

Introduction

Subordination of women has been a common feature of almost all stages of history. First large group to be enslaved in the early Indian history were women as there are more frequent reference to *dasis* than *dasas*. Women are burdened with production and reproduction, and female reproductive power has been regarded as a valuable asset because the very survival of the human specie is dependent upon it. But despite this "usefulness" the women have always been the victims of exploitation at every levels of life. Prostitution is that facet of womanhood that gives the true picture of exploitation and oppression of patriarchal society at material and ideological levels. Prostitution is bound up with wider social processes and permeated by assumptions current in society at large. The institution of prostitution has existed in one form or another in all class-based patriarchal societies. Although in the ancient times, female prostitution was closely linked to the religious practices but by the passage of time it lost its original root and in the modern times it tends to be associated with social condemnation. Prostitution as an institution, therefore, cannot be understood only with reference to certain culture specific variables. It has a clear economic and ideological base and it is intrinsically related to larger socio-economic and political processes. Rather than as a moral issue it can be usefully analyzed as a crucial part of the labor transformation process.¹

Study of prostitution has been rendered more and more complicated than in fact it is. By and large it is due to preconceived notions as a result of social apathy. Unfortunately, the story of the prostitute has not been properly told in India. Even the radical historiographical schools such as represented by Marxist and 'Subaltern' historians while taking note of the marginalized sections such as peasants, artisans, tribals, housewives, working men and women in Bengal have not paid serious attention to the prostitutes.² It has begun to attract some attention in the recent past in the wake of global awareness of human rights and the struggles waged by different marginalized sections. Prostitutes were never seen as respectable part of wider socio-economic, political, psychological, and cultural context due to social condemnation and seclusion. The study would attempt to question the stereotypes about prostitutes and try to relocate them from within the world of seclusion, invisibility, isolation and ignorance while focusing on the twentieth century developments in Calcutta. The existing body of knowledge does not analyze the problem of prostitution from a comparative perspective. The gender perspective has also not been widely dealt with. This study would attempt

¹ Jean d'Cunha, "Prostitution Laws - ideological Dimensions and Enforcement Practices", *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 25, 1992. p.103

² Sumanta Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast: The Prostitute in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, Seagull Books, Calcutta, 2000, p.1.

to examine the comparative change/continuity in the conditions of the prostitutes in the colonial-post colonial times/pre-independent and post-independent period in order to fracture the distinction that is made between the two situations. The gender perspective carries the potential of that rupture. The work has been studied from gender perspective, taking into account the whole gamut of man-woman relationships taking shape in social, political, economic, cultural and ideological environment.

While prostitutes may be either male or female, the present study is confined to the female prostitutes, inhabitants of brothels in the red-light areas of Calcutta. The present work also focuses on the 'flying sex-workers' (FSW) to certain extent who live outside but practice their trade in these brothels.

In the social science literature of contemporary period the term 'prostitute' has often been replaced by 'commercial sex-worker' (CSW) or 'female sex-workers' (FSW). In this 'study', I have, however, used two terms 'prostitute' and 'sex-worker' frequently but occasionally I have referred them as 'commercial sex-worker' as well. In my opinion these terminologies are interchangeable. 'Prostitution/prostitute' denotes the phenomenon of 'violence' and 'sex-worker' (and CSW) denotes the sense of 'self-reliance' and 'self-determination'. It also inherently implies a commercial purpose when a sexual act is performed as work.

The dearth of archival evidence as well as other primary sources has become a major hindrance in establishing a chronological order in the present work. Therefore, the present study has attempted to make a thematic presentation of prostitution in Calcutta during the twentieth century.

Hypothesis:

The twentieth century promoted the cause of gender justice by internationalizing struggles for equality by women and other oppressed people. Women's struggles against their subordination was intertwined in varying degrees with ideologies and movements based on the values of freedom, self-determination, equality, democracy and justice. Confined earlier by local foci, these now found expression through movements against imperialism, for national liberation and social transformation.

In the Indian context, as the nineteenth century closed, the women's question as an area of reform appeared to evoke less enthusiasm than it had done before. What appeared to be more important was the question of a feminine identity which continued to receive finishing touches throughout the twentieth century. The overwhelming issues now were directly political ones – concerning the

politics of nationalism. Women's participation in the freedom movement meant a protracted struggle against two different bridges of servility: colonialism and patriarchy. Active involvement in the movement helped to bring about a remarkable shift in women's perspective towards life, their world-view, self-image and ambitions. Above all, it refashioned women's personality. Striding along a path which had traditionally been an exclusively male domain, the path of politics instilled in their collective personality and element of grit and determination which eventually won grudging admiration from their male counterparts.

Sociologically speaking, the practice of commercialized prostitution is exclusively a city oriented phenomenon in India with its accompanying evils of diverse nature. The industrialization started taking place in Bengal from the middle decades of the nineteenth century. The gradual development of industries attracted a large number of landless people of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Orissa and other economically backward neighbouring states. These people started flocking to Bengal 'in search of food'. The poor cultivators also gradually started migrating to the province of Bengal. These labourers left their families behind in the distant villages. With this problem another rising problem was taking place- 'the scarcity of proper housing accommodation.' All these factors taken together, created a major disparity, crucial in nature, between the proportions of sexes. These factors resulted in the rapid growth of prostitution and in the course of time made the problem of prostitution more prominent in the urban areas.³ It is assumed that 'Veshya' (*prostitutes*) had been created originally to minister the "vish" or 'vaishya' caste (i.e. traders and merchants) whose life was laid in town being totally isolated from their homes in distant villages.⁴

Women's new professional opportunities as well as their employment in urban brothels were a consequence of British domination. Colonial rule transformed the traditional economic system and in the process fundamentally dislocated the non-agricultural, village-based economy. The decline of the local economy and with it the demise of local small-scale services and industries left many women unemployed. Poor women often found employment in exploitative industries. The dominant gender ideology constructed women as dependent housewives; the reality was that thousands of women worked to survive. This unregulated occupations flourished in the modernizing urban sectors. The Partition of India in 1947 witnessed the departure of large number of people from East to West Bengal. A large number of these people settled in 'Greater Calcutta'. Most of these refugees had migrated leaving behind all properties and belongings, which led them to a state of dire poverty. This critical situation became advantageous for the procurers. They got the opportunity to seduce

