

## CHAPTER II

### HISTORY OF PROSTITUTION IN INDIA

#### A cursory glance on Ancient India :

The growing number of studies on prostitution is making up for the years of neglect, or rather the avoiding of what had seemed to some historians as a frivolous topic of research. There is in fact no single model for the analysis of prostitution with moral, demographic, commercial and social dimensions. Despite the age-old opprobrium attached to the profession, curiosity persists about how Indian society viewed it through the ages. Further, in such study, we need a bird's eye view of the profession and its development through the ages in India.

There was a distinguished mark between sexual immorality or promiscuity on one hand and prostitution in its technical sense on the other. The former may be, in fact, as old as human being while the latter is not so. Most of the scholars have inclined to postulate, prostitution as a profession or institution started from a set of peculiar circumstances. The clear hint in the great Epic and some of the *Puranas* is that prostitution as such was just a further step from concubinage, which was a super-abundant luxury with the princes and aristocracy.

Among the masses of Indian people, civilized or otherwise, prostitution as a commercialized vice did not gain ground until at a late period when the charm and glamour of court life and paradise fascinated them. Thus, historically viewed, prostitution descended gradually from the high to the low to spread its contagion and network all over the country.

As a profession, prostitution is very ancient. It is the religious provision, which legitimates the profession *Baranganabritti* or prostitution. According to the scriptures for the gratification of the sexual desire of the men, prostitution emerged.<sup>1</sup> Women have been considered as a commodity of entertainment from the starting of human civilization.

Moti Chandra said -“In Buddhist literature courtesans are very closely associated with dancing, singing, drinking and other forms of amusements .... In *Jataka* wherever people gathered .... courtesans followed. Whether she evoked pity or whether she was condemned the courtesan flourished and no stigma seems to have been attached to the profession.”<sup>2</sup> He also stated according to *Kurudhammajata* the *ganikas* belong to the lower class called ‘*Dwarika*’.

For various purposes men are forced to go outside where they are not accompanied by their wives. But sex is inevitable. Until or unless the concept of *Satitwa* (chastity) was prevalent there was no necessity of prostitution. When chastity was institutionalized prostitution became obvious. It is said that at the time of king *Prithu* prostitution flourished.<sup>3</sup>

Towards the end of the *vedic* age, we find, in India, the emergence of a class of women who trafficked in their virtue and were protected and authorized by the laws of the state. This was what we may call the birth of legal or real prostitution.<sup>4</sup> It needs to be borne in mind that before the term *ganika* came into usage, it went through centuries of transformation both literally and conceptually. There were other terms used, synonymous with *ganika* but the proliferation of different terms is also connected to difference in the constituents of their status. In Sanskrit works, we can find numerous examples of the use of the word *ganika*. It also frequently used with other synonyms. It is not possible to quote all of them but a few of them may be referred to. In *Purans*, *Ramayana*, *Mahabharata*, *Kautilya’s Arthasastra*, *jataka*, *Samhita*, *Vinoy Pitaka* and *Vatsayana’s Kamasutra* they are mentioned in different terms. Such as - *Rupajiba*, *Kamini*, *Barmukha*, *Barjuboti*, *Madanduti*, *Angana*, *Brishali*, *Baronari*, *Veshya*, *Barbilasini*, *Sadharani*, *Pungshali*, *Janapadakalyani*, *Samanya*, *Rojoyitri*, *Muhutiya*, *Rupdasi*, *Bannadasi*, *veshi*, *Gamoni*, *Kulta*, *Barostree*, *Barbonita*, *Kamrekha*, *Barbati*, *Randa*, *Vogya*, *Khudra*, *Swairini*, *Brisholiand* many others.<sup>5</sup>

There is reference in the *Mahabharata* where *Arjuna*, the great *Pandava* hero was married, he was desired by many women with whom *Arjuna* had to make sexual unions and give them the dignity of wife. *Shetketu*, the son of sage *Uddyalok* was very infuriated when he saw his mother carried off by an unknown person in the presence of

his father. In order to pacify his son *Uddyalok* he said : ‘My dear boy, don’t be angry, it is natural and common practice of the time. Women like cows are not undefiled if they involve themselves in sexual relationships with people of the same caste.’<sup>6</sup>

The courtesans were the dancers of royal court. They were trained in sixty four *kalas* i.e. art at the royal expense. They were regarded as the symbol of aristocracy to the *Kshatriyas*. Courtesans played an important role in politics also. The courtesans were also extensively employed as spies by the government to watch over and report on the movements of the suspects within the palace and without.<sup>7</sup> It was probably a common principle of politics to employ charming young courtesans to ensnare an aggrandizing king and weaken his position and degrade his morale. Like the *Magadhas*, the *Gandharva* girls were trained to the art of singing and dancing from their very childhood. On the basis of their merit they were appointed as *Rajchhatradharin* (who holds umbrella), *Chamardharini* (who holds fan), *Atordandharini* (who holds perfume container) etc. Sometimes the beautiful courtesans adorned the throne or chariot or royal court with their glamorous presence. Besides these, they accompanied the kings in their battle front, festivals, soldiers camp hunting. The *Mahabharata* tells us that the *pandava* army was followed by host of prostitutes who went in the rear of the army on baggage carts.<sup>8</sup> They participated in the victory celebrations. we know about the succession ceremony of *Shree Ramchandra* as *juvaraj*, where the courtesans were also present, as Rishi Vasistha narrates in *Ramayana*. The physicians, soldiers, emperors, traders who left their land for a long time, were accompanied by prostitutes.

