationship between *khaowamocha babu* and his bibi. That is why it is not rare to notice that while entertaining the night customer, babu is knocked out by heavy doses of alcohol and driven out of the room of her bibi. The relationship of interdependency between babus and bibis (prostitutes), where babus mostly enjoy immense financial assistance as well as emotional support from their bibis often cause the sufferings in the life of the prostitutes. Babu's authoritative and violent role reflects the domination of men over women within the patriarchal social norms where a woman is always subjugated at her 'material' and 'ideological' levels; where sexual life of a woman is always considered as property of a man. Access over female sexuality gives a feeling of complete masculinity to a man. Prostitution is the most brutal form of that subjugation of women in the society. But in some cases few babus possess sensitive approach but that is very rare. Desire to have family life mostly restricts prostitutes to get up with their babus. They are considered as bibis' husband, lover, everything. The emotional attachment and low socio-economic conditions empower those babus to exploit their bibis. Making their own lives prosper at the cost of their bibis' earnings is commonly visible site in the red-light areas. These kinds of betrayal gradually generate distrust among the prostitutes towards the male community and the conventional world. Though sexual gratification is the major reason that leads men to visit red-light areas but some people reach brothels also in search of emotional help. In these cases mutual dependency evolves in the course of time that gradually generates love relationship resulting in a marriage. Though in most such cases marriages do not last for a long there are exceptions to the rule. In many cases, the social segregation is seen to act as major hindrance on the way of one's desire to return to normal life.

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But in the last phase of the twentieth century, a slow but steady transition has taken place in the life of the prostitutes due to the emergence of various NGOs and their active role for the betterment of the living conditions in the life of prostitutes. In this regard, Durbar (the largest organisation run by the sex-workers in India) plays a great role as it has succeeded uniting sex-workers to a large extent which in turn has infused strength among them to raise their collective voice against all kinds of injustice, atrocities. Therefore, through various action programmes the position of this marginalised section is brought to the centre stage as such efforts get them out of their vulnerable status. This has largely helped them to explore their inner strength and credibility. The protest raised by Swapna Gayen and Bharati Dey against hoodlums' atrocities is the evidence good enough to understand the process of empowerment of sex-workers. Asha Sadhukha's revolt 1980s epitomises the courage wielded by the prostitutes if there are humane support system. This self exploration made by the prostitutes has gradually succeeded in bringing out the leadership for collective empowerment and improvement.

The formation of 'Sathi Sangathan' (Association of Babus) is a remarkable and a revolutionary step in the history of prostitution during the twentieth century Calcutta. Its aim is to improve the living conditions of the sex-workers and children in the brothel world. They are made to realise their importance that it is in their interest to work for mutual cooperation to serve the sex-workers' interests. If the latter thrives the former also survives. It can be said that 'Sathi Sangathan' is a way to 'extract a thorn using another thorn!'

The hierarchical order that exists in the form of class structure in the institution of prostitution is mainly based upon this power relationship which is mostly determined by the commercial strength of a prostitute. The strength and power of prostitutes based upon the commercial status is largely dependent upon 'the body' - the real capital of prostitutes in the sex-industry. One does not need extra efforts to find out an 'A' grade prostitute to be degraded to the status of a 'D' grade prostitute by loosing her charm and beauty over a period of time. This 'capital' has a diminishing 'value' with the passage of time. Therefore, it can be said that the downward as well as the upward mobility in the hierarchical structure of the prostitutes is mostly regulated by the 'female body and sex'. And this arouses a sense of uncertainty and insecurity in the life of prostitutes, which drives them into the mental mode of constant struggle for survival. Darwin's dictum 'survival of the fittest' becomes an apt description of the brothel world. Violence, to which prostitutes are always subjected in the brothel world, exhibits the vulnerable position of women in the society. Uncertainty about future life in this world does not make one hesitate to encroach others' independence and rights. Therefore,

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profession of prostitution, trafficking, procuring etc. is considered as the strategy for survival where commercial interest becomes the main basis of this sex-industry. The art of making money thus becomes the weapon to fight against the patriarchal exploitation and to secure one's own position in this murky world. It leaves to the rise of various superstitious activities among the prostitutes and commercial rivalry in the form of securing clients began among them because clients are the only source of their income.

'Religion' is the integral part of humanity. The same is true of the brothel world. Prostitutes' blind faith in god seems to be 'secular' activity as they do not possess any kind of sectarianism and participate in all kinds of festivals irrespective of class, caste, religion, ethnic differences. Kartik puja in the brothel world is performed wishing a handsome babu and a son like Kartik reflecting prostitutes' strong desire for family life with a secured future at their old age. This simple religiosity on the part of prostitutes is ruthlessly used by the local hoodlums and sometimes by the bariwallis as a tool of extracting huge subscription from them.