³ B. Joardar, *Prostitution in Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter-India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. p.3-4

⁴ Ibid. p.4

girls and women from these families. Many girls and women of these families were lured of services and help and then they were straight brought into the brothels where they were forced to carry out prostitution. 'The irresistible conclusion is that the superstructure of the institution of prostitution was based on and the trade prospered on the woeful lives of the pathetic victims.'⁵ Gradually sex business has assumed the dimensions of an industry in the twentieth century and it has been suggested that as an industry prostitution makes a significant contribution to the process of economic development at the macro-level through income remittance of prostitutes to their village families.⁶

Only a quarter of century ago in West-Bengal the bulk of the prostitutes found it hard to maintain relation with their respective families. But with a change in material conditions due to fragmentation of joint family, loss of old traditional values and yet-to be born new ones, there has been, very significant although slow change in attitude towards the prostitutes and prostitution. And now most of the prostitutes maintain relation with their families.⁷ The prostitutes doing their trade in the brothel in Calcutta hailed from different provinces and countries. The Hindu prostitutes are dominant among whom the upper caste like Brahmin is negligible, while low caste women are numerically preponderant.

During the twentieth century, feminism advocated the idea of sexuality in a new dimension. It questions the prevailing notions of sexuality in society and looks at them as part of a political process. Sexuality is to feminism what work is to Marxism: that which is most one's own, yet most taken away. In the light of feminism, gender discrimination is deeply rooted in the social construction of sexuality.⁸ Feminist thinking on prostitution has various dimensions. Since the late 1960s, radical feminist theorists have analyzed prostitution uncompromisingly as the ultimate in the reduction of women to sexual object which can be bought and sold, to a sexual slavery that lies at the root of marriage and prostitution and forms the foundation of women's oppression. But in the last two decades the ideas of many feminists about prostitution have also changed. The prostitutes' right movement of the '80s proposed that prostitution was a form of work just like any other, freely "chosen" by women. Some have even argued that prostitution represents sexual liberation for

⁵ B. Joardar, *Prostitution in Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter-India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. p.4

⁶ Jean d'Cunha, "Prostitution Laws - ideological Dimensions and Enforcement Practices", *Economic and Political Weekly*, April 25, 1992. p. 103

⁷ B. Joardar, *Prostitution in Historical and Modern Perspectives*; Inter-India Publication, New Delhi, 1984. p.187

⁸ Yoshodhara Bagchi, "Jounata: Naribaader Aaloy" in Sudhir Chakroborty (ed.), *Jounata O Samaskruti* (A collection of Essays on Sexuality and Culture), Pustak Bipani, Kolkata, 2002. p.143

women. The language of work choice and sex has also been adopted by some feminist theorists and academics who profess to have been convinced by the arguments of prostitution activists.⁹

During the late decades of twentieth century the rapid growth of globalization had various adverse effects especially on people from the rural India and on people who live below poverty line resulting in prostitution at large scale. Although the Indian national movement succeeded in winning about the political freedom but the emancipation of the suffering marginalized groups especially of the prostitutes is far from the real even after over half a century of independence.

Gender Perspective:

Studies on women can be made from different theoretical perspectives. Gender is a complex phenomenon and is, by no means, amenable to simple analysis. It is socially defined in a variety of ways through cultural practices and symbolical representation, on a plurality of sites – the home, workplace and school, pervading all hierarchies in a complex intermeshing. Indeed, ideologies of womanhood are created as much by the realm of the sexual as by the realms of race, class and nation. Gender informs every aspect of a woman's existence.¹⁰

The gender perspective of commercial sex is the one which has most frequently been overlooked. Central to this perspective are the division of labor according to a person's gender, and society's double standards of sexual morality. Indian society is patriarchal characterized by male control over female labor and female sexuality, separating men and woman into different domains where the world of women is undervalued and insecure.¹¹ Thus this approach does not look at women and men alone, but at the relationship between them, how societies are structured along gender lines and the impact of these relations in the whole society and on all aspects of life. A gendered perspective is concerned with ensuring a gender analysis with regard to policies, programmes, planning strategy and evaluation. In other words, it looks at fundamentally transforming unequal power relations and changing the society.

Prostitution and Feminist Interpretations:

There are three conflicting views on prostitution, the moralist, the institutionalist and the feminist. The first two refer to street and brothel prostitution, while the third, which is more recent, refers to the social conditions of all women. The moral approach maintains that prostitution violates moral

⁹ Jeffreys, Sheila, *The Idea of Prostitution*, Melbourne: Spinifex Press, 1997
<http://www.feminista.com/archives/v2n2/jeffreysreview.html>

¹⁰ Bharati Roy, *From the Seams of History: Essays on Indian Women*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1995, p. 2

¹¹ Indrani Sinha, & Carolyn Sleightholme, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta*, Stree, Calcutta, 2002, p. 2-3.

sensibilities. It is hence undesirable and must be eradicated through the use of penal measures. The institutional argument takes prostitution as the oldest profession, which the state at best can control marginally. These two views are based on the assumption that social activities can be regulated for the benefit of all, and that regulations can be designed and executed by a national body. The third line of the thinking reflected in feminist circles, but not yet significantly embodied in Indian studies on prostitution, challenges the first in only one aspect of all the prevailing unequal gender relations. Prostitution as a social phenomenon will survive so long as the social structures surrounding it and contributing to it prevail. Neither sanctions nor moral condemnation will uproot prostitution. The legal status and the social stigma prostitutes endure isolate them from the rest of human kind and expose them to various forms of exploitation.¹²