Vatsayana defines them as *Ganika*, *Rupajiva*.<sup>9</sup> He has laid down that unless a *veshya* is well versed in sixty four *kalas*, she can not be properly called a *ganika*. A *ganika* by virtue of her high intellectual attainments, singularly good qualifications and fine beauty received a seat of honour in the assemblage of man. She is held in esteem by the king and highly eulogized by the appreciative people. Her company and favours are always sought for and she becomes the cynosure of all eyes. The *Kamasutra* describes in the different sports and festivals of rich barons to each of which they were invited.<sup>10</sup> By the epic age the *ganika* and *nata* probably formed a community. We get such a term as *Natanartaka Ganika* and it seems that actors and female dancers were employed by the

king in service on fixed salaries. Though from the income of the *ganika*, a huge portion was sent to the royal treasury. In the period of crises state used to confiscate half portion of their income.<sup>11</sup> Sometimes they were treated as *Upapatni* of the king.

There were another type of prostitutes in that period, who were poor, about whom *Kautilya* mentioned in his valuable treatise on Hindu polity. He did not forget to mention about the retiring prostitute who could be appointed in a royal household. She could be engaged as a midwife or a nurse or a cook or even as a queen's maid of honour. She also adopted the profession as a weaver.<sup>12</sup>

From the long past it is believed that by donating land, man can easily go to *shivaloka*, by planting tree he can reach the heaven. Sometimes the issueless people promised to give their first daughter to serve the god in temple. Later those girls were called *Devdasi*. According to Maryse Choisy "Temple prostitution is on the fleshy level a native attempt at universal love .... The transition from sacred prostitution to profane prostitution most likely took place during the great Punic War ... Patriarchal societies made out temple courtesans mere street walkers ..... What had been holy became shameful."<sup>13</sup> The *Kshatriya* women expert in dancing and singing also were donated to temples. The earliest inscriptional evidence of religious prostitution is found in the Jogimara cave.<sup>14</sup> The introduction of dancing girls in temples tended to lower their moral and spiritual atmosphere as well as to commodify the women in guise of *devdasis*. Some people felt more attraction for the company of *devdasis* than visit the deities of the temples in early medieval period. A group of Brahmins and ascetics opposed it. But the king, the aristocrats support the *devdasi* system. According to *Rajtarangini*, once king *Durlav Protapaditya* fell in love with a merchant's wife. The merchant proposed to the king to offer her to the temple, so that she would be available to the king as a temple dancer. On the other hand a king had given his beautiful wife to temple and declared that his wife would be further sold from temple.<sup>15</sup> Sukumari Bhattacharya said women had been a chattel or commodity in India ever since the *Vedic* times as she was included in the list of *dakshina* along with items like cattle, horses, chariots etc. Such gifts were given to priest. The same can be said about the above mentioned incidence. From this evidence it can be supposed that married, damsel as they were chattel-like

there might be such practice of sale and re-sale of women. This was not illegal. *Padmapuran* orders to buy beautiful woman for donating to temple. *Vabishyapuran* refers if a group of *baranganas* were donated to the sun temple, the donor would enjoy the pleasure of *suryalok*. Even now, we find the sculptures of dancing girls on the walls of sun temple at Konark and Khajuraho. Those erotic sculptures are enough to invite the customers. The scholars said about the *venares*, *somnath* and *pradumneswar* temples which became popular for *devdasi* system. The Indian temples are specially marked for *devdasis*. Not only the temples, but also few holy places became the centres of prostitution. *Brahmapuran* mentions the *Astatirtha Ekamra* in this respect. Manu prohibited the *brahmanas* to take food from a prostitute; though they were allowed to enjoy sexual pleasure from those women. So it can be said that the *veshy as* acted as the safety valves of a highly organized and refined society hence their obvious existence in the religious field was granted too.<sup>16</sup>

During the heyday of this system *devdasis* were employed by the temples and received definite endowment for maintenance, it is evident through the Tanjore inscription. In the *Samayamatrika* we hear of grants being given to *devdasis* who danced in rotation.<sup>17</sup> But gradually as the sanctity of this system waned generous endowment became rare. The process from the offering became meager with the result that the food received by them for the *Bhog* (offered food to god) of the deity was reduced to such extent that it became impossible for the *devdasis* to sustain. Hence, the *devdasis* were became forced to seek other means of subsistence beyond their legitimate duty like drama or prostitution etc.

From the written history we have known about some rich and wealthy *ganikas* and courtesans. *Ambapali* the famous *ganika* of *Vaishali* took fifty *karshapanas* for a single night. Some courtesans were really rich as we have known from *jataka*, where is a story of *Sama*, whose price was a thousands of money and who had a suit of five hundred of female slaves. During the early medieval period we have reference of rich courtesans. Some inscriptions mentioned such *ganikas* from south who had constructed temples or donated for temples. As for example *Vinapoligal* is mentioned in a dateless inscription of *Vijoyditya's* reign. It records her performance of *Hiranyagarvadana*. Similarly *Chhelebe*

who endowed three pillars in the *Vijoyaswara* temple. The amount of their donations indicates that they were well off. At a later date courtesans *Kumudika* is mentioned in *Kathasaritsagar* also seems to have belonged to the same economic status because she owned one hundred elephants, twenty thousand horses full of precious jewels. She had her own army.

A person, who is in full bloom of youth, a rich man, a person of known profession and income, were always most preferable customers to the prostitutes. When brokers come to her with varied offers from new customers, she should prefer one whose offers exceed those of the rest. But she should not all at once dislodge the present lover. Whenever the courtesans disobeyed to entertain the customers, send by the king, had to pay fine. It was very much interesting that the attention of the state was drawn to the colony of public women to bring it under the obligation of a stabilized taxation. In ancient India drinking, gambling and prostitution went hand in hand. The *Mauryan* period was no exception to this general rule. *Arthasastra* refers, during the *Maurya* reign the courtesans had to pay the state the earnings of two days in every month. She should bedeck herself daily with dresses and ornaments, she should lovingly offer him betel, betel nuts, sweets, scents etc. and for this purposes they need a lot of money. Sometimes the prostitutes felled into disputes, clashes with their customers. So it is proved that providing sexual entertainment to the public using prostitutes (*ganika*) was an activity not only strictly controlled by the state but also one which was, for the most part, carried on in state own establishments.<sup>18</sup>