The living conditions of the prostitutes in the twentieth century red-light areas were highly regulated by the class positions of the prostitutes themselves. Sometimes their aesthetic sense and tastes became so renowned that women from the conventional society got highly influenced by that. It is exemplified in the case of famous Baijee Gauharjan in the early twentieth century. Brothel world invents its own ways of recreating the prostitutes. Consumption of additives is a common characteristic of the red-light areas. Whereas on one hand it is treated as a way of reducing or removing pains, on the other hand it is business and the commercial world that thrives on such consumption. But vulnerable inmates of this marginalised world have few options and this serves as their strategy for survival.

A prostitute plays all the roles a common woman plays and yet she is refused the re-incorporation in the society from where once she was forced to move. In this context it is very interesting to see the layers of relationship between a prostitute and her children. Despite playing the role of single parent she dreams a bright future full of happiness for her children. She wants her child to be recognised as part of the respectable society. The conditions of children in the red-light areas are largely determined by their gender. Lack of amenities, alternative avenues, absence of exposure and social stigma as 'prostitute's children' make their life so insecure that in the course of time it forces boys in various illegal and criminal activities and the girls in the prostitution. Whatever be the fate of these

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children, it is observed that they remain a big support to their mothers. In the world full of suspicion and betrayal the children remain the only hope for the sex-workers.

Living a life on the edge, the prostitutes have not been found wanting in taking up responsibilities for the social causes. Prostitutes' participation in the national movements, fund collection for flood affected people, providing shelters to the freedom fighters, etc. undoubtedly show that they are not devoid of sensitivities. Post-Independent era also has witnessed active participation of the sex-workers in various social causes, e.g. protesting against the ban on Mira Nair's movie 'Water', serving poverty-ridden area of Amalsole, raising voice against communal rights, etc. Working for other segregated community like the tribals of Amalsole undoubtedly exhibits sex-workers' progressive humanitarian outlook. But it can also be regarded as a way to secure other communities' support for their causes.

Prostitutes' fight against traffic in girls and children through the formation of 'Self-regulatory Board' is a remarkable in the history of prostitutes and prostitution during the twentieth century Calcutta. Trafficking is considered as a strategy to survive in the brothel world but if alternative avenues are provided to the sex-workers then a large number of them are ready to forsake their vocation. But brutalisation of the brothel world also habituate them to find strategies which demeans their lives to suitably fit into that 'dirty world'.

Another important aspect in the development of the prostitution in twentieth century Calcutta was the formation of 'Usha Multipurpose Co-operative Society Limited', a cooperative bank for the sex workers. This remarkable step in the history of prostitution not only attempted to achieve a secured future for the prostitutes but it also empowered them to free themselves from the clutches of the money lenders. It seems 'Usha Multipurpose Co-operative Society Limited' is now acting as a major 'tool' of infusing enormous confidence among the sex workers and that it is strengthening their self identities. By extending easy loans, the inmates belonging to the 'brothel world' are encouraged to return to a normal by offering alternatives of earning money. For an example, Lattu, a hoodlum, was provided with financial help by the sex workers to leave hooliganism and other criminal activities and lead a healthy life. This way all the marginalized components of this murky world are coming to some common understanding to discover ways to lead a respectable life.

Self-expression of the prostitutes is the important facet of the institution to make sense of the inner world of the sex-workers. What we find in the present thesis is that there is no monolithic image but mixed expressions of the sex-workers about their identities. If there are some, feeling highly

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dissatisfied as sex-workers, there are others who relish their empowerment as earners of money. Some express their desire to have family life but most of them have repeatedly raised questions about the double standard of sexual morality in the society. From Manada till date, sex-workers have pointed out to the existing social hypocrisy. The voices of sex-workers carry elements of hatred towards male community throughout the twentieth century. Ridiculing their clients and babus is expressed in their various songs and sayings. Their many songs are robust, direct, bold and sexually explicit. Men's promiscuous nature has been ridiculed by the sex-workers. Betrayal gradually generates distrust among the sex-workers towards the men and the conventional society. It is sharply captured in their voices explored in the twentieth century. But that does not mean the prostitutes are devoid of love and emotions. They hold immense feelings for their children, babu or lovers, the glance of which we get in their self-expressions. What is most important development of the twentieth century in the field of prostitution is their claim to consider themselves as workers. The claim for workers' right is a radical expression of their demand for justice. There was also another argument that the sexual liberation for women was represented in the profession of prostitution.⁴ These changing attitudes towards the institution of prostitution and role of NGOs altogether propelled prostitutes as active participants in the movement for worker's right. The slogan is now:

*"Gotor khatiye khai, Shramiker adhikar chai"*⁵
(We earn through our toils, we demand recognition as labourers)

Thus the Victorian concepts of rehabilitation are no more accepted to the sex-workers. In this context the statement made by Madhu Kishwar is very apt when she says that 'Instead of trying to reform them (sex-workers), we must reform social attitudes which treat social victims as criminals!'⁶

In short it can be said that the history of prostitution in Calcutta has undergone transformation at different stages of the development of prostitution in the city of Calcutta. The history of prostitution in Calcutta can be divided into four phases:

- I. 1690-1793
- II. 1793-1885
- III. 1885-1940
- IV. 1940-2000

⁴ Sheila Jeffreys, *The Idea of Prostitution*, <http://www.feminista.com/archives/v2n2/jeffreysreview.html> p.2

⁵ Mrinalkanti Dutta, *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya*, Kolkata, 2005, p.171

⁶ Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightholme, *Guilty Without Trial*, Kolkata, 1996, p.124.