The various schools of Feminist thought like Marxist feminism, liberal feminism, existentialist feminism, socialist feminism, and radical feminism have shed opinion on the institution of prostitution from their own standpoints. For our present study the views expressed by Radical Feminists carry greater significance than those expressed by other schools of Feminism. The other schools of Feminist thought tend to be mechanical in their analysis of prostitution, separating the moral and spiritual forces of relationships from the temporal forces. In doing so, they present an incomplete view of relationships between men and women, as well as the intricate relationships between prostitutes and their clients.¹³ With the exception of existentialist feminism, the other four feminisms rely all too often on stereotypical notions of the personal lives of prostitutes by focusing too much attention on one socio-economic group at the expense of examining the wide diversity of experiences, values, and beliefs of prostitutes.¹⁴

In the reckoning of Sarah Bromberg, women's oppression is the most fundamental form of oppression to the radical feminists. In their view, a prostitute does not act out of free choice but is a victim of coercion in both its most subtle and direct forms. Because oppression is so entrenched in people's thinking, changes in the structuring of society alone are not sufficient to overcome it. The attitudes of men must be changed and a state of equality made manifest in the power dynamic between men and women. As in the case of the socialist feminist and the Marxist feminist, once equality has been achieved and the structuring of society corrected, prostitution as we know it will play a diminished role in society. Liberal feminism and radical feminism contrast sharply in certain of their fundamental views. Liberal feminist thinking is a more reasoned, intellectual perspective than the radical feminist position, which has both emotional and political centering in its logical

¹² D'cunha, Jean, "Prostitution Laws – Ideological Dimensions and Enforcement Practices", p.103

¹³ Sarah Bromberg, *Feminist Issues in Prostitution*, <http://www.feministissues.com/text.htm> , p.1

¹⁴ Ibid. p.2

expressions. Radical feminists do not view prostitution as a harmless private transaction. On the contrary, they believe that it reinforces and perpetuates the objectification, subordination, and exploitation of women. They see men as universally believing myths regarding their own sexuality. Two myths are: (1) that men need more sex than women and (2) that they are genetically the stronger sex and therefore should be dominant in relationships with women.¹⁵

Radical feminism opposes prostitution ostensibly because it degrades all women. Radicals believe that when equality is achieved between the sexes there will be no prostitution. This is probably true in the sense that if harmony prevailed among all couples, seeking outside sex might not be considered, or would be understood if it did occur. But many moralists have noticed there is not a lot of love in a world that is preoccupied with pleasures and material things. Christian moralists have stressed time and again the importance of love prevailing in a relationship. A loving relationship is far more effective at thwarting oppressive conditions than one that is based on convenience. The presence of prostitution, therefore, only mirrors the immoral nature of the contemporary society. There are at least three approaches to viewing degradation. First, when radical feminists talk about degradation, they are discussing it in terms of an activity that affirms and sustains the male power dynamic, which in turn dominates and oppresses non-prostitute women as well. Second, feminists are sometimes speaking of degradation in Marxist terms where 'prostitution, like wage labor, degrades the actor'. Third, if a woman behaves in a manner that fits the stereotype of what men commonly perceive as a whore, she is degraded by that association. The idea of degradation, therefore, derives from not being fully aware of how one is perceived in the world by association with certain behaviors.¹⁶

Kathleen Barry's work (*The Prostitution of Sexuality*, New York 1995) can in some senses be seen as representative of radical feminists, appears to be a heroic intervention on behalf of prostitutes and women in general to save them from violence and degradation. The extensive abuse that Barry cites can be viewed as a statement on the condition of human civilization in which it is clear that humans are not nearly as moral as they believe themselves to be. She cites numerous instances where violence perpetrated by pimps is the rule rather than the exception in prostitution.

Barry's discussions of degradation may proceed more from an idea in the mind than from realities of human behavior. Prostitution, in her view, is a form of moral corruption because it degrades women. A person who is a prostitute is generally viewed as a person of low social stature. Society encourages certain forms of behavior and discourages other forms through stigmatization. In a

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 15

¹⁶ Ibid. p.8-18

sense, the discouraging of the selling of sex reflects a value citing some behaviors are better than others. If a woman conducts herself in a way that goes against commonly held values, there is a cost. The costs will vary depending on mitigating factors defining an individual's personality. The cost for prostitutes is that they are relegated to a lower social status.

From the beginning, radical feminists have shown a weak understanding of the nature of prostitution and of the personal lives of prostitutes themselves. A prostitute is not necessarily a home-wrecker in the way non-prostitute women in extramarital affairs might be considered. The intimate nature of the prostitute-client relationship is much more complex than it first appears. My Chapter III looks into these complexities.

In liberal feminism, prostitution is seen as a private business transaction. Radical feminists, on the other hand, view a prostitute as a human being who has been reduced to a piece of merchandise. The liberal contends that a woman is free to enter into contracts. However, the radical feminist does not believe that a prostitute's desire to enter into such a "contract" is done of her own free will. The radical feminist usually sees prostitution as an exploitative relationship in which the customer is interested only in the prostitute's services and not her personally. But the liberal responds to this by pointing out that when one seeks out a professional such as a doctor, lawyer, plumber, or mechanic, one is not centrally concerned in the person doing the professional work—only his or her services.

Existentialist feminism derives from the school of thought of Simone de Beauvoir. In her world-view, the woman is not always powerless and does not always need to be dependent in a male-female relationship. Prostitution allows women an avenue of escape from dependency on men in a way that does not leave them victims, but empowered women. Equality of rights and freedom between the sexes is desirable. However, if they are not forthcoming, prostitution can provide the woman with the kind of liberty that is immediate, affirming, and temporally rewarding.

Marxist feminism arises out of the doctrines of Karl Marx, whose theory is centered less on the material aspects of life than on the more broadly defined social ones. Central to Marxism is the idea of the divisions of labor, which are familiarly evident in the capitalist system. Marxist feminists base their arguments of moral right and wrong in reference to the corruption of wage labor that is in itself an expression of class distinctions. Following this doctrine, Marxists are opposed to any social or political action that perpetuates the enslavement and oppression of members of the work force. Prostitution is a form of labor and therefore has been specifically noted as falling under the designation of a corruption of wage labor.