The courtesans used to procure money from their paramour's pocket on various pretexts. Such as for repairs houses, celebration of birthdays, christening festival of friend's child, giving to a pregnant friend or help her mite in her treatment etc. The courtesans should create occasions for performing various charitable deeds such as observance of *vrata* (religious ritual), planting trees on the roadside, raising gardens and groves, digging tanks, arranging festivals, making gifts to deserving peoples.<sup>19</sup>

From the above discussion we can say without any hesitation that the emergence of prostitution in this land is the consequence of women exploitation and oppression and this practice was embedded in the socio-religious structure. On the one hand man

sexually abused woman, on the other he is the man revile to her. Even now when a man insults a woman, reviles her as a *veshya*. *Manu* said all the *ganikas* were thief and frod.<sup>20</sup> As we have seen *Draupadi* was reviled as *veshya* by *Karna*.<sup>21</sup> King *Dushmanta* compared *Shakuntala* as *pungsholi*. *Baranganas* always tried to keep her paramour in a happy life, but she got contempt and deception in return. According to the religious law, the family life with husband and son is the real dignity of a woman, which is not permissible for the prostitutes. Though occasionally a prostitute was married. *Vatsayana* lays down a provision whereby a *vesya* could be given in marriage to one who could provide special musical assistance to the establishment; such a marriage leads to greater prosperity.<sup>22</sup> *Basantasena*, the inborn prostitute hated herself. She had a severe attraction to a married life and progeny. She sold her ornaments to purchase a toy for *Rohsen*, the son of her lover *Charudatta*. *Sudraka*, the author of *Mrichhakatika*, was a kind hearted person, as he ended his drama with marriage ceremony of *Basantasena* and *Charudatta*. *Sarbilak* had to pilfer to pay the fine for rescue his lover *Madanika* (maid of *Basantasena*) from prostitution. This type of exceptional marriages are very rare incident in our society. We may quote *Sudraka* from *Mrichhakatika* - '*Basantasena*, in your next birth you must take birth in a reputed family, but not a prostitute'.<sup>23</sup> In *Dashakumarcharita*, we find, *Ragamanjuri* daughter of a *ganika*, did not accept her mother's profession but behaved like a *kulastree* i.e. housewife of reputed family. *Basantasena* was a literary character, though literature is the mirror of society. But not *Amrapali*, she was *janakalyanibodhu*.

The daughter of a prostitute became a prostitute, it was quite natural or the destiny. The prostitute's son was called *Bandhul*. The *Bandhul as* introduced themselves in *Mrichhakatik* :

‘*Porer grihe lalito, porer anne pushto, por purusher dwara*

*Poro narite janmo amader.*’<sup>24</sup>

It means, we have been brought up in other's home, fed by anyone else and we have been born by the other people in other's womb (free translation). The same may be applicable for the girl child of a prostitute. No door was opened for her; rather she had

to adopt the same profession. Sometimes she was *ganika*, sometimes *rupojiba*, sometimes *oborudhha* or without youth, beauty and any other quality she was nothing but a *veshya*.

The exact situation of the public women is very difficult to define. Dichotomous attitude in the society towards these women is explicit in the texts and practices prevailing in the country. The *Baranganas* are remained outcast in our society. On the other side of the coin the idol of *Swarini Sri Radhika* and *Sri Krishna* is worshiped in our house. *Vishnu-Samhita* proclaimed with authority that to circumambulate a prostitute was an auspicious observance. *Matsyapurana* has placed the prostitute among other objects as portending good luck, if anybody falls across her at the time of starting for a journey, what more Hindu society and religion could bestow on these dealers in sensuality? In many places of southern India in indispensable *mangalsutram* (thread to be tied rounds the wrists) of a new bride was, and still, is made by hands of a prostitute, while in north eastern India a handful of earth from the threshold of strumpet's house is still required in the making of the holy image of goddess Durga as the symbol of liberty because prostitute or *veshya* are regarded as the independent women. The hymn is found as : '*Veshya dwar mrittika om hring katyayanyai namah.*'<sup>25</sup> It means, you exist (even) in brothel's dust, salutation to thee *Katyayani* (the sixth form of *Nabadurga*) (free translation).

From the references mentioned above, it may be stated that prostitution as an institution persisted in variant forms and catered to the needs of the patriarchal social order, sometimes it served the political purpose, sometimes commercial or economic purpose under pretext of religion. Practically it never ceased to exist.

### **The picture of Medieval India :**

No recognizable change had been seen in the practice of prostitution in the medieval period of India. They had to lend themselves to constant male gazes but as the other, to the wife were allowed certain rights.<sup>26</sup> Hierarchy was still existed in the society of prostitutes. The *ganikas* of lower status are referred in the writings of *Mukundaram*.<sup>27</sup> The Telegu literature of medieval age narrated the status of *ganikas*. In 18th century

*Muddopalini*, the dancer (*baiji*) of the court of king *Pratapsingh* had written *Radhikasanthabamanu*.<sup>28</sup>

According to *Alberuni's* description the common people regarded that the Hindu scriptures recognized prostitution. But when Kabul was conquered by Islam then Ispabad Islam made a condition that he never be forced to eat beef and to enjoy abnormal sexual company. On that condition he converted into Islam. The emperor placed the dancing girls, prostitutes to give an attractive look to the city. They were used as bait of amusement for the subjects. The earning from prostitution was used to maintain the huge army. The Buyide king Adud Aldaulao followed the same. Besides this, he wanted to prevent the subjects from the sexual desire of the unmarried soldiers.<sup>29</sup>

In Delhi sultanate, there also existed a class of public women known as *veshya* or *ganika* who were looked down upon by the people. The state cleverly commissioned them as spies who collected intelligence. *Champakali* was one of the most accomplished prostitute whose services to the court as a spy did stand unchallenged. The courtesans were also employed for the entertainment of royal guests. A separate office was created to deal with the courtesans under a superintendent who controlled fees, expenditure and inheritance. The courtesans had to pay two days income per month to the state as tax. Some courtesans were employed at the royal court and received salary but did not enjoy rights of inheritance. While their properties were bequeathed to their daughters after death. The state seized their assets if they had no son. The dancing girls preferred daughters to sons in order to keep up their profession.<sup>30</sup>

However, the institution of the public women was quite active during the sultanate period. Though public women were looked down in the society, yet they were considered to be the main source in diverting the attentions of the youth and the soldiers by driving them to sensual pleasures.