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I. 1690-1793: The first hundred years of prostitution in Calcutta did not consider the profession of prostitution as a stigmatized profession. One thing was very much apparent during this time that large number of girls flocked to this profession hailing from the upper strata of the society.

II. 1793 – 1885: During this phase, Calcutta started gaining a significant position in the history of India. Intellectual class began to immerge. Development of a new economic system led to the rise of a new class of 'zamindars' during this period. First half of this period witnessed 'prostitution' as an independent profession. The transition occurred since last part of the nineteenth century. With the commencement of 'Contagious Disease Act' and other legal measures, prostitutes started getting criminalized. 'Prostitutes' now started getting addressed as 'fallen women' (Patita) by the government from 1872 as the committee found in this year was named 'Committee of the Calcutta Home for Fallen Women'. It is very clear that the attitude of the administrators and the society had undergone dramatic change in course of time. .

III. 1885 – 1940: This phase can be seen as a transition in the history of the prostitution. Transition occurred in the cultural as well as economic fields that included decline in '*babusamaj*' and establishment of factories in large numbers. Now the prostitutes got confined to certain specific areas (red-light areas). The rich and intellectual section of the society took the major initiatives to confine prostitution within a limited topographical zone. The contemporary administration was directed and motivated to take measures in this regard. The prostitution now came to be considered as unsocial, attached to the world of crime. From thence the criminals started getting hold over this profession of prostitution. The prostitutes' positive attributes witnessed a major shift under the British colonial regime and with the rise of capitalist economy.

IV. 1940 – 2000: The last fifty years have witnessed a large number of girls driving into prostitution. Exploitations of men, dire poverty, deception made by the family members, relatives, neighbours, etc. constituted as dominant factors during this period to drive a large number of young girls into prostitution. Breaking the boundaries of the traditional red-light areas, prostitution started spreading all over the places of Calcutta. The wide range of Kalikuthi of central Calcutta, famous sweet shops located in south and north Calcutta, the areas in front of cinema halls, the government offices, parks, etc. are those floating zones outside the red-light areas where prostitutes started plying their trade. The role of police in the year of 1985 -1995 assumed a ruthless brutal character. The administrators the disguise of a protector kept on exploiting prostitutes continuously. All kinds of illegal activities were carried out openly. The local hoodlums and anti-socials who had been some kind of protection to the prostitutes also joined hands with police and became powerful, adamant and refused to stand by the prostitutes. It made these prostitutes extremely vulnerable. Though the

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murder of a prostitute in the red-light area had first occurred in 1868 but now the incident of prostitutes' murder reached a nigh high and became a common event in the red-light areas. The Calcutta red-light areas now became the hubs of all kinds of criminal activities and the shelters for all kinds of miscreants - goondas, thieves, robbers, etc.

Amidst these situations, NGOs started becoming active since 1990. In the process of spreading consciousness and awareness among the prostitutes, the roles played by these NGOs have been really significant.

The transformation occurred in the history of prostitution has also left impressions on the changing perception or the attitudes of the society towards prostitution and prostitutes. Prostitutes have been marginalized and regarded as ostracized community by the so called *bhadralok* (respected) society. Therefore, these women are left with no options but to live maintaining a rapport with the criminals of the underworld. But ironically, these prostitutes are members of our society only – a large number of families of villagers, remote areas are surviving on the monthly income of these prostitutes. And on the other hand, men of this so called *bhadralok* society, who marginalized prostitutes as stigmatized profession, themselves are the clientele of these prostitutes.

In this context, since mid '90s to 2000, these five years witnessed different changes, perceived totally different voices though these voices were initiated few years back but did not acquire that much prompt charter. Since that time women involved into prostitution have started getting united among themselves and raising voice against all kinds of exploitation, atrocities and they have started constantly raising questions centering their position in the society. These kinds of protest gradually have resulted into the formation of 'Self-regulatory board', 'Usha Multipurpose Co-operative Society Limited' and after long debates, seminars, demand has been raised for trade union, securing license and lastly above all workers' rights for prostitutes. These kinds of discussion on controversial issues with regard to the prostitution have drawn attention of a large section of intellectuals and socialites of Calcutta. Though they are often seen to participate in rallies and meetings but a major part of this section mostly avoid producing any kinds specific bold view points related to prostitutes and prostitution. They mostly prefer to hold a neutral position in this regard. On the other hand the issue of traffic in children, girls from remote areas, villages to city areas has started getting discussed since the mid 1990s and at last till the end of 1990s this issue started getting dealt with importance. On one hand the controversial discussion centering on legislation of prostitution and on the other hand attention drawn to the child sex-workers and traffic in children have added a new chapter to the history of prostitution in Calcutta.⁷

⁷ Indrani Sinha (ed.), *Dehabyabsha ki Ekta Samashya/ Aparadh: Samaj ki Mone Korey?*, Sanlaap, 2000. p.1-3