Socialist feminism appears to share some tenets of Marxism, but instead of focusing on economic determinism as the primary source of oppression, the socialist feminist sees the oppression as having psychological and social roots. They share a genuine concern for women that transcends politics. Their focus is on people, not profits. To the socialist feminist, the prostitute is a victim of the corruption of a society which accompanies class distinctions. The oppression of class in a materialistic society degrades people by categorizing them in a particular class and objectifying them so that they are merely parts of a mechanism that can be replaced by other parts of the same description. According to Sarah Bromberg in both the socialist feminist and Marxist feminist perspectives prostitution is discouraged, but neither school of thought seeks a legal remedy for its elimination. They believe that the cause of prostitution is in the structuring of society, and that is where the solution will reside.¹⁷

Methodology:

The work is based on the examination of primary sources preserved at the West-Bengal State Archives, the Bengal Asiatic Society Library, the National Library, the *Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Library*, and the *Uttarpara Library*, Municipal Record Room, *Manadasundari Grathagar O Gabeshanakendra* (Library and Research Center), West Bengal Secretariat Library and several university and other libraries located in Calcutta. In all these repositories unpublished official records pertaining to the Political Department (Police Branch), Judicial Department, Local Self-Government Department (Sanitation Branch), Legislative Department, and Home Department, Police Department, published government reports have also been accessed and examined. A critical examination of Bengali literature that is replete with issues pertaining to the subject is sought to enrich the perspective. In the course of my study the National Archives of India, New Delhi, the Women's Studies Research Centre Library, Baroda, the Centre for Contemporary Theory, Baroda, and the Women's Studies Research Centre Library, Jadavpur University have also been accessed. The study is also built upon the oral evidence gathered from the fieldwork in the red- light areas of Calcutta. Prostitutes' memoirs, songs, sayings, writings and interviews based on questionnaire have constituted important segment of primary sources. Besides unpublished materials, newspapers, magazines, journals, pamphlets have also been examined. The study has also used other secondary sources of information, which consist of works of eminent scholars, monographs, census reports, survey reports and other information gained from government officials and NGOs.

¹⁷ Ibid. p. 19-20

Significance of Sources:

Newspapers and Journals, Pamphlets and Booklets

This section of primary sources gives detailed information about the community of the commercialized sex-workers. Topography and Demography of the twentieth century sex market in Calcutta have been framed on the basis of information available in these primary sources. These throw light on various aspects of the lives of prostitutes. Brothel culture, lifestyle of the prostitutes, class-structure of the prostitutes, the dynamic complex relationship between *babu and bibi*, organized network between the various elements in the red-light areas, living condition of the children of the sex-workers and the inter-relationship between them, factors driving women into prostitution as well as the self expression of the sex-workers etc. have been explored with the help of this segment of primary sources. The social reaction to this community, the role of various organizations (NGOs, etc.) have been taken note of. The elaborate narratives of some sex-workers have also been found. This helps to know the true picture of the vulnerable conditions of women in the patriarchal society. It further explores the factors which drives a large number of girls and women into the profession of prostitution. These primary sources are largely available in the post independent era rather than pre-independent period. These sources have thrown immense light on the developments occurring in the sex industry during the post independent period. Sex-workers' movement claiming worker's right which has infused in course of time a sense of self determination among them and formation of Self-regulatory Board with the initiatives of sex-workers themselves to fight against trafficking in women and children show the transition period in the nature of the prostitution in Calcutta.

Insiders' Writings and Reflections:

The narratives of prostitutes include their writings as well as their interviews to scholars and journalists constitute important segment in the present work. Of late, the continuity of oral tradition of India has come to constitute as an important source of historical reconstructions. With the help of these sources their voices have been rediscovered. In this regard, writings produced by an insider, a son of a sex-worker, have also been widely used in order to gain a closer view at the prostitute culture. Self expression of the sex-workers is largely captured in these writings. Here, three dominant writings are briefly analyzed:

Manada Debi's *Shikhita Potitar Atmacharit (Autobiography of an Educated Prostitute)* is a brilliant expression of individuality. The beginning of her life history dates back to nineteenth century

in Bengal, when the spread of Western education had played an important role in her life. Along with the 'identity of an individual' came the discovery of a 'Woman's personal world'. This discovery had to face many obstacles; contemporary history and literature bear testimony to that. The gentle ladies from the hidden domestic world endeavoured to express their talent and individuality through their writings and arts. But this free expression invariably faced concerted opposition from the male dominated society. Sometimes they were ignored, occasionally they got an affectionate pat on the back but most of the times they were showered with terrible 'curses'. It is amazing that in prevailing social conditions '*Shikshita Patitar Atmacharit*' was more or less accepted by society. But there is always a doubt whether the readers really respected a woman's individual expression or it was just curiosity for the dark details of a hapless fallen woman's life!

In *Manada's* life-story, many nuances of feelings are rather unclear or obscure. But her state of mental hesitation and sometimes opposite or ambiguous perceptions are very clearly present. On the one hand she expressed her own base instincts, on the other she talked about the moral degeneration of society. Manada took to prostitution at her own sweet will; she cannot blame any one else for her fate. The carnal instincts that had burnt her, created anxiety in her mind when she witnessed others being destroyed by them. After her lover Ramesh-da deserted her, more than the fear of being left alone, she was engulfed in the excitement of a new found freedom. She got shelter and cares in the 'ashram' of Mohanta-ji and stayed there for a year. But she had to leave the ashram after she fell for a young disciple of Mohanta-ji and started 'eyeing' him. Then she found a place in some 'rescue-home' in the outskirts of Kolkata. It is here that Manada first tasted physical sexual relationship outside the emotional bonding of love. In her relationships with the managers of the rescue-home, there was no sign of love. With the men in the rescue home it was only 'sensual instincts' and a 'desire for individuality'. After coming out from the 'Home', she started living the life of a full-fledged prostitute. Possibly, after this she started her feeling of self-reproach. However much did she decide to sell herself as a commodity and bargain for her physical beauty, initially she felt uneasy to sell her flesh for money. Through this 'uneasiness', one aspect of her character became clear. She always thought of herself as a 'Potita' or a 'fallen woman' and as a 'sex-worker'.