*Sayed Naruddin Mubarak Ghaznavi*, a saint who flourished during the days of sultan *Itutmish* failed to take the extreme step of wiping off the presence of the public women. To him the absence of public women meant the perverted men to encroach upon the pious women. It was probably due to this reason he did not consider it

appropriate to abolish this institution completely, but was anxious that these public women should carry on their profession in a quiet subservient manner. In the absence of any restrictions imposed by the state the number of these public women swelled and by the reign of sultan *Alauddin Khalji* it reached to the extent of explosion.

Once they resolved to undertake this profession all their families were cut off and they led a life devoid of family love and emotions. *Biwi Tabha* received a humiliating reception at the hand of *Amir Khusrau*. The poet placed her on an ass and took her round the city to investigate as to whom did she belong. To his surprise none came forth to claim her. Thus Amir Khusrau finally took her to the hakim to punish her for undesirable acts. The poet failed to understand why these immoral women could not remain satisfied with one man. Instead they claimed themselves to be the favourite of the masses.<sup>31</sup>

*Amir Khusrau* refers to *Argwan Khatun* (a prostitute) who was also seen in her attire with ornaments and jewels. There was a necklace around her neck and *bindi* on her forehead. She was fond of betel leaves. Another prostitute, *Bagmachi Khatun* was devoid of physical charm yet she was adored by sensuous men. In spite of her swollen body and large teeth. She was very charming and much a demand. *Gajcha Khatun* was another public women who attracted *Amir Khusrau's* attention. She was short necked; one of her shoulder was higher than the other. She was bereft of physical charm. These references show that physical beauty mattered a lot in the popularity of public women. Moreover, they applied various beauty aids to add charms to their personality.

Some amusing information about the public women are available e.g. the wishes of some of these public women were strange. *Garara Khatun*, a prostitute (with one leg in her grave) aged ninety years was passionately in love with a youth of eighteen years and her earnest desire was to marry him. But whenever the boy saw her he fled. Thus all her hopes were shattered. *Mushba Khatun* was fond of eating all the time she used to keep ten seers of roasted gram in her *dupatta* and all the time she was busy eating it. Her mouth produced sound like that of a grinding machine.<sup>32</sup>

Thus it seems that public women were quite popular during the sultanate period. The names given by *Amir Khusrau* are fictitious (which the poet himself confessed) but their activities indicates forces which were prevalent in the society. The system of keeping concubines and the prevalence of the harems as among the royal families had also been practiced at that period.

The courtesans and public women might have been largely responsible for the growing moral laxity in the society. That is why, the Mughal emperors, particularly Akbar and *Aurangzeb* took drastic steps against them. *Akbar* for example, made noteworthy attempts to check prostitution. A particular area was set apart for the habitation of these public women, and the emperor insisted on sending all women of all ill-repute to that area. An officer was appointed for this purpose, and if anybody wanted to visit any of these prostitutes or to take her home he had to give him (the officer) his name and address. *Badayoni* observes, these (the prostitutes) be made to live outside the city and he appointed a keeper, and a deputy, and a secretary for this quarter, so that any one who wished to associate with these people, or take them to his home, provided he first had his name and conditions written down, might, with the connivance of the imperial officers have connection with any of them that he pleased. But he did not permit any man to take dancing girls to his house at night, without confirming to these conditions, in order that he might keep the matter under proper control. He writes further, 'And a number of well known prostitutes he called privately before him, and enquired who had seduced them. And after learning their names, several important *Amirs* were severally reprimanded and punished or imprisoned for a considerable time.' In spite of all these, it appears that *Akbar* could not eradicate this evil, yet, in dealing with it, he was certainly far ahead of his age.

Akbar appreciated if his nobles maintained high standards of morality.<sup>33</sup> He did not like them to fall a prey to social vices such as drinking, prostitution, sodomy and intoxicants. On a number of occasions he made his contempt known for such nobles as betrayed their weakness. *Badayuni* referred to *Raja Birbal* as one of them.<sup>34</sup> The public women and dancing damsels were engaged on special occasions of mirth and gaiety e.g. festivals, marriages and the like.

The *kotwal* and the *Muhatasib*, of the city along with the administrative staff kept a strict watch over drinking, prostitution and public morality. The separate area outside the city for prostitutes was called *Shaitanpurah* or Devils place.<sup>35</sup> Rules were formed to regulate their profession and they were put under the charge of a *darogha*.<sup>36</sup> In the time of emperor *Shahjahan*, these public women were scattered in different areas of the city of Agra, but in the time of *Aurangzeb*, orders were issued to them to leave the cities or get married. Obviously this order must have applied to the public women of the city of Agra also.<sup>37</sup>

Rajatkanta Roy said, 'Late Mughal society was essentially a society of cavalries and courtesans... The wife, being a member of the household is readily absorbed amongst the pieces of furniture.'<sup>38</sup>

With the spread of trade and urbanization population also increased in medieval India. Simultaneously numbers of prostitutes were raised in the medieval towns. The profession which women used to undertake in medieval India was dancing and singing. Women were employed to carry messages from market. *Chamoo*, a common woman ran a shop in Delhi, where she sold opium. The saints enjoyed the services of females in several ways. The *Khanquah* of sufi saints and the *piri* system<sup>39</sup> indeed had a number of female workers.