Is this attitude of remorse and accepting herself as a fallen woman a sign of traditional mentality? She was a girl from a well-to-do family and had studied in the renowned Bethune School of those days; she was well versed in music too. In her own words – 'with the qualifications I had, I could have easily taught some small children as their private tutor, worked in Telephone office, become a nurse or a music teacher. But these honest paths were not shown to me, nor did I have the instinct for it'. May be it is true that she did not get a chance. But we cannot deny the fact that she herself

spoilt many opportunities. In her biography she has mentioned that many women apparently working in some office or running small business often led the life similar to that of a prostitute.

In the introduction of her autobiography, Manada said: - 'my life is not at all a great one – in fact it is just the opposite. But the intention of this book is great. I am a sinner. A loose woman – I do not expect fame – so I am able to narrate my story in a candid manner. I am sure no great man can tell his story with such openness' Truly Manada did not bother to build or keep an image of herself. So she did not hesitate to tell the truth. This frank confession about her own life has added a special dimension to her biography. This is the greatest power of this autobiography. She called her profession 'sinful' and without qualms she gave detailed description of this 'sin'. She has not tried to conceal her own contradictions. If there is a need for building an image, one has to do it with care. Manada had no image; so she never had to make anything up. Manada had great love for literature. But she was not an artist. Her pain was the outcome of her sense of 'sin'.

In the introduction to the second edition of her autobiography, we find Manada coming out of the feeling of 'sinfulness'. We find some progress in her attitude regarding women's rights, man-woman relationship etc. After the first appearance of the book, some critics expressed their doubts regarding the author – 'this book cannot be written by a woman'. What was the reason for this doubt? Probably, the male-dominated society could not accept the idea of women roaming freely in the male-zone, outside the periphery of the domain decided for them by men. Manada replied to the doubt of the critics rather strongly – 'If fallen men can write books, why not fallen women?' This was her direct challenge. In this 'introduction' she has also mentioned the topic of 'defamation'. She wanted to say that either both man and woman are sinners, or none is. It was natural for the leaders of society to be taken aback by this fearless challenge. Extremely self-conscious Manada, the fallen woman wrote this book to search for her own individuality, her own self-respect. She did not make any false effort to hide the shame of her shameful life. She even wanted to put a print of her own picture in the book but desisted from it at the request of her tutor Mukul-da. This autobiography of Manada is not just a brave and honest depiction of truth. It is more aptly the outline of a search for individuality of a woman.

Srikarna's *Babuder Andarmahal Theke* (The Life, Passion and Inner Conflicts of Fixed Customers)

This is a very important work done by Srikarna, the son of a sex-worker. It explores the dynamic relationship existed between clients and prostitutes (babu – bibi relationship), the position of sex-

workers' children and bibi's vulnerabilities. The survey done by the author with his insider's experience has provided very different kind of strength to this work. Though there are a few scattered works done on the sex-workers but no such work was ever done on the 'babus' (fixed client).

Mrinalkanti Dutta's *Jounakarmeeder Jeebansatya* (Truth about the Lives of Sex-workers)

This work produced by Mrinalkanti Dutta, son of a sex-worker, on the basis of first hand knowledge was launched by the Durbar Mahila Samannay Committee, an organization run by the sex-workers in 1995. It deals with the objectives, achievements, needs and problems of the Durbar's movements. It is a very valuable document as it draws upon the actual experiences of the sex-workers as told by them to someone they knew and would not tell to anyone else. The true life accounts of a number of sex-workers cover their sufferings and struggles, the improvements brought about by their collective efforts, as it also discusses many problems and difficulties that remain to be resolved. The insight of the movement launched by Durbar is aptly available in this work. The personal experience as well as incorporation of other sources has strengthened the quality of this work. The work done by a son of a sex-worker who has grownup in the brothel milieu adds rare authenticity to this work.

Archival Documents and Reminiscences by outside observers:

To deal with the sources which consists of official records of bureaucrats; reminiscences by outside observers produced during contemporary period one has to take into account the distortions and omissions in their view as they believed in a set of self-righteous socio-cultural values that infused into them a hostile and irrational attitude towards prostitutes and prostitution mainly during the pre-independent era. In this regard the writing of Meghnad Gupta entitled '*Rater Kolkata*' (Kolkata by Night) stands very much important as a major primary source of present research. This reminiscence by outside observer Meghnad Gupta helps to capture the sociology as well as nature of the prostitutes along with the types of clientele during the early twentieth century Calcutta. The inter-relationship of prostitutes and clientele, other elements working in the red-light areas and their networking have largely been explored through this writing. It further throws light upon the class structure and the self-expression of the prostitutes in the red-light areas during the early twentieth century Calcutta.

Review of Literature

The Moral Hygiene Advisory Committee was appointed by the Central Social Welfare Board (CSWB) of the Government of India under the chairmanship of Mrs. Dhanavanti Rama Rao in 1954 to study the problem of prostitution. Soon after, the Suppression of Immoral Traffic in Women and Girls Act (1956) was passed by the Government of India. Due to the unscientific approach and absence of adequate data the study made by the Advisory Committee suffered from serious lacunae. However, social researchers on the problem of prostitution based on actual and intensive field work were recommended.¹⁸

Unfortunately, the study on prostitution in the modern Indian historical context has been inadequate. Altogether, few studies have been done on prostitution in India. Of these, the works of Santosh Kumar Mukherjee (nd), Mathur and Gupta (1959), Punekar and Rao (1962), Agnihotri Vidyadhar, B. Joardar (1984 and 1985), Promilla Kapoor (1979), S.K.Ghosh, Debrani Kar (1995), Indrani Sinha (1996), Moni Nag (1996) deserves mention.

- Santosh Kumar Mukherjee in his work *Prostitution in India*¹⁹ looks deeply at all the problems connected with prostitution in India and its suppression. A short history of prostitution has accordingly been given in the first part of the work. The second part of his work contains the description of the prostitutes and their life in the brothel. This work also attempt to find out the factors driving women into prostitution. It further deals with internal and foreign traffic in women, methods adopted by the traffickers and also with the new menace – forcible abduction. The third part of the work deals with the mechanisms of controlling the prostitution. This work considers prostitution as social as well as medical problem as it serves as a major source in the spread of venereal diseases. This work has been based upon the information obtained by the personal investigation made by author from the government sources, associations, and persons actively involved in combating the traffic in women.

Undoubtedly this work has covered vast area and is very significant as it the first published well researched book on prostitution in India. But while dealing with this 'issue' S. N. Mukherjee failed to explore prostitutes' own reaction to their profession, their viewpoints on themselves as well as society. Mukherjee has continuously used terms - 'vice', 'evil', 'immoral' while explaining prostitutes and prostitution which further uphold the colonial approach that criminalized

¹⁸ B. Joardar, *Prostitution in Historical and Modern Perspective*, p.5

¹⁹ S N Mukherjee, *Prostitution in India*, Calcutta 1936

prostitutes and prostitution since nineteenth century. The issues pertaining to prostitutes' own perception of their identity have not been dealt with by Mukherjee.

- Vidyadhar Agnihotri's ***Fallen Women*** is a study of prostitutes in their residential environment. The family background and the influence of factors within the family set-up in the industrial metropolis of Uttar Pradesh, Kanpur has been dealt with in this study. A brief summary of selected cases is also attached in the appendix of his work. But these very sketchy to make the picture very clear.²⁰
- The work done by Punekar and Rao entitled ***A Study of Prostitutes in Bombay: With Special Reference to Family Background*** is largely based on the case histories of 350 common prostitutes and 75 mistresses in Bombay. The primary nature of this study mainly deals with the family background of the respondent in order to explore their life until they became prostitute. This work mainly explore some important aspects of the respondents' life in prostitution which mainly comprises the socio economic, health and other conditions of their life in the brothel. It further explores those respondents' attitude towards their profession and future. It is worth mentioning here that Punekar and Rao assert that prostitution necessarily involves two parties, namely the prostitutes and their customers. But here it must be mentioned that brothel as an organized place/industry equally get regulated by the vital role played by the other inmates like brothel-keepers, procurers, pimps, money-lenders, businessmen, etc.²¹
- The work entitled ***Prostitutes and Prostitution*** by Mathur and Gupta provides a detailed account of the few selected prostitutes. The role of customers and brothel organizations has also been discussed, though sketchily.²²
- B. Joardar's work entitled ***Prostitution in Historical and Modern Perspective*** delves deep into the problem of brothel organization and its management, the process of socialization in brothel life, the pimp-prostitute relationship and self-image of the prostitutes etc. But this work is mainly based upon survey and field works carried out in Naihati red-light area situated in North Greater Calcutta. This study has been conducted from sociological perspectives. Though this work explores the above mentioned aspects quite skillfully but while dealing with the aspects of prostitute but it lacks to look at various relationships from class angle. The prostitute – customer

²⁰ Vidyadhar Agnihotri, *Fallen Woman*, Maharaja Printers, Jwala Bhawan, Gualtoli, Kanpur (n.d); cited in B.Joardar, *Prostitution in Historical and Modern Perspective*, p.5

²¹ Punekar, S.D. and Kamala Rao, *A Sociological Study of the Prostitutes in Bombay with Special Reference to its Family Background*, Bombay, 1962, '64, '67. Cited in B. Joardar, *Prostitution in Historical and Modern Perspective*, p.5

²² Mathur, A.S. and B.L. Gupta, *Prostitutes and Prostitution*, Rama Prasad and Sons, Agra, 1965 cited in B. Joardar, *Prostitution in Historical and Modern Perspective*, p.5

relationship also lacks dynamic approach in Joardar's work. Joardar also overlooks the role of other elements of the brothel world like police, hoodlums, *bariwalli*, who play a dynamic role in order to regulate the prostitute-customer/babu relationship. While dealing with prostitute-customer relationship gender perspective is almost missing in Joardar's work. In the beginning of his work he has given picture of prostitution in ancient India and then he has discussed about prostitution during eighteenth, nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. But these descriptions are brief and sketchy in nature and lack critical analysis. Though Joardar has attempted to explore the self-image of prostitutes to a certain extent but their individualities do not emerge as dynamic. Like S. N. Mukherjee, Joardar also fails to bring the prostitutes outside the status of seclusion and considers prostitution as a 'strategy for survival'. He also deals with the problems and remedies in the form of rehabilitations of prostitutes at the end of his work.²³

- Another work done by B. Joardar entitled ***Prostitution in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Calcutta*** embraces various facets of prostitution in Calcutta during the nineteenth and early twentieth century. It describes red-light areas, participation of prostitutes in theatre and their contribution in contemporary literature, classification of various types of prostitutes –scenes of brothel area, clients, pimps, management of brothels, crime, religion, magical belief and castes in brothels, socialization of prostitutes, patronizing of nautch by local aristocracy. Lastly it explains social awareness, legislative measures for regulation of prostitution and their rehabilitation. This work has undoubtedly covered vast areas with regard to the prostitution in Calcutta. Joardar has not taken up the idea of politics of power in the brothel world on the basis of which the entire organized network was operated. While discussing the caste, religion, magical belief etc. Joardar's attitude has been more descriptive rather than critical. He failed to look at the phenomena of 'belief' and 'tradition' (religion, superstition, socialization, caste etc.) as instrumental in the hands of exploitative machinery. His discussion on participation of prostitutes in theatre and their contribution in contemporary literature is more sketchy it fails to incorporate some major work produced by prostitutes mainly in the early twentieth century Calcutta. While discussing about the prostitutes' contribution in the contemporary literature, Joardar needs exploring prostitutes' creative expressions in the field of folk literature. While dealing with other work, Joardar failed to critically analyze the work produced by prostitutes and other literature by the scholars on the prostitutes.²⁴

²³ B. Joardar, *Prostitution in Historical and Modern Perspective*, Inter-India Publication, New Delhi, 1984