The courtesans of Lucknow were usually divided into three categories. The first were the *Kanchanis*, women of the *Kanchan* tribe, who were actually harlots and whose primary and regular profession was to sell their virtue. They were actually inhabitants of Delhi and Punjab, when they had started to come at the time of *Shuja-ud-daula*. Most of the well known prostitutes of the town belonged to this category. The second category was the *Chuna-walis*. Originally their work was to sell lime but later they joined other groups of *bazaar* women and became well known. *Chuna-wali Haider*, who was renowned for her voice, belonged to this category and collected a large group of courtesans of her caste. The third category was *Nagarni*, from the Gujrat area. These three classes were the queens of the *bazaar*. They established themselves and worked in groups. Some women who had already gone astray joined these groups. Enormous influx

into Avadh and Lucknow of musicians and troupes of singing courtesans advanced the art and dance of the cities.

In addition to these courtesans who sang and danced, there were two groups of female dancers in Lucknow. Perhaps it would not be wrong to say that these dancers were peculiar to Lucknow. This is the group, which performs *rahas*. The art of *raha* belong to Mathura and Braj and the constant flow of dancers from these areas made it popular in Lucknow.<sup>40</sup>

Muslim *Sultans* appointed ‘*Sinduki*’ (women spy) to collect the information regarding the Hindu ladies and then forcefully married them. The story of ‘*Vorar Meyer kotha*’ and ‘*Amir Sadhu o Beluya Sundari*’ (in Bengali) refer to the evidence. The picture of prostitution in Bengal has been depicted in the following verses of ‘*Monosamongol*’ :

*‘Chando bole ardhek kori boisia khaibo*

*Aar ardhek kori ami notire bilaibo.’<sup>41</sup>*

It means, the merchant Chand *Sodagar* is stating that he will spend half of his money on his living and the rest half for amusement in the association of dancing girl (free translation.)

From *Vijoygupta’s Padmapurana*, we have an interesting information about the charge for having the company of a dancing girl. Gupta says :

*‘Aar ekpon kori diya noti bari jabo.’<sup>42</sup>*

The chest women had to abide by the desire of the husband who was crazy for getting company of the prostitute. To which degree the wife succumbed to the decision of the husband is revealed from the following lines :

*‘Nana subesh ami koribo jotone*

*Agya koro monosukhe thaki dujone*

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*Veshyar nikot giya kon phol dhore*

*Airupe probodh dey sati patibrata*

\*\*\*

*Rogi bole mor mone na laage anno kotha*

*Veshyar songe thakibo heno bolichhi nischoy.*<sup>43</sup>

It means, the wife is trying to assure his husband to live with her happily as she would take care of. She is requesting him not to go to the *veshya*. But the patient did not hear his wife rather expressed his will to go to *veshya* (free translation).

### **Prostitution in Modern India :**

From mid-eighteenth century, the impact of European occupation of Asia and Africa was felt in the development of new forms of market relations as well as new forms of production. This affected women universally as women wage workers in British textile mills, Afro-American slave women in plantations and Indian women spinning in remote villages fared badly under the economic changes ushered in by colonial rule.<sup>44</sup> In 1858, India became the part of British empire. At that period *baranganas* were in Bengal, but there is no clear information about prostitution.

At the first phase of company's rule, with the emergence of new economy and society, the women from frontier parts of the country started a new era of prostitution.<sup>45</sup> From then prostitution spread vastly all over the country. Pros-quarters and bars began to grow like mushroomed around the *bhadropallis* (locality of elite) of Kolkata. American sociologist Vern Bullough had remarked - 'One of the best ways of studying prostitution is to examine the literature of past'.<sup>46</sup> Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Bhawani charan Bandopadhyay, Kaliprasanna Singha all of them mentioned *babu* culture which patronized the *veshyabritti* in their writings. Rajnarayan Basu in his '*Ekal and Sekal*' (Bengali Book) expressed his deep grief on the prevalence of prostitution and the habit of intoxication in the society. In those days even the schoolboys did not get rid from this vile habit.<sup>47</sup> Other Bengali literary fictions of that period speak volumes of such characters (*patita* or

prostitute). Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Rajlaxmi* (in the Bengali Novel 'Srikanta') narrates the harmful effect of *Kulinism* on contemporary society. Sarat Chandra's *Sabitri* (in Bengali Novel 'Charitraheen'), Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's *Sreemati* (in Bengali Novel 'Brishabriksha') were characters portrayed in that fashion in those novels. Tarasankar Bandopadhyay introduces us to these women thus : "The women gather in groups beside the road, now (in the evening) wearing fine thin - bordered saris and their thinning hair stuffed into knots. Even in the dark, their eyes burn with a hunger. Their greedy gaze is trained on men, but they also seek the gleam of silver. Their eyes, searching and scorching, reflect not merely their hearts' desires. Their fire in their bellies has kindled the lusts of the flesh."<sup>48</sup>

Not only in the literary works but also through the celluloid the picture of contemporary society has been depicted. Deepa Mehta's film 'Water' made on the poor condition of the widows in Benares. A documentary film 'All Roads Are Closed' by the social scientist Jayati Guha, the recent Bengali movie of Srijit Mukherjee 'Raajkahini' and so many others are remarkable in this context.

In 1880, out of 7001 prostitution in Calcutta, 65 were European and 46 Eurasian. The number of European prostitutes was 70 in 1893 and 50 in 1894.<sup>49</sup> The famous *Bot-tola* literature and the *potchitra* of Kalighat tried to draw the picture of that society.<sup>50</sup>

We have heard about the Fancy Fair, which used to be organized on every 1st January at Belbhedere in Kolkata (now National Library is situated there) for the purpose of buying and selling of prostitutes in 19th century. As we have seen the royal persons employed the prostitutes in various jobs like to entertain their guests to fulfill their self-interest. The *Zamindars*, *Jotdars* or the landlords set up some pros-quarters to attract the people, when they used to inaugurate new markets or trade centres.