²⁴ B. Joardar, *Prostitution in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Calcutta*, Inter-India Publications, New Delhi, 1985

- The work of Promilla Kapur entitled *The Life and World of Call girls in India: A Socio-psychological Study of the Aristocratic Prostitutes* was the first attempt to scientifically explore and analyze the early life history, experiences and life-patterns of call girls in India with a view of exploring their 'deep-seated motivation' and the socio-psychological factors driving these girls into this profession and motivating them to continue this mode of life of selling their sex. It studies a particular class of prostitutes – the aristocratic prostitutes. Her work aimed at discovering and understanding the definition and nature of call girls, the family and socio-economic background, later experiences, their private and professional life, their attitudes, interests, pattern of life, emotional stability, personal and social adjustment, their fears and frustrations and their aspirations and anxieties about their future life. The study also aimed at investigating the social and economic factors leading to prostitution and finding reasons behind the expanding networks of prostitution universally. Kapur's ultimate aim was to finding out ways and means of eradicating prostitution.²⁵
- S. K. Ghosh's work entitled *The World of Prostitutes* is published in two volumes and following the title has an international coverage. The socio-economic origins and modes of prostitution prevailing in more than 40 countries as well as specific forms of state mediation constitute as some of the aspects dealt by Ghosh in his book. His work also includes a review of international organizations and instruments, conventions dealing with traffic in persons and thoughtful appraisal of strategies for mitigating the consequences of prostitution and allied malpractices.²⁶
- Debrani Kar's book *Kolkatar Nagarnati* in Bengali is a well researched book based on field work. This work is done from a sociological perspective. It has dealt with location of the red-light areas in the present Calcutta to a limited extent, crime and politics in the red-light areas, socio economic condition related to this profession mainly factors driving women into prostitution, laws and legal measures related to the prostitutes and prostitution, social reaction to the prostitutes and their profession etc. This work mostly deals with the post-Independent era. It lacks incorporating details on the self perceptions and social responsibilities of the prostitutes and organized network existing in the red-light areas. The politics of power relationship that regulates the life of prostitutes in the brothel world, mutual subordination existed among other inmates have also not been dealt with proper elaboration as also dynamic approach is missing.²⁷

²⁵ Promilla Kapur, *The Life and World of Call girls in India: A Socio-psychological Study of the Aristocratic Prostitutes*, Vikas Publishing House, Calcutta, 1978

²⁶ S. K. Ghosh, *The World of Prostitutes*, A.P.H Publishing Cooperation, New Delhi (n.d)

²⁷ Debrani Kar, *Kolkatar Nagarnati*, Mitra & Ghosh Publishers Pvt. Ltd. , Calcutta, 1995

- Dr. Moni Nag's work entitled ***Sexual Behaviour and AIDS in India*** is a masterpiece where he examines the collated and synthesized current research on sexuality in India. Several scattered pieces of work undertaken in different parts of the country has been brought together by Moni Nag and those works have synthesized to enable the research of this work to examine sexual practices among youth, women and men in urban, rural and tribal community as well as of those who form a part of the sex-industry. The contemporary behaviour within a cultural and historical context has been dealt by the author in this discourse. This work can be considered as an early effort to bring into discussion major issues related to sexuality and sexual behaviour in India. It has vividly highlighted the dearth of information and the urgent need to promote research in the field of sexuality and sexual behaviour.²⁸
- The work by Carolyn Sleightholme and Indrani Sinha entitled ***Guilty without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta*** is in many ways a foundational to the discourse on sex-work. Published in 1996, it remains one of the few books by and about a non-governmental organisation's intervention on behalf of a community of sex workers in India. As the feminist debate on prostitution has developed, the ways in which the differential experiences of sex workers in the Global North and the Global South are represented continues to pose challenges for writers and activists of all political persuasions. *Guilty without Trial* was produced by Sanlaap, an NGO that also works with sex workers in Calcutta. It includes depictions of women in the sex industry who are systematically victimized and horrendously abused at hands of clients and, in particular, the police. The book stops short of conflating violence and prostitution. Throughout the text, the authors argue for a 'toleration' approach to prostitution, which correlates with the contemporary parameters of 'de-criminalisation'. Women selling sexual services in Calcutta are characterised as 'informal sector' 'self-employed workers' entitled to the basic benefits of all workers, including adequate childcare facilities and a minimum wage. Rather than conflating trafficking, prostitution and violence against women, trafficking and violence are described as aspects of the industry that must be addressed legally through 'toleration'. The Indian legal system is criticized for its double standards toward sex workers. The authors argue that sex workers are treated as necessary to the overall survival of Indian society by providing a space where men can find a controlled environment for sexual release. In contradiction, sex workers are also treated as immoral, corrupting influences on the ideals of marriage and family. The solution that is posed to address this contradiction is an enumeration of the rights of sex workers. Interestingly, 'the right to rescue and rehabilitation' is included among these rights. While expressing some of the conflicts and tensions in the debate on sex work in India in the mid-1990s, the authors of *Guilty without Trial* succeed in describing aspects

²⁸ Moni Nag, *Sexual Behaviour and AIDS in India*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 1996.

of sex workers' rights. Like many contemporary progressive feminist organisations, activists and academics, the authors identify unorganised sex workers as being more vulnerable to violence at the hands of local thugs, clients and police, and advocate establishing autonomous sex workers' organisations as a sustainable response to this phenomenon. This is radically different from many abolitionist writings on prostitutes especially in the Global South.²⁹ This work is mostly based on the fieldwork in the contemporary time and it lacks empirical evidence.³⁰

Census and Survey Reports:

Census reports focus on the topography and demography of the sex-market in Calcutta. During the British period, the census report used to provide independent statistical information about the number of prostitutes and their customers but after the independence this part was removed from the census report. With the increasing population, the number of permanent and temporary sex-workers has been on rise. But census reports have constantly attempted to suppress this information. Moreover, section comprising caste and religion has also been eliminated in the post independent era. It has certainly created a major hindrance to reformulate the nature of prostitution and draw an accurate demographic picture of the prostitutes. Here it should also be mentioned that census reports are not totally realistic and acceptable as there are gaps in the census reports if we compare the estimation made by police department and statistics provided by newspapers and journals. Apart from that, not only in Calcutta but in the whole of India, a large number of women are indirectly associated with the prostitution and it is quite impossible to ascertain their actual number.