The social composition of prostitutes was gradually changed. The dominant gender ideology constructed women as dependent housewives; the reality was that thousands of women worked to survive. Urban areas acted as magnets, not just for men seeking jobs, but for women without guardians. Poor and uneducated, they found work as maid servants, coolies, and prostitutes. These unregulated occupations flourished in the

modernizing urban sectors. No legalization limited their hours of work or improved their working conditions. Only prostitutes were discussed by the voluntary social workers. Prostitution was viewed by them as social problem and they tried to rescue them from their work.<sup>51</sup> At the first phase the prostitutes came from higher class, mainly they were widow or deserted wife. Widows were also vulnerable to sexual abuse. The use of the word *rarh* to denote both widows and prostitutes indicates that widows were thought to be sexually available.<sup>52</sup> The widows were the main victims of *babu* culture. In this context we can again mention a few literary works like *Golok Chattapadhyay*, the rich landlord in Sarat Chandra's '*Bamuner Meye*' (Bengali Book), how he exploited the poor widow namely *Gyanada*. The same incident was found in the story of *Ekadoshi*'s life in '*Ekadoshi Bairagi*' (in Bengali) or *Lalana*'s life in '*Subhada*' (in Bengali). Some of the married women who were deprived of familiar resources of marital infidelity, the victims of *Kulinism*, widow, the escaped *sati*<sup>53</sup> went to places of pilgrimage like Mathura, Benares or Brindavan. These pilgrimages were famous for prostitution. This was felt to be the most deleterious consequence of the widows, especially the child widows.<sup>54</sup>

Part time maid servants were presumed to inevitably take to prostitution to supplement their poor income. The Hindu prostitutes maintained caste rituals and operated within codes of caste. They would not accept Muslim or European clients. Moreover, Muslim prostitutes may marry and relapse several times and many Hindu prostitutes converted to Islam in order to get married.<sup>55</sup>

Majority persons of them came from lower caste like weaver, potter, cobbler and other labour class. Poverty and starvation forced them to come into town from their native land.

In *babu* culture<sup>56</sup> the *babus* used to live with their kept (as *upapatni*). Various of them were very wise and literate also. The *babu* culture patronized theatres. In 1874 the great National Theatre of Kolkata, offering western inspired theatre, staged '*Benisamhar*' by Haralal Roy. Generally male actors played female roles, but in this case *Binodoni*, a daughter of a prostitute, played the female lead. Another name is remarkable here, the great actress Sukumari Dutta, popularly called *Golap*, who was also a prostitute.

It was very natural that whenever the kings and soldiers left their countries for long days, they were always equipped by foods, weapons, medicines as well as *baranganas*. British government also gave importance on that issue. That was why the British government established brothels near the cantonments for their self-interest.

From the seventies of nineteenth century the British government made the questionnaire for enlisting the names of prostitute girls. The Vice District Magistrate of Rajsahi, Kashikinkar Sen expressed his view ‘ ..... Men who are habitually idle and averse to work or who are very poor become generally converts of *Vaishnavism* in as much as it holds out to them an easy means of subsistence by begging which the profession of this class of people..... polygamy exists to a certain extent amongst them.’<sup>57</sup>

Prostitution was a practice in Kamrup (Assam) at the period of our discussion. Some references are given bellow.

Colonel M . Hopkins had reported from Assam that :

“..... In Assam there are several temples which in time of the Assam *Rajas* (kings), were endowed with valuable grants of land and for the service of the temples, a class of people known as ‘*nots*’<sup>58</sup> were induced to settle down there, on the condition that each family was to dedicate one female child as a singer and dancer before the idols. With the fall of the Assam *Raj*, the daily dancing in these temples has discontinued, and is only now seen on festive occasions... These bands of singers and dancers are now regularly available as prostitutes among the residents of the grants and the pilgrims and others visiting the places. The local patronage so obtained being deemed insufficient, large bands of these female dancers and singers... proceed to Gowhatty and Gowlpara, where they settle down as professional...<sup>59</sup> A similar custom also existed in Orissa connected with the *Jagannath* temple. These women were known as *Khoontries* and ‘if not regular prostitutes, are often women of the most infamous character.’<sup>60</sup>

The picture of prostitution whether in town or village, court or temple in Assam, is found in both the records and contemporary or post contemporary literature or in Tezpur Grant of Vanamala V.24 and Bargaon Grant Line 31. There were female temple dancers

(*Kumaris* i.e. unmarried damsel) as in *Kamakhya*, *Madhava* temple at Hajo and other *Shiva Shakti* shrines, introduced under the influence of the *Tantric Buddhist* tenet, evidenced by the *Kalika Purana* and the *Jogini Tantra* as well.

*Gambhireswar* temple in Benaras, *Somnath* temple and the south Indian temples were famous for *devdasi* system. At the beginning of 20th century the *devdasis* were converted into *patitas* or prostitutes in South India. Various laws were passed in between 1920 to 1930 to eradicate this business. Andhrapradesh *Devdasis* Prevention of Dedication Act, 1947 and Andhrapradesh *Devdasis* Prohibition of Dedication Act, 1988 were passed, but all in vain, the temple prostitution has not disappeared. As a result the *devdasi* system is still found in 21st century even.<sup>61</sup>

The British Government regarded the prostitutes alluring and dangerous at once symbolizing India's degradation.<sup>62</sup> At the same time sexual degradation and sexuality were looked down upon and low morality of poor white prostitute even were considered to be a threat to the Empire. The issue of prostitution in Indian society so far as has been discussed may be viewed from the perspective under the British *Raj*. The British imperial government, whatever measures they felt necessary for betterment of administrative management of the colony like India, always formulated their policy keeping in consideration the exclusive interest of the British *Raj*. The series of legislation involving the control management of venereal and contagious diseases by the government was aimed at preventing the army from being infected with such fatal diseases through contact with the diseased prostitutes. Specific legislations by British Government enacted exclusively to cover prostitutes were the Cantonment Act of 1864 (to be followed by several amended versions in the late 1880s), and the Contagious Diseases Act (CDA) of 1868.<sup>63</sup> The second one was popularly known as *Chouddo Aayin*.

From an official note prepared by the Military Department of India, it is clear that the British Govt. became conscious of the spread of the venereal diseases in the British cantonment.<sup>64</sup> The main objective of the CDA (Contagious Diseases Act) was to counteract the spread of venereal diseases among troops posted in British colony. The two main features of the CDA became controversial in India. The first one was the provision of compulsory registration of all the prostitutes and the second was the compulsory medical

treatment of them in lock hospitals. The system of compulsory medical treatment was so dangerous that a large number of prostitutes committed suicide or were forced to leave their shelter.

### **Types of Prostitutes :**

There are different types of prostitutes. Classification among the prostitute women never ceased to exist throughout the historical period. Coming to the 19th - 20th centuries we find that evolving some changes with the passage of time. It is therefore important to understand the phenomena and various types of prostitution which are prevailing in the society.<sup>65</sup> According to the *Brahmabaibarta Puran* the woman who lends her couch to two husbands (or paramours) is called a *Kulta*, to three is a *Dharsini*, to four is a *Brishali* or *Pungscholi*; and to five is branded a *Veshya*. The woman who gives herself to people more than five in number is to be known as a *Mahaveshya*.<sup>66</sup>

We may categorize the prostitutes into two categories such as (A) **Traditional** and (B) **Recent types**.

#### **(A) Traditional Prostitutes :**

Generally we find five types of prostitutes under the (A) **Traditional category** viz. 1. public women, 2. common prostitutes, 3. the dancing and singing women, 4. prostitutes patronized by *darbars* or royal court and 5. religious prostitutes.

**1. Public Women :** Mothers enjoyed great respect and were held in high esteem in the Indian society. On the other hand, there also existed a class of public women known as *veshya* or *ganika* who are looked down upon by the people. They were given to the enjoyment of material pleasures. Often these women of easy virtue lured men to abandon their houses, thus running the lives of young men, breaking up families and causing social disruption.

The existence of this class in the country is reported since the earliest times. The very survival of this institution speaks of its popularity among the common men and patronize it received from the royal house and aristocracy. These women who were in touch with the undesirable elements of the society - murderers, rebels and outlaws were

often able to ferret out secrets when they blurted out their plots and designs against the state. These were then reported to the court.

Although many of the public women were not sufficiently cultured, yet quite a few among them were women of culture and learning, well versed in poetry, music and dance. Teachers were assigned by the state patronage to instruct them in art, literature and culture. Under these instructors, they mastered the popular books like *Kama Sutra* by *Batsayana*.

**2.Common Prostitutes :** The second type are called common prostitutes. These comprise the unfortunate women and girls who are recruited through pimps and procurers who have been sold or landed in brothels and vice - dense maintained by old or retired prostitutes and the pimps. Their induction into the trade is often through allurements, misguide about nature of work and many time through false promise of marriages, even through false marriages. If the pimps fail to win over the girls through other means then the procuring gang may resort to kidnapping and abduction. Several young women and girls got into prostitution because they were raped and neither their family nor society was willing to accept them. The pimps are constantly on the look out for destitute willing to sell their children.<sup>67</sup>

**3.The Dancing and Singing Women :** This is a class in itself, who have a heritage from the Mughal period. They are drawn both from Hindu and Muslim communities. Among them, the prostitution is handed down from mother to daughter as a profession with no stigma attached to a life of immorality. They are trained in the art of singing and dancing and the girls in the family are trained in this art from early age. As a matter of fact, a large number of them have acquired an excellence in the rendering of classical and semi classical music so much so that they have earned a place of pride and respect among the knowledgeable persons. They do not indulge in open prostitution and entertain or attend to very selected clients. Their status is considered higher than that of common prostitutes. They also take pride in calling themselves as '*Khandani*'.<sup>68</sup>

**4.Patronized by Darbars :** This class of prostitutes comprised beautiful women and girls who were raised by the kings, chieftains and landlords. They were well trained in

the art of singing and dancing and were required to render special services for the rulers at the times of festivals to entertain audiences and guests. Sometimes, they had to enter into competitions with similar artist from outside and their excellence and performance had a bearing on the prestige of *darbar*. They were known as various terms as ‘*Kalvanathis*’, ‘*Mangalmukhis*’, and ‘*Nrityamangalis*’.<sup>69</sup>

**5. Religious Prostitutes :** Religious prostitutes are known by different names e.g. (a) *devdasis*, (b) *sevadasis*, (c) *jogins*, (d) *basavi*, (e) *jalpatra* etc. They all start at an early age i.e. at puberty and pre-puberty stage.<sup>70</sup> Brief description of categories of religious prostitutes is given below.

(a) **Devdasi :** The term *devdasi* literally means servant (slave). Her duties comprise a combination of propriety, ritual, entertainment to assert positive fertility and prosperity. They on account being married to god or goddess. In *Dhoyi’s Pavanduta* there is reference to temple girls or public prostitutes. There are also the following classification in this category:<sup>71</sup>

- i. *Datta* : Parents devote their daughter to gain *punya* i.e. virtue.
- ii. *Hrita* : Those are stolen and dedicated to god.
- iii. *Bikrita* : They are sold to the temple authority.
- iv. *Vritya* : They are served as maid in temples.
- v. *Bhakta* : Those are devoted themselves to god willingly.
- vi. *Salankara* or *Alankara* : Firstly these girls adorned with ornaments and then donated to temple.
- vii. *Gopika* or *Rudraganika* : These girls are paid dancers of temple.