Photo Illustrations:

Pictorial evidence has been explored in the course of research depicting the socio-economic conditions of the prostitutes and their children. The dynamic relationship that existed between the *babu-bibi*, exploitations of the prostitutes, conditions of their children and their creative aspects etc have been vividly captured in these illustrations. The changing social scenario is highly captured in these photographs. Social responsibilities fulfilled by the prostitutes, foundation of cooperative of the prostitutes for the purpose of savings with the motto of securing future life in their old ages have also been widely explored. The most vibrant activities of the prostitutes witnessed in the late twentieth century are the movements launched by the prostitutes claiming worker's right which

²⁹ Svati P. Shah, 'Prostitution, Sex Work and Violence: Discursive and Political Contexts for Five Texts on Paid Sex, 1987–2001', *Gender & History*, Vol.16 No.3 November 2004, pp. 794–812

³⁰ Indrani Sinha and Carolyn Slightholme, *Guilty Without Trial: Women in the Sex Trade in Calcutta*, Stree, Kolkata, 2002

further explores the gradual transformation in the personalities of larger sections of the prostitutes with full of the self determination as well as the sense of self-reliance. Thus, this nature of sources throws light upon the major transition period in the nature of the sex-market in Calcutta during the twentieth century. Therefore, photo illustrations are considered as a significant segment of primary sources. These pictures are mostly self-explanatory.

Interview:

Getting access to sex-workers for interviewing them was extremely difficult as there are walls of controls and rings of 'securities' thrown around. Moreover, they do not have 'enough time' for such academic jobs. One prostitute was interviewed an average of four hours for four days. In the course of interviewing a lot of time was spent in establishing a rapport with her. She was taken to various restaurants and parks and gradually the conversation began with her. She took me to her house in the Harkata red-light area of Calcutta one evening in the year of 2006. It helped me to have an experience being in the red-light area at night and capture the scenario first hand. It was an eye-opener when a series of questions organized around (a) account of career, (b) self-conception, (c) group identifications, and (d) role expectations were posed. Specific but informal questions were asked in each of these major areas, such as childhood experiences, recruitment to prostitution, attitudes toward clients, police, neighbours, etc., relationships with parents, husbands, children, relatives, other prostitutes, etc., attitudes towards work, future hopes, fears and plans, moods, fantasies, daydreams, and recreation.

Moreover, while working in the *Manada Sundari Library*, located in the Kalighat red-light area, the researcher got a chance to mix-up with sex-workers freely. Being physically there, it helped me to know about the prostitution and prostitutes and this experience of capturing the ambience of red-light area has become very useful in the pursuit of my research.

The problems of research in an area as contested and confused as that of prostitution in the colonial and post colonial setting of the twentieth century Calcutta have been realized as an important issue to be discussed about. A more refined methodology is needed that could be specifically suited to the exploration and examination of sources in this particular area. Any comprehensive idea of prostitutes and prostitution requires an ambitious inter-disciplinary exercise and a resolutely dynamic approach to a fluid and changing reality.

Overview of Chapters

I. Prostitution in Calcutta: Historical Background

The antiquity of profession of prostitution in India is beyond doubt. But the context of colonialism entails important shifts. And before one can make a sense of prostitution in the twentieth century, one needs to look at the ramifications of the nineteenth century, colonial as well as reformist discourses, which provide important leads to the later day developments in the profession. This chapter has focused on the position of prostitutes and prostitution in the context of changing reality of nineteenth century Calcutta as gleaned from Bengali literature. In this regard their role in the popular culture has also been explored which helps us recapturing their voices. The inter-relationship between the clientele and the prostitute in the context nineteenth century Calcutta has also been drawn close attention. The role of *bhadralok* and British administrators centring on the profession of prostitutes as well as various legislative measures in relation to prostitutes undertaken by the colonial regime has also been examined.

II. Empirical Reality:

This Chapter has focused on the topography and demography of the twentieth century sex market of Calcutta. The organisational network of the world of prostitutes including the role of police, political leaders, *gundas*, brothel keepers and their categories, client and *babus*, dalals, shopkeepers, moneylenders, and businessmen has been dealt with in details. This chapter helps us understand the economy and sociology of the profession. The material conditions of the people involved in the trade—from the middle men/women to the direct clients and the prostitutes—have been tried a reconstruction.

III. Prostitutes and Clients:

The clientele of the prostitutes constitutes an important element as it is related to the principle of demand and supply. The chapter has focused on prostitutes' relationships with their occasional clients and regular clients. Power and Control are two determinants, which regulates the prostitutes and fixed clients. It is very much interesting to see how the sexual and commercial interests regulate the inter-relationship between the prostitutes and their clients/*babus* and how their interdependence gets evolved. Impact of *babu-bibi* relationship on the lives of their children and the role played by *babus* in the upbringing of the children has been vividly discussed. The role of pimps, madam (*mashi*) and hoodlums in relation to the clientele of the prostitutes and their relationship with prostitutes in this regard, has also been looked into.

IV. Self Perceptions and the Culture of Prostitutes:

The prostitutes' views of themselves and their self-esteem are very important facets of the existential question. This chapter has attempted to get into prostitutes' self-perceptions. The culture of the prostitutes includes various aspects of 'prostitution' as institution. It is interesting to look into the hierarchy existed within the prostitution in the form of class-structure and how it regulates the lives of prostitutes in various dimensions and act as a major determinant to influence the relationship between prostitutes and other elements prevailing in the red-light areas. Here, it has been attempted to explore the voices of prostitutes and their individualities with full of sensitivity. In what ways the issues of caste, class, religion, race and ethnicity determine and differentiate the living conditions of the prostitutes have been examined.