*Devdasis* dance before god, and priest. *Rajdasis* dance before king and royal court. *Swadasis* entertain the general people and pilgrims in temple.<sup>72</sup>

According to various research, the practice is socially acceptable in some sections of Indian society through ‘*devdasi*’, whereby young girls are given to the gods and become religious prostitutes. There are believed to be around 3,300 *devdasis* in the Belgaum area (Karnataka) alone. The *devdasi* practice is banned by the Prohibition of Dedication Act 1982 and parents or guardians dedicating their girls to this sordid system are liable to

five years in jail and a Rs. 5,000 fine. Anecdotal evidence suggests that through these outlawed religious practices like *devdasi* and *jogin* temple priests use their position to trafficked girls for prostitution.

(b) **Sevadasis** : In *vaishnavism* these girls were recruited into *Ankhra* i.e the *vaishnav* hermitage by money or sometimes forcefully. They were strictly recruited to serve the *vaishnavs* but not the general people.<sup>73</sup>

(c) **Jogins** : The prevalence of *jogins*, a similar practice like *devdasi* continues in large part of Andhrapradesh. In this system the girls are married to god before puberty and they enter into prostitution when they reach puberty.

(d) **Basavi** : It means ‘female bull’ and it connotes the bulls freedom to wonder. Historically *basavis* are forbidden to marry and expected to spend their lives performing religious duties. The system is known to exist in Andhrapradesh and in scattered form in some areas of Karnataka. The *basavis* do not immediately enter into long career of prostitution. They are still required to perform certain ritual duties. Since such work does not yield sufficient income they turn to prostitution.

(e) **Jalpatra** : To render service to a *brahmana* by a woman as his concubine was not condemned in the society. The women were initiated in *vaisnava* mantra. As the custom of maintaining such concubines by the males was a common feature of the society, the legal wives mostly had to accept their fate without any grudge. Often it has been found, wealthy people even maintained Muslim girls converted to *vaisnavism* for sexual exploitation in later days. Such women not legally married, were termed as *jalpatra*.<sup>74</sup>

### **(B) Recent types of prostitutes :**

They are known as 1.**Call Girls**, 2.**Cage Brothel Prostitutes**, 3.**Hitch Hiking Prostitutes**, 4.**High Profile Prostitutes** etc. This form of prostitution is considerably of unique types and not a much old practice.

1.**Call Girls** : Prostitution has been noticed popping up around market, port, military bases and also tourist spots. Prostitution connected with tourism is the most institutionalized and the most lucrative since recent past. This phenomenon has grown

with modernization and globalization. Some hotels, inns, guest house, tourist lodge managements maintain their contact with society girls belonging to the elite or upper middle class families, who live in private houses very often quite educated. They are well dressed and well-mannered and enter into the trade not on account of any compulsion or financial constraints but for fun and extra income needed for meeting the expense of their luxurious life. They are called 'call girls' and are classed among voluntary prostitutes. Mostly it is believed that girls above 18 would be involved in this trade. But recent exposure through media indicates that large numbers of school going girls, middle class house wives are engaged in using themselves as commodities for meeting their expenses. They are also belong to this category. The psychologist Smt. Anuttama Majumder has considered this type of prostitution as 'free floating fun or surplus sex'.<sup>75</sup> Comparing a call girl with a prostitute we can say that a call girl does not satisfy all customers but a selected rich and aristocratic people only.

**2.Cage Brothel Prostitute :** They are mostly found in Mumbai and they are basically young girls. They are referred to as caged brothel prostitutes because of their virtual confinement to small cubical or cage like situation in brothels. All their earnings go to the brothel keeper till such time that the brothel keeper's investment is made in procuring them has been recovered.

**3.Hitch Hiking Prostitutes :** They basically operated on road sides of national and state highways of different cities. They usually serve the truck drivers and fun seekers, moving in trucks and lorries. They operate on temporary and casual basis, often on contact basis, thereby bringing the element of call girl system, mostly under the guidance of an elderly prostitute or brothel keeper.<sup>76</sup>

**4.High Profile Prostitutes :** There is also social stratification within the community of the prostitutes in several red light areas. A group of prostitutes regarded as high profile workers. They live in the rooms in the front road but do not stand or sit on road side to attract the attention of the people. In this sense they are privileged group. They possess physical beauty and refine personality and for this natural privilege they do not care either the middleman or the mistress of brothel. Their standard of living is higher than of the common prostitutes. They maintain a sort of distance with the common

inmates of red light area. They take special care to their children. Few of them send their children into reputed school. Their children are not allowed to play with the rest of the children of the colony. They are also well dressed, play with expensive toys. One or two of them (high profile prostitutes) also possess separate flat in the affluent area of the city and they left their rooms of red light area in rent. The prostitutes of high profile category frequently go to market for shopping.<sup>77</sup>

There are two more categories of prostitutes e.g. -

**Registered and Unregistered Prostitutes :** The enforcement of the contagious diseases act did not prove easy. The women stubbornly resisted registration, examination and internment in the Lock Hospitals. Soon after the act was in operation a very large number of the public women left the city and sojourned in the suburbs and the further away. However, as more poor women drifted into the city, the problem of unregistered and 'clandestine' prostitution grew intractable. The police mounted vigilance on all widows and destitute in particular, and poor women in general.

The categorization of prostitutes into 'registered' and 'unregistered' was futile; it seemed impossible to spatially and geographically separate registered and unregistered women, since these apparently faceless women could with ease melt into the poorer quarters of the city.<sup>78</sup>

There were large numbers of women, with no connection to religion or the arts like singing or dancing, who were prostitutes in the conventional sense, that is selling sexual favours for money. Most accounts agree that there were large number of widows among the prostitutes, which suggests that brothels were heavens for women with nowhere else to go. Girls were also seduced or stolen from their homes and forced into this business. Among the ranks of prostitutes were married women who found their lives intolerable and escaped from one kind of oppression to another. Some working women turned to prostitution to make ends meet; others had drifted to the cities in times of economic hardship and were unable to find employment of any other kind. Some women provided sexual favours in exchange for protection.<sup>79</sup>

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